

SEMINAR REPORT  
EXPERIMENTING THE VISUAL IN ART  
AND ANTHROPOLOGY: THE ETHICS  
OF RESEARCH AND COLLABORATIONS  
NTNU 29<sup>TH</sup>–30<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER 2008

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*Introduction<sup>1</sup>*

The international seminar “Experimenting the Visual in Art and Anthropology: The Ethics of Research and Collaborations”, organized at the Faculty of Architecture and Fine Art, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) was a result of the exchange of ideas between Ph.D. fellow, anthropologist Ruth Woods, and Professor Arnd Schneider at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo (UiO). The engagement in visual forms of research and enthusiasm for art-anthropology collaboration (Schneider and Wright [eds] 2006; Schneider 2008) were the main inspirations for the seminar. Overlying objectives and similar practices in art and anthropology were represented by invited speakers, both artists and anthropologists.

During the seminar there was also a modest exhibition—*The Visual in Research*—and a workshop for Ph.D. fellows from the Faculty of Architecture and Fine Art, NTNU and the Museum of Cultural History, UiO. The topic of the workshop on art-anthropology collaborations was broadened by including the discussions about the visual in architectural research as well.

*Theoretical background*

The issue of the visual in research concerns and challenges such fundamental ideals of modern science as subject-object dualism and scientific truth. Western modern science as a rule focuses on articulated knowledge, where verbalization plays an important part. Only explicit knowledge, formulated in words or numbers is considered scientific as it can be verified and reviewed. However, visual forms have always been important means of communication in art, as well as in architecture. For instance, from the very beginning of architectural training in the seventeenth century, the artistic dimension of architecture was emphasized as architectural skills were gained by demonstration rather than through explanation in verbalized forms. Due to the strong position of the visual within practice and training in art and architecture, both fields have a special relationship, but often are seen as lacking scientific rigour. Therefore the position of the visual in research within art and architecture is much more complex and the seminar aimed to highlight the aesthetic, ethical and methodological issues involved.

The art and science dualism is connected to the idea of subject-object distinction as modern science aims at detaching a subject conducting research from an object being researched. Science aims for objectivity by assuring that a subject is neutral towards an object of study. In art, an object is rather closely related to its creator—a subject. However, according to Bengt Molander (1996) the relationship between art and science is much more complex if borderline cases (for instance, shaping and fashioning in science) are taken into consideration.

A similar discussion about art and science dualism was present in the field of anthropology in the middle of the twentieth century, when the first attempts to establish visual anthropology took place. Margaret Mead was among the first who promoted the visual in anthropological research, but simultaneously advocated the objective and opposed the artistic approach. As she is recorded as saying:

An artistic film maker can make a beautiful notion of what he thinks is there, and you can't do any subsequent analysis with it of any kind. That's been the trouble with anthropology, because they had to trust us. (...) I think the difference between art and science is that each artistic event is unique, whereas in science sooner or later once you get some kind of theory going somebody or other will make the same discovery. (Brand [ed.] n.d.)

At the end of the twentieth century the criticism of object-subject dualism in visual anthropology began to win adherents as a subject's objective observation of an object was questioned and knowledge produced as a result of mutual collaborating between the researcher and the informant was recognized (Banks 2001). Hence, a positivist scientific paradigm in visual anthropology gave way to subjectivity and reflexivity by challenging the mainstream writing culture and new ways of knowledge production based on collaboration with informants opened up. Even Margaret Mead involved informants as critics and collaborated with them during her observational study in Bali, something that supports criticism of the 'pure' objective observational approach (Pink 2003: 190).

The discussion about collaborative and reflexive research involved ethical questions as well. David McDougall (1998: 89) introduced the term "deep reflexivity", which requires not only explanation of motives and conditions of research, but also reflexivity in continually shifting the approach of a subject towards an object as a result of mutual collaboration during the fieldwork. Marcus Banks (2001: 178–179) advocated "humanistic reasons" for collaboration between researcher and research objects as "while they might not be educated or well-informed about the latest intellectual fashions, they know more about their own lives than a visiting researcher can ever hope to" .

As the subject-object dualism in anthropology was questioned and the ideals of subjectivity, reflexivity and collaboration emerged, the new potentials of interdisciplinary cooperation for visual anthropology became evident, especially in such fields as architecture and art, which have always favored the visual forms of representation. The cooperation became relevant also due to the "ethnographic turn" in art (Schneider and Wright [eds] 2006: 3). As the invited speakers demonstrated during the seminar, fieldwork and participatory observation became common practices in anthropology and art.

*Between art and anthropology*

The seminar “Experimenting the Visual in Art and Anthropology: The Ethics of Research and Collaborations” gathered professionals working with art and anthropology, who purposely or unintentionally combine the objectives and methods connecting the two fields. The various positions of a subject towards an object throughout visual research and representation were observed during the seminar.

The Swedish artist Thomas Håkki Eriksson was the first speaker at the seminar and presented his project “There are people for everything” on a small Swedish community of Ljungaverk. The artist himself created a semi-fictitious character “Håkki”, a stereotype of a Swedish guy from a local northern community. Håkki designs and sells T-shirts and makes other artistic projects, aiming at celebrating the local identity with “50% humor and 50% design and anthropology”. By demonstrating proximity to the village community, Håkki represents the local identity as opposed to the globalized culture of large cities, while at the same time manifesting a reflexive approach to the stereotypes of locals.

The second speaker, artist and ethnologist Robert Willim from Lund University, presented quite a different project: “Evocations—Mixing Art and Cultural Analysis”. His film projects deal with place and the meaning of presence. Robert Willim and film-maker Anders Weberg create films about urban places (for instance Tokyo and Yokohama, Cape Town) they have never visited. Their artistic manifestations of urban alienation and non-presence draw attention to the possibilities of touching faraway places at a distance.

The second day of the seminar started with a cheerful and pleasant journey to northern Norway photographed by Rune Johansen. Warm and honest pictures revealed the everyday life of the artist’s own native culture. With no intentional anthropological aspirations, the pictures capture everyday life in northern Norway—local people in their own houses, full of meaningful things, houses placed in distantly populated landscapes, silent and eloquent at the same time.

Anthropologist Martin Thomassen touched upon slightly different issues than the rest of the speakers. During his paper “Text production as chora” he presented the visual forms of a text and analyzed how form and content of a text is dependent on collaboration and reflexivity between a subject and an object.

The last speaker, anthropologist and artist Anna Laine from the University of Gothenburg, presented her Ph.D. project “In Conversation with the Kolam Practice: Presentations of Artistic Experiences in India”. Anna Laine discussed the visual as a source of knowledge and raised ethical questions of visual representation, such as collaboration with the informants and their reflections on visual representations (see this issue of *Suomen Antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society*).

*Collaboration of art, anthropology and architecture?*

During the second part of the seminar the pieces of the exhibition were presented and discussed by the participants. Professor Arnd Schneider opened the workshop and introduced some borderline cases in recent art-anthropology collaboration. Schneider also led the discussions about the visual research materials presented by the Ph.D. fellows.

Most of the Ph.D. fellows were artists and architects with little or no background in anthropology. However, the discussions about presentations raised relevant issues for art-anthropology collaboration, such as ethics and methods of visual research.

Ph.D. fellow and artist Nomedas Urbonienė presented one such case. Her Ph.D. project “Performative participatory artistic practice and notion of public space in a post-communist era” derived from her artistic experience during a Pro-test Lab project on privatization of the public and cultural spaces in Vilnius. Though the project is not an anthropological study and focuses on reflective artistic practices, it shares similar methods and objectives with anthropological research.

Architect Kari Hovin Kjølle presented her Ph.D. project “Boundary objects as a translation instrument” about the interaction of different actors through visual means in decision-making processes and designing of spaces. The presented visual means were discussed among the participants of the seminar by raising the questions of choice and classification of the visual.

A few of the Ph.D. students had a special interest in the main topic of the seminar—art-anthropology collaboration. Ph.D. fellow Maria Øien from the Museum of Cultural History, UiO was one of them. She presented her project “Aboriginal Art: Art Forms in State of Transformation” and the recently gathered visual material from her fieldwork in Australia on the maintenance of the local identity through changing forms of local art.

Ph.D. fellow Ruth Woods made another relevant presentation concerning art-anthropology collaboration with the help of a scrapbook about the fieldwork for her Ph.D. project “Shopping with Art: An Analysis of how Art Creates its Space within Public Places”. Ruth Woods chose not only an innovative way of presenting the visual material, but also an innovative approach to art-anthropology collaboration as the object of her anthropological study is contemporary art in the ordinary and familiar environment—shopping centers (*see this issue of Suomen Antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society*).

### Conclusions

The invited artists were representing their own local cultures and the ways that the distinctions between a subject and an object disappear as the artists reflect upon their own, familiar identity. However, the anthropological studies “at home” still seem to be an innovative approach in anthropology (Pink 2003: 185). Though the distinction between Western and non-Western cultures is questioned in anthropology, most of the presentations of anthropologists invited to the seminar still focused on the distinct and non-Western.

The Other has always been an object of anthropology. Only with the rise of self-reflexivity within the discipline has the subject-object dualism been questioned. Self-reflexivity within anthropology has also opened opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration. However, as emphasized by Tim Ingold (2007: 291), another step in collaboration could be the proceeding from anthropology *of* to anthropology *with* art and architecture. Interdisciplinary collaboration would mean not only the focus on the visual (a product), but also on the visible (a creative process). In order to achieve an actual collaboration, art and architecture should not be considered merely the objects of anthropological research.

## SEMINAR REPORT

### NOTES

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