

**The ethnographic turn – and after:  
a critical approach towards the realignment of art and anthropology**

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**Abstract**

The ethnographic turn has been the focus of recent debate between artists and anthropologists. Crucial to it has been an expansive notion of the ethnographic. No longer considered a specialized technique, the essays of Clifford and others have proposed a broader and more eclectic interpretation of ethnography - an approach long considered to be the exclusive preserve of academic anthropology. In this essay, we look more critically at what the ethnographic turn has meant for artists and anthropologists. To what extent does it describe a convergence of perspectives? Or does it elide significant differences in practice?

Key words: ethnography, art, anthropology, ethics, aesthetics

The last fifteen years has seen a proliferation of international conferences,

workshops, exhibitions, publications and projects about art and anthropology (Ravetz 2007; Rutten, et al 2013; Sansi 2015). What was long an uneasy relationship – and sometimes no relationship at all – has become a focus of renewed interest and debate.<sup>1</sup> Much of the recent debate was framed -- at least initially -- by what leading commentators called *the ethnographic turn* (Clifford 1988, Foster 1995). Subsequently, however, a number of different terms have come into play. Specifically, *practices of making* (Ingold 2013) and *ethnographic conceptualism* (Ssorin Chaikov 2013) have been proposed as alternative ways of thinking about convergences between art and anthropology.

In this essay, we look more closely and critically at attempts to realign fields of practice. We argue that the apparent straightforwardness of the term, “ethnographic”, belies the very different ways it has been interpreted by artists and anthropologists interested in what Schneider and Wright call “border crossings” (2006: 1). We seek to prise open this central notion and examine different ways that an anthropological dialogue with contemporary art has been articulated. Although the ethnographic has served to designate important points of intersection for those working within and between these territorialized and de-territorializing fields, we also suggest that a focus on convergences has elided significant frictions between the endeavors of art and anthropology. We ask to what extent can a clearer understanding of the resistances -- as well as the convergences – between art and anthropology establish the ground for hybrid or unconventional work?

This essay is conceived as a response to both the growing interest in, and skepticism of, the re-alignment of art and anthropology. For despite the flurry of activity

and increasing calls for collaboration, there continues to be confusion around what is actually at stake. The reflections we offer here have their origins in our own experiences of being positioned on the fault-line between art and anthropology. Drawing on diverse backgrounds, training and areas of interest, much of our practice has been pursued under the rubric of “visual anthropology”. The latter has long designated a space for experimentation with forms of anthropological enquiry that fall outside the usual academic conventions. But while we have relished the opportunity that visual anthropology afforded us as a *making* practice, in contradistinction to how anthropology is predominantly seen (Grimshaw 2001; Ingold 2013), we nevertheless found ourselves missing more sustained dialogue with our academic colleagues.

Over the course of our collaborations, we have often struggled to make an effective argument for non-traditional forms (for example, film, exhibitions, photo-essays, soundscapes) to be taken seriously as *anthropology*. All too often they are seen as secondary to anthropology proper or understood as a sort of popularization. Moreover, work considered experimental within anthropology is viewed as aesthetically limited by those in the creative arts for whom the critical interrogation of form or medium is central to their approach. But precisely because of the anomalous location of our practice, we have been reluctant to eschew a commitment to anthropology for art or vice versa. The challenge has never been about the generation of the work itself. The crucial question has been about how to effectively catalyze an expansive, rather than a defensive, exchange about the expectations and conventions of art and anthropology.

Although one of the motivations in writing this essay was to understand better our own practice on the fault-line between fields of practice, our intention has also been to

raise issues of broader significance. Through a critical examination of the contemporary debate that has followed the ethnographic turn, we seek to map a terrain in which non-traditional work might be more securely situated and evaluated. In particular, we are mindful of the dilemma facing younger scholars who, impatient with disciplinary conventions, are interested in pursuing experimental forms and techniques. At the same time, there is considerable anxiety surrounding such initiatives. Younger scholars are often warned to respect the conventions or their professional credentials will be compromised. As Rabinow implied in *Writing Culture*, breaking with convention is a privilege for those with tenure. Assumptions of this kind, widely prevalent in academic contexts, promise something of a bleak anthropological future. Given such a view, how might one navigate disciplinary expectations while also continuing to productively challenge the boundaries of existing practice?

In the narrative that follows, we trace key threads in the contemporary encounter between art and anthropology. Our point of departure is the much discussed “ethnographic turn”. Associated with the writings of Clifford (1988) and Foster (1995), it has become something of a convenient shorthand term for perceived new synergies in different fields of practice (Schneider and Wright 2006; 2010; 2013; Rutten et al, 2013), but, as we will argue, its familiarity has tended to obscure diverse understandings and interpretations of the ethnographic – not just among artists but anthropologists too. Hence in the second part of the essay, taking the work of Schneider (1993, 1996, 2006), Ingold (2013) and Ssorin Chaikov (2013) as our focus, we examine the different ways that ethnography has been understood and used in the articulation of arguments about art and anthropology.

The third part of the essay makes a case for a more finely grained account of the frictions between art and anthropology. In redirecting attention away from convergences and collaborations, we highlight moments of resistance and incomprehension between fields of practice. For work produced across established boundaries has often been deemed inauthentic or dismissed as merely “looking like” art or anthropology. We examine what is at stake in these moments. To what extent do they bring into focus how the categories themselves are mutually constitutive, each predicated on the desire for, and opposition to, the other? But equally, how has this dialectic served to inhibit a more generative debate about the aesthetic and its radical potential within anthropology?

*The ethnographic turn and after*

Recent interest in the convergence of art and anthropology marks a break with earlier engagements between these fields (Marcus and Myers 1995; Morphy and Perkins 2006; Sansi 2015; Schneider 2012). Hitherto notions of the “primitive” and a concern with the exploration and representation of forms of cultural dissonance -- prominent features of modernism and the European avant-garde -- had been a point of connection (Clifford 1988).

During the second half of the twentieth century, however, exchange between artists and anthropologists coalesced around different interests and concerns. The phrase “the ethnographic turn” began to be used to describe a new intersection and the writing of two key figures established a framework for the subsequent debate. On the one hand, the essays of James Clifford (1986, 1988) challenged narrow conceptions of ethnography as the exclusive preserve of academic anthropology and offered a more capacious interpretation of its potential as a mode of inquiry. In so doing, Clifford provided a

critical language that facilitated exchange and collaboration between different fields of practice. On the other hand, however, Hal Foster's 1995 essay, "The Artist as Ethnographer", was a cautionary corrective to this expansive conception of ethnography. Foster's sharp intervention into the debate served as a reminder that apparent convergences around notions of the ethnographic elided significant differences in expectation and understanding between artists and anthropologists.

Writing in his introduction *The Predicament of Culture*, Clifford defined ethnography as "a hybrid activity", variously appearing "as writing, as collecting, as modernist collage, as imperial power, as subversive critique"(1988: 13). The subsequent essays traversed an extensive terrain of ethnography – one predicated on Clifford's refusal to separate "avant-garde experiment" and "disciplinary science" (1988:12). Instead he proposed to "reopen the frontier", since, as he puts it, ". . .the modern division of art and ethnography into distinct institutions has restricted the former's analytic power and the latter's subversive vocation" (1988:12). Indeed, as the first essay suggested, anthropology's radical impulse was inseparable from questions of professional authority. But as Clifford suggested, since the 1950s the jealous guarding of ethnography as exclusive to the discipline had been increasingly hard to sustain.

Clifford's much cited "On Ethnographic Authority" offered a critical review of the conventions that lay at the heart of twentieth century anthropology. He identified a series of methodological, conceptual and rhetorical moves made in the early part of the century that served to establish an area of specialization and expertise and it underpinned disciplinary claims of a new kind of inquiry called scientific ethnography. In so doing, academic anthropology distanced itself from the creative possibilities that might be

generated from a more open and dynamic conception of ethnography. For Clifford, traces of the latter were to be found in certain pockets of interwar French anthropology where experimentation with modernist techniques and forms – most notably, montage and surrealism -- brought together an eclectic group of artists, musicians, poets and anthropologists dedicated to the radical rethinking of western categories and conceptions.

*The Predicament of Culture* offered, in its own method of radical juxtaposition, an expansive way of thinking about ethnography and its possibilities in late modernity. Along with its companion volume, *Writing Culture*, there was a refusal to accept a narrow definition of the term behind which lay a distinction between art and science, interlopers and the “real” anthropologists. Instead Clifford outlined a much broader and more complex landscape that promised to bring anthropology back into dialogue with a host of other practitioners who shared an interest in the ethnographic, understood, as he subsequently explained to Coles, to involve: “. . . a willingness to look at common sense, everyday practices – with extended, critical and self-critical attention, with a curiosity about particularity and a willingness to be decentered in acts of translation.” (Clifford 2000: 56). In extending the definition in this way, ethnography became a general term that encompassed a range of activities, practices and sites. Such a conception offered a different way of thinking about – and, from both anthropologists’ and art historian’s points of view, evaluating -- certain developments in contemporary art. It also made possible a new dialogue between practitioners working in fields hitherto divided by professional conventions and expectations.

Clifford’s notion of ethnography found its way into the writing of both art critics and anthropologists as a way to describe a range of practices characteristic of the post

1960s art world. In particular, it provided a useful framework for interpreting certain kinds of work that had begun to emerge in the period following Warhol. For instance several figures from the 1990s – most notably Christian Boltanski and Fred Wilson – have been considered part of the ethnographic turn by reason of their focus on objects, collection and display.

Boltanski began to work with ‘ethnographic’ cabinets and artifacts early in his career. His exploration of collections and a certain aesthetic of display continued with a series of pieces called *Inventories* in which he collected and arranged “everyday” objects (an ironing board, TV set, couch, microwave). His *Inventory of Objects Belonging to a Young Woman of Charleston* (1992) drew on the tangibility of objects abstracted from their commonplace connections. He used the affective charge of such familiar and domestic items to provoke feelings of absence and loss. His “ethnography” was rooted in a montage rather than a *mise-en-scène* aesthetic – that is, it hinged upon subverting continuities of time and space through techniques of juxtaposition and re-contextualization. In this way, the artist sought to generate new perceptual experiences by transforming what was familiar into something strange.

Fred Wilson’s 1992 *Mining the Museum* project also engaged questions of collection and display. Objects in the Maryland Historical Society Collection were rearranged by Wilson to draw attention to and challenge the commonsense assumptions of a racially based historical narrative. In this respect his concerns as an artist were different from Boltanski’s. Although his work implicated a nineteenth-century anthropology of collecting, classification and display, its intention was both broader and more specific. Wilson’s intervention challenged the institutional power of the museum

as an authoritative purveyor of knowledge and its particular representation of American history.

Both Boltanski and Wilson drew attention to and subverted established institutional hierarchies by making manifest the arbitrariness of their own conventions. For these artists it could be argued that ethnography functioned as both a practice and a mode of representation. While not necessarily having anthropology as a primary focus, their work nevertheless drew attention to forms of anthropological classification and the ordering of objects, throwing into question existing categories of knowledge.

For other artists, the interrogation of anthropology and its colonial legacy became a more pronounced and explicit part of the work. Most notably, during the 1992 Quincentennial anniversary of Columbus's "discovery" of America by Columbus, Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña collaborated in a performance piece entitled *The Year of the White Bear*. It involved the two artists locking themselves in a cage. From inside, they presented themselves as "aboriginal" inhabitants whose presence in the Gulf of Mexico had been overlooked by Columbus. The performance, staged in different sites including Madrid, London, and the Smithsonian in Washington DC, was intended to challenge the Columbus celebrations, at the same time as it satirized nineteenth century practices of exhibiting non-western people in world fairs, museum dioramas and other popular sites.

Fusco and Gómez-Peña's performances and carefully chosen sites of intervention, drew attention to cultural "othering" and ideas about race, authenticity and culture. Crucial to the conception of the work were the responses provoked in viewers of *The Year of the White Bear*. Sometimes violent, sometimes empathetic, but always unsettled,

Fusco's and Gómez-Peña's intervention touched what they called "a colonial wound" (Johnson 1993).

In the work of another artist, James Luna, anthropology was again negatively implicated as part of a broader exploration of identity, history and popular stereotypes. Luna's *The Artifact Piece* (1987-1990), part performance and part installation, involved the artist lying on a sand-covered table in the San Diego Museum of Man surrounded by selected objects – Luna's personal possessions and traditional artifacts, along with conventional museum labels. Visitors encountered what appeared to be a museum "type" or "specimen", evidence of a stereotypical 'salvage' endeavor. But, of course, the exhibit was not only alive but he was surrounded by evidence of a violent history and its contemporary residue. *The Artifact Piece* challenged pervasive notions of Native American culture as dead or dying, located in a different time and space from contemporary America and preserved in the museum.<sup>2</sup>

If the ethnographic turn saw some artists engaging critically with anthropology, for others (especially those involved in the avant-garde elision of the gap between art and life) it served a different purpose. Most prominently, the German artist and Fluxus member Joseph Beuys self-consciously fashioned a new role for himself – the artist as shaman or healer. Beginning in the 1960s until his death in 1986, he staged a series of performances or "actions" involving intense experiences of one kind or another that served as a basis for new insight and spiritual regeneration.

In his 1974 work *I Like America and America Likes Me*, and in the many actions that followed, Beuys performed a role that has long been a staple of anthropological practice. It involved a kind of immersion analogous to that experienced by ethnographic

fieldworkers. Beuys's conception challenged the traditional understandings of the artist, artwork and the viewer, closing the gap between life and art.<sup>3</sup> Considering Beuys in the light of the ethnographic turn, we can see that not only were his performances recognizably anthropological – that is, in undergoing a shamanic or possession ritual his performance presented itself as a recognizable anthropological object for analysis. But, at the same time, he performed (and appropriated a certain conception of) the role of ethnographer – the shaman-fieldworker plumbing the depths of experience, disoriented and displaced as precondition for knowledge of “another kind” (Grimshaw 2001).

A different but related aspect of the ethnographic -- the paradigm of participant-observation -- has been invoked with respect to understanding the artistic work of Nikki Lee (Kwon 2000). Through a series of pieces, Lee disguised herself in order to ‘pass’ within different identity groups – elderly, ethnic and so on. She extended the anthropological technique of participant observation by having herself photographed within these “infiltrated” groups. One of the unsettling aspects of the work derived from the viewer’s knowledge -- not shared by Lee’s “participants” – was that she was an artist, working undercover, so to speak. For Lee, like Beuys, anthropology was approached less as an object of critical enquiry and more as an artistic resource that could be mined and appropriated.

#### *Anthropology, art and the ethnographic turn*

For a number of anthropological commentators – most notably Schneider, Ingold and Ssorin Chaikov – the ethnographic turn in contemporary art practice has offered a new, generative point of engagement with the discipline. On the one hand, it suggested ways of expanding anthropological practice and modes of representation; while, on the

other, it has established potential ground for experiments in collaboration and exchange. Each of the three writers, however, worked with a particular interpretation of the ethnographic and articulated contemporary synergies between art and anthropology by means of different conceptual frameworks.

Schneider (often in conjunction with Wright 2006, 2010, 2013) was among the first to respond to the creative possibilities for the discipline of the ethnographic turn. Through a series of essays, edited volumes and public workshops (including the high profile Tate Modern Fieldworks conference held in London in 2003), he sought to effect a break with older assumptions associated with the anthropology *of* art. Proposing open exchange between artistic and anthropological practice, he anchored such initiatives in notions of border crossings, appropriation, collaborative practice, and experiment (2003, 2006, 2008).

Given the earlier preoccupations of anthropologists with respect to art (for example, Boas 1927; Forge 1973; Gell 1998), Schneider's choice of significant figures -- Boltanski, Anne and Patrick Poirer and Nikolaus Lang -- was unusual; so, too, his intellectual objectives. Schneider's artists were internationally acclaimed figures, artists with a capital A whose work was exhibited in major sites, had significant market-place value, were part of major private and public collections, and had attracted extensive critical commentary. Moreover, his primary interest was not in examining their practice as a particular form of cultural production. He was concerned, in a self-reflexive move, with the significance of the work for anthropology itself.

Differing subtly from Marcus's and Myers's (1995) later argument that anthropology be thought of as a form of cultural production, Schneider's exploration of

the overlaps between contemporary art and anthropology made a case for why art might be good for anthropology to think with (Schneider 1993). It offered a critical lens with respect to disciplinary conventions and reminded anthropologists that contemporary artists were sometimes working the same territory (culture) with remarkably similar approaches (ethnography). For example, in his discussion of Lang, Boltanski, and the Poirers (1993), Schneider drew attention to the challenge posed by their work to assumptions that underlie museum – and by extension – anthropological practice. He made a case for the importance of their work as a critical intervention, one he argued that pre-dated *Writing Culture*, the work more often associated with development of anthropological reflexivity. Schneider asked what could be learned about anthropology, its taken-for-granted norms, conventions and practices through attention to work of certain contemporary artists?

In a series of subsequent writings, Schneider (1996, 2014) extended his argument about the reflexive significance for anthropology of contemporary artistic practice. He noted a marked reluctance among anthropologists to acknowledge overlapping interests and shared ground with certain artists, despite the clear evidence that the latter were “appropriating” or utilizing disciplinary (i.e. ethnographic) strategies in their work. Recognition of these borrowings, he suggested, could be potentially de-stabilizing, an uncomfortable reminder that anthropologists have no monopoly on particular techniques (for example participant-observation); nor could they make exclusive or privileged claims in the interpretation and representation of culture. For Schneider, the distinction between art and anthropology was unstable. It was less about substance or approach, since work might appear one thing rather than another by dint of where and how it was displayed.

To label an approach “art” or “anthropology” was not to point to inherent differences, but to situate work with respect to particular histories and associated cultural and disciplinary positioning.

If Schneider’s writing tended to foreground Art, Ingold, by contrast, has been engaged with art. Understood to be verb rather than a noun, Ingold signaled his concern with creative processes rather than finished objects and, as such, he like Schneider sought to move his project decisively away from the classic “anthropology of art” framework focused around the study of artifacts and representations. In its place, he proposed what he termed anthropology *with* art, that is a bringing together of practices understood to be analogous ways of moving through and engaging with the world (2013: 7-8). Art, Ingold declared, “shares with anthropology a concern to reawaken our senses and to allow knowledge to grow from the inside of being in the unfolding of life” (2013: 8). From this position, there followed a break with certain key assumptions about art and artists – specifically, the centrality of form, originality, the imagination, innovation and individuality.

Ingold’s realignment of art and anthropology was part of a broader intellectual project that he had pursued for over a decade or so. Beginning with essays on skill, livelihood and improvisatory practice, Ingold worked systematically to return anthropology to phenomenological foundations (2000, 2011). It necessitated a radical break with the discipline’s prevailing cognitive and semiotic frameworks and, in their place, Ingold proposed a different kind of endeavor – one that hinged upon a crucial distinction between ethnography and anthropology. For Ingold, ethnography designated the documentary or descriptive work of anthropology – a retrospective

account *of* or *about* something – the articulation of knowledge organized into a representational object. By contrast, he argued that anthropology was an ongoing knowledge practice, a prospective endeavor understood to be a generative way of moving through, and making the world, in collaboration with others. As such, in its experimental, speculative and open-ended character, anthropology resembled art practice as understood by Ingold to be an essentially improvisatory endeavor (2013: 7-8).

There are many overlaps between Ingold's case for a new dialogue between art and anthropology as related fields of practice and the one articulated by Schneider. If they work in different ways with the notion of the ethnographic, they nevertheless share a commitment to art as about the aesthetic – that is, about the engagement of the senses and experience. By contrast, Ssorin Chaikov has challenged such a conception. Drawing on the ideas of artist, Joseph Kosuth, he proposed a new configuration between the two fields – what he termed “ethnographic conceptualism” (2013a, 2013b). In particular, he was attempting to establish an alternative alignment of art and anthropology predicated on a radical departure from conventional understandings of the ethnographic. Following the example of conceptual artists like Kosuth, who abandoned the traditional art object in favor of ideas or concepts and collapsed the distinction between artist and audience, work and commentary, Ssorin Chaikov made a similar case for anthropology. Ethnography was no longer seen to be about the description and representation of pre-existing social and cultural realities, but as ethnographic conceptualism, “[i]t explicitly manufactures the social reality that it studies and in so doing goes well beyond a mere acknowledgement that we modify what we depict by the very means of this depiction” (2013a :8).

Much of Ssorin Chaikov's case was linked to the specific anthropological

questions that emerged during his curation (with Olga Sosnina) of *Gifts to Soviet Leaders*, a 2006 exhibition at the Kremlin Museum in Moscow (2013b). As this work developed through a series of complex dialogues and exchanges, it became clear that the form of the inquiry (an exhibition assembled through and by gift-giving) mirrored its substantive concerns (gift relations). Moreover, as Ssorin Chaikov came to recognize, the exhibition was not an ethnography or a representational object in any straightforward sense. Instead, it was an open-ended event – a catalyst for, or activator of, relationships between authors and audiences, people and objects. The ethnography was neither separable from the exhibition nor added on to it as an interpretive frame. It was the work itself – as Ssorin Chaikov put it, “an ethnography that does things as well as saying them” (2013b: 171).

In utilizing the techniques of Kosuth and others, Ssorin Chaikov followed Schneider in appropriating an approach from contemporary art for anthropological ends. It is predicated on a sort of equivalence between art and anthropology, since this functions as the basis for borrowings and exchange across fields of practice. Ssorin Chaikov’s term was intended, as he put it, to designate “a bridge that can be crossed in both directions” (2013b: 168). But his interest in what art might offer to anthropology was distinctive and specific. It was about “analytics”, and not about the aesthetic (understood as the sensory) as implied by the work of Schneider and Ingold. For Ssorin Chaikov, the model of conceptual art offered a methodology by which to extend his anthropological understanding. Although he noted that the exhibition, *Gifts to Soviet Leaders*, was both an end and a means, a presentation of research results and way of doing the research (2013a: 6), a further move was required for it to become

“anthropology”. From his account, ethnographic conceptualism does not appear to be in and of itself anthropology, but *preliminary* to it – something that undergoes a transformation and enclosure within specific theoretical frameworks (the gift in this case).

### *Resistances*

At one level, as the above narrative has revealed, the ethnographic turn in contemporary art suggested new possibilities for dialogue and collaboration between artists and anthropologists. Despite significant differences in interpretation, the notion of the ethnographic has functioned as a critical mediating point, facilitating fluidity or flow across hitherto carefully demarcated boundaries of practice. In many ways, this moment can be understood as part of a wider series of changes affecting the social sciences in the 1990s – what Schaffer (1993:6) described as a “turn”: “a performance, a change of direction, a revolution, a temporary attack of giddiness.” There was a sense of expanding horizons – conceptual, methodological, formal -- and a commitment to exploratory intellectual exchange.

At another level, however, we have to ask whether Clifford’s generalized and hybrid notion of ethnography, while encompassing a broad landscape of practice, also obscured significant interpretive dissonance between artists and anthropologists. For, it is clear that anthropologists like their artistic counterparts have interpreted and worked with the ethnographic in highly diverse ways. This begs the question as to the usefulness of the term itself. Indeed, perhaps its very familiarity and apparent straightforwardness stands in the way of an acknowledgement of fundamental differences between art and anthropology?

Foster was, of course, the first to raise the question of misunderstanding between artists and anthropologists in his classic 1996 essay. As its title makes clear, *The Artist as Ethnographer*, Foster sought to draw a parallel between the contemporary artist as ethnographer and Benjamin's earlier writings on the role of the artist as political activist. As he pointed out, both shared the same oppositional stance toward bourgeois institutions – the art world, museums, the academy and so on. But, according to Foster, in place of workers as the primary subjects of alignment, the artist now sought out the “cultural and/or ethnic other”. He warned against the rise of what he called the “pseudo-ethnographic” (1995: 180), where: “[f]ew principles of the ethnographic participant-observer are observed, let alone critiqued, and only limited engagement of the community is effected. Almost naturally the project strays from collaboration to self-fashioning, from a decentering of the artist as cultural authority to a remaking of the other in neo-primitivist guise” (1995:196-197). He continued: “*the quasi-anthropological role set up for the artist can promote a presuming as much as a questioning of ethnographic authority, an evasion as often as an extension of institutional critique*” (original emphases 1995: 197).

In his critical review, Foster claimed that artists had only a superficial grasp of ethnography – one underpinned by projections of alterity and authenticity on to the so-called “other”. The denial of coevalness between artist and subject led to the “other” being appropriated in the interests of “art”. All too often the new ethnographically inflected work involved the sacrifice of human beings to an artistic vision. People became objects of aesthetic contemplation. As Foster pointed out, there was always a danger that the *artist as ethnographer's* claims of commitment to reflexive or

collaborative practice was a rhetorical move, serving to mask the reassertion of artistic authority.

Foster's intervention raised a crucial problem concerning the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in ethnographically inflected artistic work. This relationship has continued to frame a good deal of the debate between artists and anthropologists.

Typically anthropologists have sought to take the high ground on the matter, disavowing the aesthetic and asserting the centrality of ethics in the shaping of their scholarly practice (see AAA ethics statement). For this reason (among others), Robert Gardner has long been – and continues to be -- a lightning rod for anthropologists. His films (*Dead Birds* or *Forest of Bliss*) are denounced because they “look like” ethnography, while at the same time willfully flouting the expectations and conventions of the discipline. Central to the criticisms leveled at Gardner is his perceived violation of the ethical contract of ethnographic work. He is accused of placing people in the service of his art – denying their cultural specificity, historical agency and subjectivity in favor of highly aestheticized representations of common humanity (Ruby 2000, Parry 1988).

In declaring Gardner an artist, not an ethnographer, anthropologists point to his self-conscious foregrounding of the distinctive qualities of the film medium over the details of cultural context. Moreover, the intentional ambiguity of Gardner's work, the openness of its meaning and refusal to offer explanations in favor of stimulating sensory experience and embodied engagement with the world evoked on film presents a challenge to academic anthropology. The latter depends on legibility in terms of existing bodies of knowledge and a commitment to collective norms of evaluation. If work does not obviously engage established disciplinary categories, then it tends to be cast out.

Designated as “art”, it is consigned to an endeavor understood to be about a lack of collective accountability and animated by creativity, individual expression and formal innovation.

The sheer strength of anthropological feeling about Gardner is striking. It suggests that there is perhaps more at stake than simply the desire to protect disciplinary boundaries. Formally or aesthetically ambitious work throws into sharp relief disciplinary assumptions and practices that are often easier to elide than to engage – something that has not been lost on artists engaging the ethnographic practices of anthropology. In criticizing Gardner for taking aesthetics too seriously, anthropologists have often overlooked the aesthetics of their own practice. For artists this lack of attention to matters of form can be perplexing. <sup>4</sup>

By implication then, artwork that “looks like” anthropology raises questions about the aesthetics of anthropological inquiry, ways of knowing and, crucially, the notion of ethics itself. Anthropologists have tended to feel secure in their ability to debate the latter. But Strohm identifies a crucial problem with this position (2012). In exploring the resistances between anthropological and artistic perspectives in the context of his fieldwork he came to understand the limitations of the former, particularly with respect to ethics. The latter, as he pointed out, was predicated on an assumption of inequality (2012: 101). But, if anthropologists have held onto the idea of ethics and sought to discipline the aesthetic, the impulse of the artist has been in the opposite direction. For the artist, the aesthetic opens up a new -- and potentially transformative -- space. In drawing on the work of Rancière (2004), Strohm proposes “aesthetic experience”, defined as “a free play or non-hierarchical relationship within the artwork itself.” He

continues: “What aesthetic experience activates, particularly in those moments of collaboration between anthropology and art, is a disruption and redistribution of roles and places of anthropologist and the other and, in turn, of what can be seen, heard, thought, said and done in the anthropological episteme” (2012: 117). Hence, the entry of aesthetics into anthropology as a *research practice* rather than a topic or object of research is a deeply unsettling – indeed potentially transformative -- move. In a field traditionally wedded to empirical fact, it brings into view a series of contested boundaries that includes the real and the imaginary, the discursive and the figurative, anthropologists and subjects of research.

If anthropologists have long been alert to interlopers of one kind or another, artists are equally sensitive to work that appears to resemble their own practice but fails, in their judgment, to be the real thing. For example, during 2004 while situated within the Manchester School of Art, one of this essay’s authors, Amanda Ravetz, produced a series of films, drawings and mixed media works for critical evaluation. During a studio discussion with tutor Pavel Büchler, he commented that her work “looked like art but was not art”. As Ravetz understood it, the problem was that her videos and drawings revealed vague and unexamined ideas about contemporary art. They were based on a superficial ‘look’, rather than on a deeper, and possibly conceptually-informed, appreciation of contemporary art. Importantly this meant her work did not, as another tutor, Ian Rawlinson put it, ‘follow the ground’ of a practice (Grimshaw et al 2010). It had not emerged from a long-term development of ideas, experimentation and decisions that together constituted an identifiably authored way of thinking and doing, with its own recognizable appearance or profile.

Throughout a year of studio practice alongside art school students, Ravetz discovered that the notion “ground of a practice” marked a clear difference between her way of approaching work as an anthropologist and how artists conceptualized their task. In seeking to understand more fully these divergent understandings, Ravetz tried to explore this ground, identifying ideas about things and events in the world and subsequently making work around them. For example, she became interested in a story about a man washed up on the coast who claimed to be a concert pianist. This became the subject for some initial drawings. But Ravetz found that she struggled to develop the drawings, as she was not sure exactly what she was interested in or where to take the ideas. Through this she began to recognize that for her artist colleagues, even those working in a conceptual mode, ideas emerged in close dialogue with material forms and practices and –crucially -- often without a clear end point in view. Being able to sustain uncertainty, often through the use of improvisatory play – accompanied by a *not knowing* where something was leading -- was part of an artist’s skill.<sup>5</sup>

On a different occasion, Ravetz enquired if the problems with her work were to do with a lack of skill. Her tutor responded in the negative – the problem was not a question of skill but rather she was perceived to have “an ethnographic chip on her shoulder”. This comment communicated disappointment with Ravetz’s perceived lack of imagination. Her work was criticized for its literalness. It was seen as evidence of the maker’s inability to let go of the details of the real world in order to enter into some kind of transformative and/or abstracting process. Ravetz recognized that anthropological training had encouraged her to think about problems, contexts, techniques and form in such a way that each element of the process folded logically into an overarching

framework and, ultimately, served to generate knowledge *about* something.

Ravetz's experience of the resistances generated in bringing together anthropological and artistic practices is echoed in observations made by other commentators located within the creative arts (Sullivan 2005, Smith and Dean 2009). For the latter, modes of academic knowledge production like anthropology are perceived to involve a shift from the *known to the unknown*, a process that begins with the mastery of current positions within a particular field, followed by the development of research questions and methodology, and concludes with an articulation of original insights. The artist, however, is seen to work differently – engaged in what has been called “transformative knowing” (Sullivan 2009, Kershaw 2009, Haseman and Mafe 2009, Fisher and Fortnum 2013). Here knowing is conceptualized as unruly, a kind of leap, a sudden flash, imaginative insight, an intervention, a dislocation, a dynamic challenge to what is already known. It is not about knowing more, but knowing differently: “This is where the artist-researchers take us – to where we’ve never been before, to see what we’ve never seen. And then they bring us back and help us look again at what we thought we knew. Facing the unknown and disrupting the known is precisely what artist-researchers achieve . . . (Sullivan 2009: 62). Artistic work, as a disruptive rather than cumulative kind of knowledge practice, shares a concern with the generation of new knowledge but it is of a radically different kind.

As Ravetz discovered, discussion of work within an art school context often focused around the artwork and what it ‘did’ (Ravetz 2007). Analysis often followed rather than preceded artistic making and research, meaning that much about approach and aims could not be laid out in advance of an activity, producing a form of ‘improvised’

research design that many anthropologists might not consider rigorous. Moreover, anthropologists seek to communicate and persuade their peers through established forms of argument and presentation. The artist is less concerned with the communication of a particular message. Instead, as Johnson drawing on the work of philosopher John Dewey proposes, art does not describe or explain but instead “presents” or “enacts” (2011:147). Knowing emerges from what he calls the “enactment” of the art work in and through its viewer, yielding potentially new and transformative understandings of the world (2011:150).

The convergence of practice suggested by anthropological notions such as appropriation, improvisatory practice or ethnographic conceptualism risks the production of work deemed inauthentic or masquerading as something that it is not. The problem with Gardner’s case, from an anthropological perspective, is that his films *look like* anthropology but follow much of art’s presentational form. With Ravetz, however, her work, while superficially looking like art, was because of its emphasis on content and perceived underdeveloped aesthetic considered by the art critic to be closer in its mode of fabrication to anthropology.

What these cases suggest is that for anthropologists – and artists – the central question is indeed a shared concern for aesthetics. Here, Foster’s widely invoked observation that artists and anthropologists accord differential values to ethics and aesthetics gives way to something more surprising and intriguing. How something looks, (its representational profile) emerges as crucial to whether work is considered legitimate or not, aside from what it “does”. But if both fields share a central concern with the aesthetic, their understanding of it is profoundly different. For the anthropologist, the

aesthetic is a vehicle for content rather than an outcome actively shaped by an emergent play of content and form. By contrast, as Strohm (following Rancière) emphasized, there is a profoundly different conception of the relationship between knowledge and the aesthetic within contemporary art. It is predicated on open space, a state of “not knowing”, a common suspension of disbelief out of which new forms of collaboration and participation may arise.<sup>6</sup>

### *Conclusion*

For both artists and anthropologists, the term “ethnography” has encompassed several, sometimes conflicting, agendas. Despite these significant differences of interpretation, practitioners in each field have utilized the notion for their own purposes. On the one hand, ethnography has lent a certain kind of academic respectability to calls for artistic work to be given a place in the academy (as practice based or practice led research – Sullivan 2005); on the other, the new anthropological dialogue with contemporary art has led to a reconceptualization of research as a kind of making (Gauntlett, 2011, Ingold 2013) and suggested new creative possibilities for the discipline. It has also initiated a different kind of engagement with audiences. Hitherto anthropologists tended to think of speaking to specialized insiders or “popularizing” their work when engaging general audiences. Artists have provided anthropologists with other models, prompting bolder, riskier and more open-ended possibilities that involved challenge or provocation and in which the anthropological work itself is not understood to be complete or bounded but is instead emergent and generated through active audience participation (Ssorin Chaikov 2013b).

However, the failure to prise open the notion of the ethnographic and to assume it

straightforwardly encompasses or mediates encounters between contemporary art and anthropology risks a number of things -- confusing anthropological concerns too closely with artistic ones, reading into certain artwork a narrow set of concerns that may not actually have been relevant, allowing for a re-appropriative move on the part of anthropology over art. In many cases, the discipline was largely irrelevant to artists' concerns. The work of Boltanski or Lang, for instance, was animated and shaped by the particular questions they were seeking to explore *as artists*, not by a concern with 'ethnography'. Their medium and approach were an integral part of this work rather than a response to social phenomena 'out there'. Although we might recognize something akin to ethnography in play here and understand the ways that the discipline might be implicated by the work of certain artists, it is important not to over-estimate the role of anthropology in its formation or significance.

Moreover the anthropological erasure of difference implied in notions of appropriation or improvisatory practice reduces art to an instrumental purpose equivalent to that of anthropology. González has warned of the reductive framing of art work when seen in terms of ethnography or identity politics: “. . . the artwork is generally reduced to the status of an *additive* rather than *critical* intervention. In other words, both readings tend to disregard the possibility that the art work serves as a meta-discursive critique of systems of representation, emphasizing instead the ways in which art offers views of an Other culture or Other perspective, not commonly seen in the art world” (original emphases, 2008: 13). So what if art is understood in this way – what might be its radical intervention into the project of anthropology?

By posing this question, a primary aim in this essay has been to map an

intellectual space within which work that crosses boundaries of practice, form and conceptual orientation might be more effectively evaluated. At present, the realignment of art and anthropology oscillates between two positions – an erasure of difference, often accompanied by strategies of appropriation, or an assertion of an irreconcilable conflict, following from differential values accorded to aesthetics and ethics. We have suggested that a more nuanced understanding of both convergence and friction has the potential to destabilize these established positions, yielding greater clarity about what is at stake in exploring human (and other) worlds. It is not just about how to locate experimental or hybrid practices. It *is* about recognizing the differences that stem from why and how they are pursued -- and the kinds of assumptions that underpin them. To focus attention only on the problem of how to situate work tends to provoke the heated but often unproductive debate about matter out of place – whether something is authentic or not, whether it merely “looks like” art or anthropology but is not the real thing. To move beyond this impasse, we have argued, requires a surer grasp of what art and anthropology do as very different ways of engaging the world. This matters to anyone in anthropology who wants to achieve a clearer analysis of what happens when content and form grow together. If Boltanski and other artists are not primarily interested in concerns we might call ethnographic – anthropologists certainly are. The challenge for those wanting to bring anthropology and art into a new dialogue is how to forge a generative space between convergence and resistance.

<sup>1</sup> A detailed history of the relationship between art and anthropology has yet to be written, but useful references to the relationship between the two fields can be found in Clifford 1988; Morphy and Perkins, 1996; Marcus and Myers 1996; Schneider 2012; and Kelly 2007.

<sup>2</sup> A commentator on Luna's work has suggested that Luna's performance can be seen as a work of auto-ethnography: "If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, auto-ethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations" (González 2008: 42). Drawing on the writing of Mary Louise Pratt, she points out that this genre involves both a sharing in the dominant discourse, at the same time there is a re-appropriation of it as a mode of subversion. In this way, González foregrounds the skillful way that Luna in *The Artifact Piece* effectively employs museum strategies and conventions precisely to bring into question the ways that certain identities and histories have been fixed, represented and made authoritative through the mediation of institutional structures.

<sup>3</sup> Yet, as a number of commentators have pointed out, the role he developed -- the artist as shaman -- was in many ways profoundly conservative given the period in which he was working. It involved the recuperation of a much older notion of the artist understood to be a visionary, hovering on the edge of madness and suffering but crucially transposed into a *collective* therapeutic function -- in which, as Beuys declared, everyone becomes an artist (Moffitt 1988; Walters 2010).

<sup>4</sup> "Why is ethnographic film unconcerned with formal innovation?" the artist Claudia Pilsel asked Ravetz during a studio crit at Manchester School of Art in 2004. Pilsel's astonishment that form might not be the primary concern of a filmmaker reflects different priorities between many in the two fields. During the Connecting Art and Anthropology workshop convened by Ravetz during January 2007 another artist, Daniel Peltz, commented on the way anthropological method might cause a change of priorities around 'the work' (<http://www.miriad.mmu.ac.uk/caa/>) Referring to Ravetz's account of taking her daughter to fieldwork, he implicated questions of form when he

reflected that a similar activity on his part might lead him to “make a different work that had a different sense of responsibility to people versus my ideas or versus what I observed.”

<sup>5</sup> For example, Naomi Kashiwagi, a student in Ravetz’s group at the Manchester School of Art, developed work using musical manuscript paper and a variety of ‘tools’ ranging from hole punches to musical instruments. In *Piano String Drawings* exhibited at the final MA degree show, piano strings and ink were used to mark manuscript paper (*Portfolio* p 31.

<http://www.naomikashiwagi.co.uk/portfolio>- Last accessed May 25th 2015). The resulting drawing subverted the standard appearance of a musical score and reversed the accepted temporal sequence of composition implicated by score, followed by gesture and lastly performance. The score-like drawing by Kashawagi assumed the end point of a process instead of its initiation, a performance and gesture that had become a score for something now already absent. Kashiwagi’s subsequent conceptualization of this and other of her work as being about obsolescence and innovation came about gradually through the pursuit of certain accidents, possibilities, experiments and playfulness, rather than being an initial claim for the work.

<sup>6</sup> Not knowing is not the same as ignorance – it is more a suspension of disbelief, an opening up to possibilities coupled with the skilled knowledge of how to give form to materials and ideas.

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