

The relevance of
ethnography today:
is it still small?,
beautiful?, critical?,
possible?

— George E. Marcus

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Introduction: The aesthetics of small gestures
and ethnography as micro-publics
Nikos Papastergiadis

What is the link between the little detail and the big pattern, or the connection between the building of structures over time and the movements across space? The answers to these fundamental questions take surprising and wondrous turns as we follow the trajectories outlined by George E. Marcus. He proceeds with one eye close to the ground, and the other looking ahead to the horizon. The vertical and the horizontal are not arranged with any neat symmetry. Sometimes he goes slow and hangs about. In other instances, there is a measured leap and a willful embrace of the beyond. Either way, there is pleasure to be found in both the selection of sites and the crafting of elongated phrases to capture the nuance and the scope of things. If his scenes and sentences need a visual counterpart they can be compared to the texture of the skies and the presence of limbs in an El Greco painting. Perfect in its context but not to be copied, not at least until another Picasso emerges.

In this essay, Marcus at first charts a view of the paths opened by that fantastic spur to his discipline — the book that he co-edited, *Writing Culture* — but then takes us to a new frontier that hovers before the humanities as a whole. The timing of that book was exquisite. It addressed the conjunction of the crisis of representation with the postcolonial critique of culture. Unlike many contemporaneous texts, it did not just note the barriers and collisions that blocked the way, but it sought to offer proposals on what to do next, and how to go about it. The emphasis on textuality heightened the distinction between a document as a record of events and the event of recording the emergence of newness. *Writing Culture* became a guide for a generation of scholars in many disciplines and a companion piece for like-minded interdisciplinary folk from around the world.

The continuing focus on the interplay between method and content has taken Marcus to another exploration of collaboration. In his recent work, he has already distinguished between the crude definitions of collaboration that are in effect not much more than the coordination of diverse participants and the delegation of production to a chain of technical outsourcing, and given more attention to the collaborative encounter as a mode of 'epistemic partnership'. This gives stress to creative possibility that comes from the mutual apprehension that the other is not just a container of information, but also a generator of new thought. The encounter is the stimulus and stage for the production of emergent possibilities. This is distinct from the more mechanical idea that collaboration is the directed participation of multiple people according to a predetermined masterplan. Today, with the intertwining of digital production and dissemination, collaboration is more far-reaching and the emphasis on participation is a banality. It is the condition upon which almost all creative and critical work is conducted. The interesting point is not if you are collaborating but with whom and how.

The implications for the humanities are equally profound. If we are to continue the task of writing culture, and not regress into writing on and about culture, then the methodological challenge of collaboration needs to traduce the borders of form and content. From this perspective, Marcus turns on his tools to conduct little fieldwork experiments within the realm of the gesture and the aesthetics of living situations. This shift in attention is quite subtle and easy to confuse with the turn towards participatory practice in contemporary art. Marcus takes note of the relevance in the artistic context, but his aim is not to conflate ethnographic method with artistic intent. If there is any ambition towards achieving conceptual renewal and innovation, it does not strive in the direction of doing the communicative work that articulates the practice of contemporary artists. He appears to be less interested

in providing supplementary texts for artistic projects, but more concerned with examining the viability of ethnographic techniques. However, at the frontiers of ethnography and aesthetics there is a common problem: how do we define the dynamics of collaboration?

The conventional perspective on collaboration puts a great weight on the existence of shared forms and a capacity to receive information. It relies on the assumption that the process of sensory perception proceeds by means of receiving external stimuli and the capacity to recognise external patterns. This presumes a shared language composed of legible signs and comprehensible phrases. Through the process of exchanging signs, collaboration enables a new shape to emerge, as it produces a form that the other can mimic and commune with. However, what sort of collaboration occurs when there is no shared text? This does not necessarily mean we are suddenly condemned to dreaded silence or violent confusion. However, it does require a radical switch in the function of sensory perception. Suddenly the senses are not followers of the trail of signs and phrases that are outside, but seekers and producers of the desired outcome. The collaboration is prompted from the inside. Here the taking in of even the smallest of signs and then reorganizing it into a movement occurs at the threshold of the body and its surroundings. The enunciations that flow activate a new and previously non-existent shared space. The parliament of sensory work oscillates between passive receivers and active seekers. The body is not just an interpretative council but also a legislative assembly.

I am guessing that this is what Marcus means when he sets out to rescale the 'classic regulative ideals of ethnographic method'. It is a kind of zooming into the details and a form of sensory extension that then proceeds to capture the cosmic connections. The smallest signs are touched in the same way that our eyes can reach towards the stars in the

spheres above. This wide-angle lens that enables a zooming out is an apparatus that is distributed across the whole body. Marcus suggests that he is not satisfied with an endorsement or a recognition of this double sensory modality, but also a form that can handle the flows and exchanges that occur in the midst of such fieldwork. As instructive as was his earlier methodological prompts about ‘following’ the lines of cultural meaning, it is now directed towards the equally challenging task of grasping the form of a situation from the inside. Marcus is quick to correct any deluded extrapolations. Multi-sited ethnography is not just the multiplication of sites. It is less an aggregative logic but more like a relational modality. This is in every sense a qualitatively different approach. It is not only looking to see how one thing is developed relative to another in a different space, but also a desire to identify the almost imperceptible transformation of things as they enter into a relation with each other. These transformations are often only existent in the time/space of the encounter, and even if they deposit visible footprints, these are like Canetti’s legendary analogy of the interpretation of the dream — the cage after the bird has flown.

Such is also the complaint that is most often voiced about art that is made in the midst of live situations. However, the brittle folds in Canetti’s affirmative melancholy are now reduced and flattened to a churlish rebuke. For Canetti, the cage was not empty, but the protesting empiricists don’t see any flight lines. Here the pursuit of judgment trumps any attempt to trace the hidden threads that lead from impressionistic glances, rhythmic interactions and the generally fluid stuff of sociality. At the forefront of this legalistic declaration of the right to have a body on display is the insistence that a process that has passed can never compete with a solid form that remains, and the deep-seated suspicion towards witnesses who have no evidence that can withstand a veridical test. In short, the transformation in the conditions of spectatorship, the blurring between participant, witness and producer, has

also undermined the criteria of evaluation. This spreading of responsibility is thus interpreted as a sign of malaise in the judgment that now everything goes, and anything can be art.

Against the pleasure of debunking the rhetoric that promotes the aleatory nature of the ephemeral, the joyful union of strangers, the promise of many hands that make light work, the freedom from institutional regulation, and the general claim that you had to be there to know what it was like, Marcus prefers a more modest pursuit of constructive labor. In his own words, he strives to work like a 'bricklayer'. He is as interested in the next brick as he is in the bigger structure. He acknowledges that all artistic and academic work has a relationship to the existing criteria and structures that make it part of a public. But he is not in rush to form judgment. Thus he complements the 'following processes' of multi-sited ethnography by proposing a methodology that builds 'contraptions', heads towards an eventual 'docking', and results in the production of 'prototypes'. The contraption refers to the role of research as a platform for staging 'micro-publics' and receiving ideas. The contraption provides a form of emplacement. The docking is a way station that accommodates the form. The prototypes give expression to these encounters and enable others to pick them up as ideas that can be used elsewhere.

This is a suggestive and rich vocabulary for dealing with contingency. Marcus took inspiration from the field of contemporary art, and also turned to see what it was doing to art criticism. He took a sober middle path, one that is neither invested in the hagiography of the artist, nor in pricking the hyperbolic bubbles. There is ample evidence that artists have contradictory agendas: in terms of their commitment towards progressive political ideals and engagement with the art market; their willingness to be embraced by the dominant institutions and their desire to be immersed in popular culture; their involvement in the construction of collective experience and the fostering of private reflection; the expansion of the

role of the participant into a co-producer and the enhancement of the authorship of the initiating artist. He accepts that actions assume authoritative meaning only when they are docked within institutional frameworks. However, he also emphasises the crucial role of mediators and the space that exists between the radical act and the process of institutional incorporation. The tendency to reach for immediate authoritative aesthetic judgment over the participatory art appears to be premature. Rather than rushing in to announce where value can be found, the critical task may now lie in working with the micro-publics as they seek to devise their own criteria for evaluation. Similarly, there may be a need to develop a wider conceptual framework for evaluating collaboration. If, for instance, it is only conducted from the position of an external spectator, then it is at risk of negating or missing the understanding that comes from the experience of participation. In the ambient field of participation there is a radical distribution of spectatorship, and it requires new modes of critique. In a curious transposition of inter-disciplinary exchange, Marcus discovered ethnographic insight from the art critic that turned a blind eye to ethnography. Parenthetically it must be noted that there is an emergent cluster of artists, curators, art critics and scholars who have taken the challenge of fieldwork more seriously. This has led to a sharper clarification between the evaluation of the documents that follow participatory projects, and the reflexive portrayal of the affective process of engagement with participatory projects. The former can be conducted with a slight extension of available art historical tools, the latter requires a new approach that is capable of producing more detailed narratives of the textures of complicity. Such narratives are still at the fringes of art history and criticism.

Some art critics still argue that the ethnographic gaze maintains a blind eye to aesthetics. It is self-evident that Marcus's insight is honed by the tools of his trade. He is not leading us to an ultimate model, or, to use his terminology,

a docking point that assumes authority by claiming to be the destination from which judgment can survey the scenes. The gesture of ethnographic experimentation goes in an opposite direction of formal appreciation. It heads for the sensory activity of aesthetics. In this sense, aesthetics is a verb. The eye that seeks this activity is distributed across the thresholds of the body and its field. Aesthetics is also the incessant activity of making a space attractive to the other. Here the power of images is not as representations of the world, but as direct contact with another worldliness. Here the image is a world-making activity. The ethnographer steps into this zone not as a reporter but as a mediator who works with artists to hold together elements that are otherwise too hot or just plain elusive. To bring forward these images into the public imaginary these mediators must build platforms for circulation and encounter. To merely activate experience can be dismissed as a repetition of banalities, the field gets to work as the participants are pulled into a vortex of polyphony. The spiraling exchange of near hits and misses propel the speculative and imaginative activity into being, in a way that is akin to the emergent socialities of our time and place. Marcus has put a bet on the capacity of ethnography to experiment in the production of micro-publics, and to incorporate these findings as 'results'. For the artist, the authorial form of the result may not coincide with the ethnographer's striving to produce an authoritative account of the situation. In Marcus's account of his collaboration with Cantarella and Hegel in the 214 Sq. Ft. project, the aim stubbornly points to revisiting the assumptions of ethnographic practice. He disassociates from any aesthetic effect, but then his mode of rethinking the fundamental methodological concepts is via the testing of anthropological insights through the 'amplification' of the ideas that are latent in the scene and the act of 'probing' to elicit gestures. In these events, the act of collaboration proceeds by one person turning up the volume and the other accepting an invitation to put something inside. In ideal circumstances,

these intervention make feelings explode and memories enter. This is a radical departure from the assumed role of the ethnographer as 'fly on the wall'. However, it is through this methodological movement that Marcus may have found a common purpose with the artist. They both find themselves in the role of probing to prompt new experiences and amplifying the not-yet-formalised interpretations that emerge in the micro-publics.

If we return to the image of the birdcage with the door that has been left open, we still cannot see the bird, but we can ask ourselves — what are the traces that tell us something else is happening? In the Pacific Ocean, there are tiny atolls that pop up and down depending on the tide. When sailors set out without any maps, they cannot see them. These mostly invisible and tiny clumps of rock lie beyond the horizon line. However, the interference that they produce in the wave patterns is enough for these sailors to find their way.

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In late 2011, a conference was held at Duke University, organised by the current editors of the journal *Cultural Anthropology*, to recognise the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of the volume *Writing Culture* in 1986. It was both an occasion and an assessment of what that volume marked in the history of ethnographic method. Presented were readings by six contemporary and noted writers of ethnography in the US, reflecting a range in the diversity that that moment of broad discussion licensed in the production of ethnographic writing just as the research agendas of anthropology and other disciplines were reforming, and becoming diverse, even eclectic.

James Clifford and I had the honour of leading off with prefatory comment and reflection. Clifford in his talk, 'Feeling Historical', was characteristically elegant and elegiac, casting a look backward to the near past from the perspective of vast present changes. And I, writing in my characteristic style of the 'bricklayer', was interested in the next brick, the next wall and its architecture in the near future of ethnography. Writing beautiful texts, keyed to inventive narrative, analytic creativity, and reflexive awareness, as especially licensed by the *Writing Culture* exposure of the representational history of ethnography in anthropology, remain the standard in guaranteeing academic careers. However, for me, the present and near-future challenges for ethnography as textuality, performance, and representation are all about developing the latter's forms and making them accessible within the design, politics, and conditions for establishing the 'field' of fieldwork, project by project, in a world full of diverse projects, of global scale and portent, of self-awareness, and where textuality is synonymous with sociality. Responses to one's work, in the making, among one's subjects and other publics matters

more than ever to the standing and influence of anthropological writing and thinking as knowledge. Theory work thus does not just precede the production of anthropological texts as a mode of communication to colleagues. But it surrounds this professional context on all sides. Indeed, the creation of concepts and theories occurs significantly in the field ('in the wild', in Michel Callon's terms), and they circulate as prototypes among diverse publics before they ever reach colleagues through conventional publication. Professional discussions of research in anthropology seem increasingly to define themselves in the middle of projects without making the dimensions of research clear enough.

Anthropological knowledge is at the same time expert knowledge and publically recognised as such. The question is, what forms of representation in the contemporary make this so? And how are these forms of representation synonymous with method? How, then, do we sustain, or morph, the regulative ideals of ethnographic writing in relationship to, and more importantly within, the fieldwork experience itself — operating as research in the world? So, *Writing Culture* beyond the private archives of fieldnotes, is somehow synonymous with and publically implicated in the messy track of contemporary fieldwork, that is both dwelling and moving. But just how?

Looking back at what the so-called 'crisis of representation', along with the powerful postcolonial critique of history in which it was embedded, did to anthropology during and after the 1980s, we could say that it established a limit condition for framing and stating older anthropological questions and projects, and gave a license to younger scholars to move in many different new directions. The old subjects — the worlds of alterity and conditions of indigenous peoples, for which ethnographic method was devised historically to study deeply — have still held an ideological central compass, while many, many other topics and subjects have gained currency.

How has ethnography, at least, rethought itself as a

mode of inquiry in this more eclectic, diverse world of question-asking?

1. For a while, at least, during and after the 1980s, ethnographers centrally embedded their engagements within the contexts defined by world, social, and colonial historical research. They changed in order to remain the same.
2. Increasingly, as ethnographers address contemporary and emergent problems, they invest more strongly in their longstanding public and activist concerns, and come to justify themselves more explicitly in these terms.
3. They turn inward, become hyper-theoretical and archival, and reinvent the relevance of classic problems, and their terms, for anthropology in the contemporary. This is the mode of 'Anthropology Is Definitely Not Ethnography!'
4. Ethnographers absorb their new collaborations both inside and outside the academy or the museum and forge with them new resources and forms of inquiry for themselves. Here settled methods become key sources of innovation that require new partners. Method is much more than just method, and ethnography becomes an intensified ground for experimentation with the classic techniques as an ideology of fieldwork.

These four tendencies are certainly not mutually exclusive in contemporary practice, but in line with my own interests since the 1990s, I am most interested in the fourth. This option appears most obviously to address questions of method, but it is not just this. It is interested in going to the source in the research process where anthropological ideas are articulated, are thought, inducing a kind of paraethnography (ethnography that is shared at both a high, practical, and applied intellectual level with subjects and partners in research — an expression of this knowledge, textual or otherwise, is both a specialised product and means of anthropological research).

What is unique to ethnography, I believe, is the building of its ideas — and its concepts and theories — from those of its subjects and found partners in fieldwork. In this sense, theory is a primary form of data — not its result — but, as such, it must be located in the sites and situations of fieldwork. This requires dialogic forms of reception that the anthropologist has to make, stage, design, and incorporate into classic notions of fieldwork and the production of ethnographic texts from them. How all of this can be staged, mediated, and circulated in a ‘standard’ project of contemporary anthropological research is a matter of keen interest to me as I have emphasised in recent writing, and tried to subject to experiment at a modest Center for Ethnography at my university.

So, my impulse is to push the production of ethnography — its published texts — back into the contemporary experience of constructing the field of fieldwork. And this needs its forms and norms for remediating the textual forms that we have, making them performative and more actively interventionist in part, and rescaling the classic regulative ideals of ethnographic method themselves. So, forms of enactment, emplacement, and textuality within and alongside fieldwork are what I am after. Appearing to become theater, performance, or experimental in the aesthetic sense, on one hand, or the studio work of designers, on the other, these alliances create the forms, I argue, for achieving the distinctively historic analytic and theoretical ends of anthropological inquiry as these have evolved since the 1980s.

Organizing a Center for Ethnography after having moved to the University of California in 2005 has provided me and others an opportunity to think through and modestly experiment with these forms of producing ethnography within and alongside the politics and dilemmas of establishing sites and conditions in the spirit of classic fieldwork (where sustained participant observation, dialogic engagements, and deep relationships significant for research could be cultivated).

These are means for experimenting with the textualising of ethnography in the real time of fieldwork. The Center has offered an opportunity to think about forms that would push the process of ethnographic writing back to the practical, on the ground problems of constituting fieldwork in differently constructed worlds from the ground up. I think of this as anticipated in my interest in the emergence of ‘multi-sited ethnography’ in the 1990s with its ‘following’ metaphor, as a condition of producing this kind of research, similar to other research and theory imaginaries about mobile or circulating processes of knowledge-making that were in high fashion during that period, the most influential remaining actor–network theory. However, today, that view of the social life of the ethnographic method is far too lonely. It should be reimaged and challenged, I argue, in addressing the problem anew of situating the virtues and effects of micro-scale, ethnographic work in a networked, globalising world of which collaboration has come to be the key, almost universal normative expression of desirable social relations. Ethnography remains multi-sited but its composition cannot be comprehended by following and explaining processes that are authoritatively and aesthetically realised in resulting accounts.

A key problem is that the evocation of multi-sited ethnography came to be understood in a literal way as the reproduction and multiplication of sites of individual research where the modes and standards of inquiry applicable to one would be produced in each. Of course this was open to obvious critiques of feasibility which I anticipated in the original essay. What I was personally more interested in was how work in one place evoked often-hidden routes to others precisely through the theory or concept work that the ethnographer could do with specific subjects and not others (the key informant becoming epistemic partner in complicit relations — a construct with which I was working by the late 1990s). This is also the way that multiple scales

and paths of unintended consequences were evoked in Anna Tsing's masterly work of 2004, *Friction*, for example. In this trajectory, I indeed saw the multi-sited construct becoming something like the emergent connectivities and paths of recursion that were generated by collaboratively produced and distinctive ideas of ethnography emerging in the scenes of fieldwork — as a technology of question-asking that sent one on a trajectory that was in fact multi-sited. What was missing was thinking about the literal forms that might materialise this sense of fieldwork process then. Changes in the way the world presents itself to ethnographers for fieldwork projects and dramatic changes in media and communication technologies have finally made the question of doing things differently with the classic method explicit and pressing. In the original multi-sited formulation, this question was not far under the surface, but it only became gradually and never clearly sayable until the present and the recent past.

The sections that follow describe the major preoccupations and experiments with form that have emerged in the Center at UCI so far.

Collaboration

Collaboration was the first and perhaps obvious topical interest of Center consideration, and it has been sustained. Quite aside from de facto collaboration being a more or less explicit component of individually authored ethnographic projects from the method's inception, collaboration is everywhere now a standard, and a normative expression of association. It is a universal 'good' to be promoted with very few shadows. It is thus the practical, formal, and found centre as well as the on-the-ground medium of access in constituting fieldwork amid assemblages, projects large and small, locations, sites, and places. It is both the ether and cocoon of still individually conceived research projects that become collaborative everywhere, by push or pull. In short, collaborations are not a choice in fieldwork, they are a condition for constituting it.

Experiments within collaborations, and their politics of research relations, defines the degree of freedom that ethnographers can reserve to pose their own questions.

Pedagogical Experiments

The kinds of students who become anthropologists now, and who pass through its initiation by ethnography are distinctive by often having already been where they want to go (e.g., as journalists or as workers in NGOs of a variety of sizes and causes), having both experience and knowing languages relevant to the once-defining alterity of place of the ethnographic subject. They arrive, and we recruit them, on the basis of their already formed commitment to and curiosity about problems that becoming anthropologists will help them know afresh or more deeply. Thus regulative norms of classic method bend pragmatically to suit what is brought by contemporary students.

The impulse is to push the production of ethnography back into the experience of the field but it needs its forms of pedagogy for so doing. The prevailing Malinowskian regulative ideals are still very much training in theory and method before venturing into the literally unknown. Instead, experiment with ethnographic form — in the studio or charrette — expands the imagination for projects to which students come already committed.

The experimental possibilities increase considerably in post-doctoral revision of dissertations, and in the imaginaries for second projects, when newly minted anthropologists are on their own. Post-dissertation work and later projects are never so Malinowskian again. But, first fieldwork is messy, especially amid networked entanglements of collaborative projects large and small, already being there, highly reflexive and sometimes even paraethnographic in outlook. It might just as well be served by alternative forms and contraptions, if only they were encouraged by pedagogical experiment.

Third spaces, studios, para-sites and
intermediate forms of concept work within
and alongside fieldwork

Third spaces have been evoked in the recent work of Michael Fischer in his efforts to envision a distinctive anthropology of science and technology. They emerge at ‘plateau’ moments in fieldwork settings, which are dialogic opportunities for anthropologists, when ethical issues get debated and articulated by social actors in process. Their emergence suggests alternative, performative strategies of ethnographic elicitation.

Para-sites evoke experiments with the actual staging of such third-space events, in the spirit of studios, rather than seminars, in the midst of fieldwork or alongside it, as a means of developing lines of thinking or concept work among relevant and willing parties. ‘Third spaces’ and ‘para-sites’ are specific expressions of, and prototypes for, the intermediate forms that I have in mind.

Platforms, and digital experiments with
composition, commentary, relationship,
reception, micro-publics and textualities

Digital platforms, in their design and care, are indeed third spaces, becoming primary genre forms for ethnography — they subsume texts and fieldwork. They also promise to condense many of the functions that I imagine intermediate forms to enhance, if not displace, in the traditional production of ethnographic texts from fieldwork. But they are major collective undertakings, involving considerable coordination, devotional managerial and curatorial labor, and struggle for resources if these do not come externally. The Center does not sponsor or produce any of these, but is interested in such projects underway. We are particularly interested in following, for example, the Asthma Files, conceived and nurtured over several years by Kim and Mike Fortun, who have written in detail about the derivation of the design of their platform from the lineage of *Writing Culture*, and more generally of

cultural theory ferment during the 1980s and 90s. Some remain small, and productively struggle. Others start within or become assimilated by huge well-funded philanthrocapitalist projects.

... and contemporary contraptions, in general:
nestings, scaffoldings, recursions, receptions
and micro-publics

Digital experiments and designs for ethnographic research and writing are particular sorts of contraptions, improvisations with the classic ethnographic form within the constraints and possibilities of media technologies. I am personally more involved in a kind of contraption that works with the classic, technologically primitive forms of ethnography (participant observation, immersion fieldnotes, and writing there from, etc.). They are experiments in contextualized inquiry and thinking in natural contexts with found partners and collaborators, though they have complex developments, addressing the issues of scale and circulation that my original interest in the emergence of multi-sited ethnography in the 1990s began to address. They have often unanticipated and disjunctive paths or trajectories that emerge in fieldwork, but have a coherence of idea or problem that define them.

This entails a kind of rethinking of the multi-sited frame in which the idea of moving among intensively investigated sites of fieldwork was imagined as following processes. Contraptions signify a refunctioning of this style of multi-sited research from following processes intensively investigated at appropriate and found sites toward the idea of building and staging micro-publics and receptions for ideas and insights tentatively created in initial arenas of investigation and transformed as argument, as ethnographic data, as theory, as they move. As I will argue, this is a movement of the modest ethnographic research project toward an eventual 'docking' or limit in authority, but not on arriving, with a presentation of a model, an explanation, or analytic description,

only or mainly, as endpoint or product, but with yet another call for reception, among a history of others, on a recursive pathway of circulation, that may be an ultimate case, or perhaps a limiting one — one that is articulated in the language of models, outcomes, results and knowledge by a project's assessors in the academy or elsewhere.

In a sense, this is a call for the preservation and progressive refinement of prototypes as the core of ethnographic research, and what, in a current collaborative project in which I am involved, we are calling 'productive encounters'. Prototypes are the working forms of innovation, of speculative, imaginative ideas, yet they are tied to the reality of a product that will work, in technologically driven societies today. In technology, however, prototypes are disposable, perhaps remembered by techie afficianados, but otherwise they are created to be inevitably forgotten. Anthropologists in their conceptual thinking also deal in prototypes, but they invest more in them. The richness of what they have to offer perdures as such in the field. The firm and authoritative ideas that anthropologists produce as concept or theory are often no stronger or lasting than prototypes. Current anthropological debate depends on preserving prototypical ideas, as a form of data, re-enlivening them for other possibilities, and sometimes excavating them back from the 'finished' concepts as they appear in texts and publication, for continuing inquiry. In anthropology, prototypical ideas span the space of the experimental and the authoritative. The 'gift', for example, is one of anthropology's most enduring prototypical ideas.

Multi-sitedness here is moving such prototypes of thinking in the field proactively to sites of reception and micro-publics, variously staged, for whom these ideas may not be otherwise presented, or not presented in composed forums. The envisioned role of experiment is to enfold receptions in evolving fieldwork before it reaches or 'docks' in points of authority, offering reports to and debates with the

academy, or assimilation by powerful forms and projects of philanthrocapitalist sponsors. Formerly, something like this would be the endpoint of ethnographic research in the role and exercise of anthropological expertise in 1950s and 60s development paradigms. Its successors are collaboration-based philanthrocapitalist projects (e.g., the Gates Foundation, but also many others worldwide based on its model). My argument is that ethnographic research in its traditional modest scale can work outside such realms of authority for considerable periods, although these define an inevitable limit for it, what I have called its 'docking' points. In the meantime, such a multi-sited paradigm for ethnography is capable of a trajectory that does not follow processes but moves ethnographic results as thinking, concepts, grounded speculations — prototypes — among different micro publics that it modestly constitutes for its purposes through collaborations with, for example, designers and artists to which I now turn. The university research project is not enough or will not do, I argue, to provide the means to create a scale of diverse reception in research — a varied communicative field of experiment.

Close working collaborations, specific to the project, are essential for the production of this kind of multi-sited ethnography even when the latter is still imagined as the work of the lone fieldworker. For example, Kim Fortun in her 2001 ethnography, *Advocacy After Bhopal*, gives a very good account of working within circuits of activism that define the sorts of micro-publics and granular receptions (she calls them 'enunicatory communities') that an embedded ethnographic project can conjure for its own purposes — e.g., how media representations, advocacy campaigns, and legal responses all recursively contribute to making an incident into an event, and how ethnography creates its own receptions, proofs of concept and the like, alongside. We intend in Center projects the same kind of partial and measured embedding of ethnographic inquiry in the practices of relevant others,

but, in our case, the inspirational partners, or referents, have been design thinking and methods, on one hand, and certain contemporary art movements (site-specific and participatory art and its predecessors), on the other. For ethnography, these alternative spheres promise to provide an imagination and ‘tricks of the trade’ in the norms and forms with which we are experimenting.

Jostling ethnography between design and art I like this term ‘jostling’ to evoke the relationship of an experimentally oriented ethnographic method to design, on one side, and to contemporary art movements, on the other. The idea has been to give priority concern to ethnography rather than to forge ahead in the actual and considerable histories and politics of ethnography’s collaborative relations with each broad arena. What can ethnography absorb and experiment with from various design and art movements? I will have less to say here about the design side of the ‘jostling’ than the art side, even though the Center has been much more engaged with thinking in terms of the former than the latter in recent years.

I personally have long been interested in how experiments in ethnography could learn from the creativity and imagination of certain contemporary art movements (such as the idea of ‘relational aesthetics’ developed by Nicolas Bourriaud and the debates it has engendered). For the experiments I am evoking here, I have been especially engaged most recently by Claire Bishop’s *Artificial Hells*, on which I want to dwell here a little, as providing a thrust for anthropological ethnography that frankly it would not be as likely to do for itself. This will lead me into a brief discussion of the 214 Sq. Ft. project which has ‘contraption’ qualities and characteristics past and yet to come, the logic of which is captured by Bishop’s discussions of the key binds of participatory art projects.

But briefly about the other side — the inspiration of de-

sign methods and thinking — I will only say here that they tend to incorporate ethnography through the use of cultural probes as well as the space they make for knowledge of end users, but, reciprocally for ethnography itself, design disciplines offer, first, a rationale and ideology for operating creatively, and sometimes experimentally within structures of business, markets, governance, and policy (this is captured in Bruno Latour's delicious characterisation of design as 'cautious prometheus', capable of morphing matters of [even critical] fact into 'matters of concern'), and second, and in terms of tradecraft, design venues offer most crucially actual technologies and experience for developing new spaces for ethnographic research alongside and within fieldwork. Design methods provide the legitimation and, most importantly, the craft and forms to produce third spaces, studios, and sites for collective or collaborative work within fieldwork. They provide, in sum, cunning, ingenuity and process — cocoons, and a certain kind of mimicry in effect — by which ethnography can produce intermediate forms that are necessary for it to be multi-sited in the way that I have described.

'Artificial Hells'

Claire Bishop takes her title from André Breton's postmortem on Dada's 1921 movement into the streets. But it could stand half humorously for what the twentieth century avant-gardes have sought to produce directly in social settings. While she narrates an original and rich history of such largely European avant-gardes through the twentieth century, her intent is to focus on post-studio artists, who operate in natural and found social settings, who give up works as such 'for projects', and who, while they produce site-specific events, are interested above all in participation that effaces the distinction between artist and spectator. Bishop herself is not interested in ethnography; in fact, she does not mention it. But many of the projects she discusses resonate with a more interventionist experience of fieldwork, as well as

with the longstanding modes of incorporating subjects of ethnography as participants and interlocutors in its agendas. Most importantly, for me, Bishop's assessment of this form and movement of contemporary art poses a problem and potential for the changing forms of ethnographic method in anthropology that anthropology cannot or is unlikely to pose for itself, at least in its mainstream.

I comment on some of Bishop's points useful for viewing ethnographic projects as contraptions that construct chains of micro-publics from the experience of fieldwork. These might shift the classic ethnographic project and its more recent multi-sited characterisation to summon granular receptions as the rationale for its movement and its terms of completion before it 'docks' or plateaus in an authoritative form for reception or response as a text or document of the expert. In this way, the intermediate or prototypical texts and experiments of fieldwork become its results, rather than sketches and drafts, intolerably messy and hidden from view, as much as the final beautiful textual artifacts that we now have. This requires forms of textuality, commentary and composition, not anticipated by *Writing Culture* or other critical discussions of the ethnographic form since. Ethnographic writing remains largely composition after fieldwork. It presumes and privileges at least a professional readership for its performance just as art presumes spectators. In my view, ethnographic texts are part of a broader process of production whose earlier forms are of equal and sometimes more enduring importance than monographs or articles.

While, as noted, Bishop does not mention ethnography, her work in fact revises Hal Foster's famous mid-1990s article, 'The Artist As Ethnographer?', that clearly distinguishes site-specific and associated forms of art from ethnography — a fashionable association at the time — but only by formally delimiting the latter as method, something rigorous, less imaginative, stiffer than the site-specific art that beckons toward it. That is, at the time, in comparison, to make the

point, and police the boundary, ethnography, and its potential as form and practice, suffered. For ethnography at least in the 2000s, this characterisation of the relation between art and ethnography will no longer do. The relation between participatory art, at least, and multi-sited ethnography redux deserves a new trading language. Bishop's study reopens the question in ways that ethnography has not done. Here are five arguments and observations that she makes that resonate with an ethnographic method that focuses and sustains attention upon its middle terms as its primary contribution to anthropological knowledge.

1. 'In post-studio art practices since the 1990s, labeled participatory art and conceived as 'projects' rather than 'works', the artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of situations — the audience previously conceived as a viewer or beholder is now positioned as a co-producer or participant.' For Bishop, 1993 seems to be a key transition year when site-specific practice becomes more 'ethnographic', in my sense, keyed to participations, and less derived from theatre and performance genres as in previous years.
2. 'Although the logical conclusion of participatory art is to foreclose a secondary audience (everyone is a producer, the audience no longer exists), for these actions to be meaningful, for the stakes to be high, there need to be ways of communicating these activities to those who succeed the participants. Subsequent experiments in the 2000s have given rise to more vivid ways of conveying such projects to secondary audiences.'
3. 'At a certain point, art has to hand over to other institutions if social change is to be achieved: it is not enough to keep producing activist art.' The same goes for projects of ethnography that hope to have public or activist functions or effect, yet within their authoritative forms of textuality — no matter how richly descriptive

and incisively analytic — they try to be double-voiced in activist commitment as well as in scholarly invention. To ‘dock’ such a form where the contraption meets its limit in the community of scholarly authority (especially one as eclectic as that of anthropology, for instance), seems to me to be a worthy, modest and feasible project within the current modest means of producing research.

4. Bishop says, ‘In using people as a medium, participatory art has always had a double ontological status: it is both event in the world, and at one remove from it. As such, it has the capacity to communicate on two levels — to participants and to spectators — the paradoxes that are repressed in everyday discourse, and to elicit perverse, disturbing and pleasurable experiences that enlarge our capacity to imagine the world and our relations anew. But to reach the second level requires a mediating third term — an object, image, story, film, even a spectacle — that permits this experience to have a purchase on the public imaginary.’ Indeed. This means making something beyond the site-specific participatory art — it has to do something more to create its public, which it must have. This is a problem that participatory art has not resolved. But its explicit struggle with it is an opportunity for ethnography to rethink its own practices.
5. ‘Unlike conceptual or performance art of the 60s and 70s which did use visuality as important to the task, today’s participatory art is often at pains to emphasize process over definitive image, concept or object. It tends to value what is invisible: a group dynamic, a social situation, a change of energy, a raised consciousness. As a result it is an art dependent on first-hand experience, and preferably over a long duration (days, months, or even years).’ Very few observers, says Bishop, are in a position to take such an overview of long-term participatory projects — students and researchers are reliant on

accounts provided by the artists, the curator, a handful of assistants, and if we are lucky maybe some of the participants.

So, Bishop's recurrent key issue is the lack of a secondary reception or spectatorship for participatory art — and with no obvious sense of how this will be achieved. To know, itself, requires fieldwork, she says. This gap is one that suggests methodological innovation and experiment — an impulse that both participatory art projects and ethnographic ones share. A contraction in either anthropology or participatory art seems to develop from a period and experience of intensive site-specificity toward its dialogic sources. In terms of multi-sited ethnography, it is not so much a matter of following a path, as being pulled by the polyphony in a site toward the speculative designing of related receptions elsewhere.

Nested and scaffolded commentaries and re-presented thinking in carefully staged and composed venues, at least for the purposes of ethnography, do have extraordinary cumulative value. Recent interests of anthropologists, who came up through the same basic technology of question-asking and note-taking, and are now producing exemplary texts, in open access, platform experiments (like Kim and Mike Fortun), recursive publics (Chris Kelty), and ethnography as commentary (Johannes Fabian), are all exploring the kind of contraptions that projects of participatory art seeking spectators seem to produce.

Both ethnography and participatory art share this problem of doing something about the issue of secondary publics and incorporating them in their projects. This defines a shared logic to other sites and creating forms of reception and their documentation as micro-publics — folded into 'results' for eventual authoritative limit or docking. Ethnography may have more obvious play or direction in this regard than participatory art projects, but the logic of impulse to experiment is no different.

214 Sq. Ft.: an exemplary project

As a current sustained collaboration with two artists that has spun off from our Center for Ethnography opportunities, the three of us, Luke Cantarella, Head of Theater Design at Pace University, Christine Hegel, anthropologist and artist, and myself, are writing a text in the form of a workbook or manual that concerns how projects that merge ethnographic, design, and participatory art methods produce interventions, or what we call 'productive encounters' in relation to ongoing ethnographic research projects at different stages of development. Our orientation is explicitly toward the ethnographic method and our purpose is to rethink or performatively and theoretically expand, with organised, relevant publics, aspects of fieldwork projects that are brought to the workshop in different stages of development. A 'productive encounter' is doing something different with fieldwork materials. This involves an interesting rethinking of fundamental methodological concepts, and the differences between performance concepts in art and design and the same ideas deployed in anthropological ethnography. For example, Christine Hegel rethinks and expands the concept of 'immersion', central to the professional culture of method in anthropology, as 'amplification': 'Productive encounters have the potential to amplify existing dynamics/conversations/debates/phenomena'. This runs counter to how classical ethnography works in the sense that, through immersion, one seeks to overhear and observe 'natural' phenomena that occur in the course of everyday life. This tacit knowledge is unamplified, and thus is only accessible by the 'fly on the wall' approach. Being an ethnographer has long been associated with a kind of sublime and gifted insight. But this can be opposed to the model for experiment, such as we are designing as the 'productive encounters' workbook, which relies upon techniques to open up, share, and morph anthropological hunches or insights by creating expressions for them, not as true or false, but as situations where such ideas are explored or amplified directly

or indirectly by social actors. The imaginaries of pioneer situational ethnographers like Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel posed ethnographic insight in these dramatic terms, but we are breaking the frame of the bounded field-work concept, and thinking more like Brecht, for instance, while keeping clear of the specific assumptions and aesthetics of theatrecraft.

So far, we have workshopped three projects together. I present one briefly here, entitled 214 Sq. Ft., created principally by Cantarella and Hegel, and advised by me. The title refers to the living space of entire working poor families in rundown but high-priced motels situated in the very wealthy, very religious, and politically conservative enclave of Orange County south of Los Angeles, notable for the original Disneyland, many huge and wealthy churches, extravagant malls, and sterile corporate business parks — it is also where the University of California, Irvine, is located. The concept of the project was not so much to examine the conditions of the virtually homeless, but to probe the relation, or non-relation, of the wealthy and the privileged (including enlightened academics) to them, and especially to stimulate and clarify ideas of charity, responsibility and injustice.

214 Sq. Ft. is an immersive scenic environment created in collaboration with the Project Hope Alliance, a non-profit organisation that serves the homeless population of Orange County. For such families, a motel room is an impermanent home, made homelike through the personal objects that fill it and the daily activities of home life within its walls. The environment has traveled throughout Orange County creating encounters at various non-traditional sites of performance such as the Balboa Bay Yacht Club, the central plaza of the School of Social Sciences at the University of California, Irvine, the Second Harvest Food Bank, and Saddleback Church.

Existing on the border between theatre practice and anthropology, 214 Sq. Ft. is conceived as a research environment that collects ethnographic data through the activation

of an experience. Fictional and personal narratives of homelessness in Orange County have been materialised in a staged environment, which in turns serves an ethnographic purpose by inviting audiences to experience this environment sensorially and to offer responses. The scenic environment is a full-sized replication of a motel room inhabited and lived in by a fictional family of six who function as unseen characters. The audience entering the front door and exiting through the bathroom traverses the roughly 214 square feet. Furniture typically found in motel rooms has been rearranged and augmented, showing the creative solutions to the practical problems of poverty and limited living space. Found objects, purchased from auction at the Goodwill of Orange County, represent the personal effects of a composite family.

Audio and video recordings emanate discretely from objects such as a heat vent, a bedside alarm clock, and other objects, and intimate proximity is required to experience some of these media elements. For instance, only by sitting on the bed closest to the clock can one overhear a child's story. The experience overall is an open-ended participatory performance in which audience members open drawers, peek into storage bins, and otherwise touch and move objects as they walk through the space.

In one respect, 214 Sq. Ft. is in the tradition of participatory performance in contemporary art that Claire Bishop chronicles, especially strong since the 1990s.

The project employed classic strategies from theatrical production, to create a designed space infused with embedded narrative. Hegel, an anthropologist, functioned as author by other means, substituting the text of the playwright with a body of ethnographic data. Cantarella, whose practice is set design, enacted a traditional design process that 'read' the ethnographic data as a play text and from this reading generated a theatrical setting.

214 Sq. Ft. adopted familiar strategies of the tradition of the site-specific art tradition, but it added to them a strategic

dimension of temporality, as well as multi-sited circulation, similar to the emergence of multi-sited fieldwork that so transformed the look and structure of ethnography from the 1990s forward. The 214 Sq. Ft. project is most ethnographic in these strategies of movement and elicitation among related but diversely positioned subjects — not the working poor themselves, but the privileged of varying position, of whom the former are of varying interest, reflection and consciousness. The anthropological root of the project is about the spatial and conceptual subtleties of variant degrees of awareness of inequality among the privileged.

The initial site, the Balboa Bay Yacht Club, not only transposed one of the poorest motel rooms in Orange County into one of the most exclusive hotels, but it also occurred during the specific time of a gala benefit. Attendees of the gala encountered the materialized performance within the specific context of a benefit and thus had to synthesise visual, spatial, and temporal disjunctures. In this context, the subject of the work became the nature of the charitable act and how it functions to assuage guilt and assert social status while simultaneously creating intimacies across class and between patron and benefactor.

A similar process occurred as the piece travelled to different sites throughout Orange County. At the same time, the terms and the subject of the staged encounter shifted. For instance, during the installation at Saddleback Church, a mega-church with a congregation of over 20,000, the subject became how fundamentalist Christianity resolves its principles of ministering to the poor with its dominant political discourse of libertarianism. Then, later, when installed in the plaza of the School of Social Sciences at the University of California, Irvine, the installation revealed how works of advocacy, reliant on emotion, are problematic for social theorists and researchers, trained to operate within rational, intellectual structures, and a presumed left-liberal political mentality.

The multi-sited circulation of the project thus engaged fundamentalists, philanthropists, social-climbers, social scientists, and self-regarding decent citizens.

In fact, the performance experience is construed as extending beyond the time of encounter into process and installation. For each installation, instead of hiring a strictly professional crew, volunteers were solicited from the different partner organisations to help assemble the structure. The process of installation was seen as a crucial time in which dialogues around the work's themes were rehearsed. Volunteers, having participated in the labor of building and restaging the environment, acquired a kind of ownership in it and often became guides for the viewing audiences. This was particularly notable during the performance at the Balboa Bay Club where a member of the Project Hope Board, costumed in black tie, adopted the role of a narrator, guiding patrons through the motel room and instructing them to specific ways of seeing and interpreting. As in a traditional narrative performance, a definitive statement about meanings voiced through a figure of authority both assert their truth while inadvertently suggesting their inverse. A kind of ethnographically valuable language game emerges. This duality reflected a central question of the gala site, namely: does the charitable act spring from a desire to do 'good work' or a need to symbolically suffer to cleanse one's guilt as a member of the upper class? This is of course a question or an observation that arises in ethnographic participant observation and perhaps explicitly in conversations of classic fieldwork. Here it is performed through the production of the installation in richly generative expressions and reflections by a kind of elicited and interested collaborative doing or making, as ethnography by design and performance.

This project remains in prototype, we do not yet consider it to have 'docked' in authority. It has no need to, to constitute the richest kind of analytic-descriptive knowledge form that the ethnographic method was invented to produce.

Conclusion

So, after having delivered micro-publically this particular iteration of my talk, in this forum, in closing, I return to the general questions posed in its title, with some tentative, impulsive replies — to be continued and engaged...

Is ethnography today still small-scale? Yes, but only in collaborative cocoons and entanglements that shape field-work trajectories and make the small/micro/jeweller's eye perspectives of ethnography relevant and significant among the micro-publics that it conjures in circuits and recursions until it docks in the ultimate reception of disciplinary, or other forums of, authority. We learn that the places where ethnography achieves significance are not predictable from its initial sites of immersion.

Is it still beautiful? Not really, in an aesthetic sense. It depends on how streamlined, how textured you can make the essentially messy seem. A contraption, or a prototype, can fascinate, effectively communicate ... but beautiful, no. This requires domestication to the rhetoric of a favoured theory or kind of concept work and its learned aesthetics. 214 Sq. Ft. is not beautiful in this sense — but perhaps it might become so in the craft of our ethnographic project of productive encounters.

Is it still critical? Yes, but so what? In any case, not more so or less so than broad discourses of critique to which it might finally appeal. In its doing, ethnography is only ever partially critical. As a contemporary multi-sited contraption, or composition, as described in this talk, its positions of critique can take unpredictable twists and turns as it moves cumulatively among staged receptions and micro-publics. It settles on critique, but in its movements mostly it surprises itself.

Is it still possible? Absolutely! In all of its strands and senses from its early twentieth-century beginnings. It has been experimental and unruly from its inception in all varieties of effort to make and justify it as method through to its

current designed and artificial (or artful) forms in collaborations sought, and in collaborations to be encountered and endured.

Notes

About the author

Professor George E. Marcus is the holder of the prestigious Chancellor's Professor at the University of California, Irvine. Since co-editing *Writing Culture* and seminal works on multi-sited ethnography, he has become one of the most influential cultural theorists in the world. In 2006, he became the founding director of the Centre for Ethnography at the University of California, Irvine. The scope of influence of his research and methodology extends far beyond anthropology as it incorporates cultural studies, cultural theory, and a wide range of disciplines that are engaged with the way new cultural values emerge in the world.

Acknowledgements

The Research Unit in Public Cultures is based in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. It focuses on transformations in public culture produced by new intersections of knowledge, media, space and mobility, within Australia and internationally.

It brings together scholars from four faculties at the University of Melbourne who are collaborating on projects with a wide range of industry partners. The Research Unit's agenda is to develop projects that address four fundamental trajectories:

- how cultural knowledge is shaped by and against the global forces which articulate Australia's place in the world;
- how developments in digital technologies alter the protocols for inclusion and exclusions within public cultures;
- how new practices of mobility impact on the constitution of public knowledge and cultures; and
- how public space is created, managed and accessed, specifically within networked urban environments.

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The relevance of ethnography today:
is it still small?, beautiful?, critical?, possible?

George E. Marcus

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Continuing the textual turn in ethnography that George E. Marcus initiated with his colleague and friend James Clifford, this essay opens up new vistas in the conduct of fieldwork and the role of collaboration in cultural production. Marcus finds inspiration in the recent innovations in participatory practices in contemporary art and the principles of co-design in architecture. His focus then turns back to his own discipline to interrogate the role that scholars play in the production of what he calls 'mini-publics'.

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