

**ART AND GARBAGE:
ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDIES THROUGH A
PHOTOGRAPHER'S EYES**

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Presentation

This communication reports on four photography series, three of them developed in Brazil over the last four years, and exhibited at the 1st Sino-Latin American Symposium at the University of Nottingham, Ningbo, China¹ : “(in)Security” , “Letters from the countryside” and “Translitorânea”. In this paper, I will present the conceptual and practical aspects of all three series of photographs and raise some questions related to a new project about art and garbage, developed at VU University, in Amsterdam, as post-doctoral research connected to the CAPES/NUFFIC Program². From the fieldwork, I sought to promote a reflection about the use of photos and videos to explore connections between Art and Anthropology. I will address here both the technical conditions of the production of the images in the different projects and the conceptual issues regarding their status. I will also discuss their relation to the real, the way they are put together, the objective and subjective character issues that emerge from them, and especially their uses and functions in each case.

Notes about Photography, Anthropology and Art

There are many similarities between photographic and anthropological practices. First of all, photographers and anthropologists are observers. They carefully observe the world around them and they can use pictures to describe it, document it, question it, interpret it, stage it or simply to recollect it. They capture data, facts, events, gestures, impressions, feelings, the speakable and the unspeakable. They use photography as a way to promote encounters, to approach different contexts, to be related to the other and to the world. As described by Etienne Samain,

photography and anthropology are “two complementary approaches, two attempts to satisfy the same need: to tell the man” (1995, p.27).

There are however many differences, and the biggest one is that the anthropologist uses photography as a research tool and information support, according to certain theoretical and methodological assumptions. It can be considered a support tool for research, a notepad, an element that illustrates or dialogues with a text, a language in itself, but generally photography is restricted to scientific discourse. That is, in anthropology, photography is often associated with a method of research which should be adapted to certain rules. In this sense, many researchers, ‘defenders’ of a visual anthropology, joined forces to set the foundations of a photographic practice in the anthropological field, by investigating and specifying different possibilities of appropriation of the medium and by also enumerating and detailing its qualities in order to convince a ‘traditional’ anthropology about the need for other forms of anthropological writing than the textual one (Mead, 1975; Collier Jr and Collier, 1986; Samain, 1995; Maresca, 1996,2005; Guran, 2000,2011; Achutti, 2004; Conord, 2013 among others).

As foretold by Samain (1995), on the twentieth century threshold of the twenty-first, in the years to come new trails would be opened to the effective establishment of a visual anthropology, outlined "both from the steady dip in the fieldwork, and from the sharp determination to want to answer the real problems that such research (in visual anthropology) usually raises in interdisciplinary terms "(1995: p. 24). However, despite growing visual production in the anthropological context, one realizes that there is still much to be done, so that visual anthropology can take a considerable step towards autonomy.

In this sense, Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright (2010) argue further for an exploration of what they call "inter-spaces", precisely the border zone between art and anthropology. By promoting an

interdisciplinary dialogue, the authors suggest that new and interesting perspectives can open up to both areas, not only when they explore what they have in common, but rather their differences. They don't forget, of course, that to explore the differences it is necessary to experience new practices, and perhaps experimentation is the greatest obstacle for many anthropologists, which explains their resistance. However, to the authors, these experimentations and associations have much to add because these are able to enrich the anthropological statements. Moreover, it can be said that anthropology has much to gain by exploring the formal and informal art spaces of circulation, usually more accessible and democratic than the means of dissemination of pure anthropological research.

Brazilian Series: “(in)Security”, “Letters from the Countryside” and “Translitorânea”



Figure 1. S 28°17.966' W 48°43.053', Imbituba, SC – From “Translitorânea” series, 2012

The photographic series that accompany this symposium, were produced between 2011 and 2014, and include two approaches: one that deliberately dialogues with anthropology to conduct a study and another one that takes photography as an independent act. The first series, "(in) Security," was intentionally built as a boundary work, in which artistic and anthropological approaches were assembled³. The project explores the experiences, feelings and practices that have become part of the lives of residents of Florianópolis, a city on the coast of southern Brazil, with the increasing presence of security apparatus in their daily lives. The study was conducted in partnership with another anthropologist, and brings together photography, video and ethnography. The images were taken to promote encounters and at the same time to help to reflect on a common and constant desire of non-encounter with the unknown ('criminal', 'marginal'). The second series, called "Letters from the countryside"⁴ was a commission aimed at documenting the processes of agrarian reform and adult education in the countryside of Southern Brazil. The portrait was used as a fundamental practice for the construction of a 'new image' of peasants in these areas. The third series, "Translitorânea", was carried out following the North-South highway along the Brazilian coast. It was based on a subjective experience marked by encounters and life stories that highlight geographical, economic, social and cultural diversity in contemporary Brazil. In all three series, the practice of portraiture is taken as a stimulation to the interactions and exchanges with the photographed subject.



Figure 2. Shirley – From the series “Letters from the countryside”, 2012

The act of portraying contains in itself an inherent question of anthropology: ‘how to present /and how to represent the other’? This question is important because it not only brings the issue of authority, an invisible imposition, without words, something delicate in the ethnographic encounter, but also because, in a certain way, we build and make visible a certain image of the other, or, we become his or her voice. In this sense, in *Reassemblage*, a film made in Senegal in 1982, the filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha gives us interesting advice: “not to speak about / just speak nearby”. It is exactly what the filmmaker and anthropologist Jean Rouch was already doing while making his films guided by a “shared anthropology” (Colleyn, 2009).

I have been seeking to follow this idea while making portraits. I have been using a medium format camera whose display is located on top of

the equipment. When taking pictures, the camera is positioned at the photographer's chest height and not in front of his face, leaving one free to better interact with the photographed subject. In addition, the fact of working with analogue films - which require a more attentive technical control than digital photography - allows for the establishment of a pose ritual that has been lost with broad access to amateur digital practices (compact cameras, cell phones). This distinguishes the photographic act of what could be a banal practice and becomes, therefore, a means to strengthen the exchanges between photographer and people photographed.



Figure 3. Marta - From "(in)Security" series, 2012

Being elevated to the category of 'event' by the subjects involved, what takes place during the production of the picture is remarkable. Images are negotiated and the "interactive camera" (MacDougall, 2006) records not only the photographed subject, but also the exchanges

between the subjects involved in the image construction. The pictured persons help to select the place and decide how they will be photographed, they choose which costumes they will carry and which objects they will have with them, which Annateresa Fabris (2004) identifies as an act of "differentiation and uniqueness". These negotiations, besides being interesting because they reveal the ways in which people want to see themselves represented, also talk a lot about intersubjective exchanges and about an encounter of different world views that come together in order to produce images. That is to say that people know that the pictures will be given back to them⁵, a reason to get involved in such a way. Even if the aesthetic treatment follows the same procedures (frontality, objectivity, immobility, with small variants offered by pose), to emphasize the equality amongst all subjects, one can certainly observe the character and the personality that they all bring to the portraits. Their visual constructions are an expression of people's symbolic and affective belongings.



Figure 4. Douglas and Jaqueline, Araçatuba, SC - From "Translitorânea" series, 2012

In regard to the landscapes, places and objects photographed, these are also presented in a 'neutral' form, without artifice, in a documentary way (straightforwardness, rigor, reflection), following the tradition of classic photographers, such as Walker Evans who advocated the "style" (Lugon, 2011). It is not an alleged and naive objectivity, but a search for neutrality. And "what distinguishes the documentary neutrality of objectivity as significant distance (...) is precisely the refusal of a detachment that crystallizes models and spaces" (Poivert, 2010, p.172). On the other hand, simplifying the forms means giving the highest value to the experience of the encounter and the immersion in the landscapes. In addition, photography is used for its ability to promote questioning. Its poetic and metaphorical dimensions, just as its political nature, are widely exploited in the construction of imagery speech.



Figure 5. Untitled – from “(in)Security” series, 2012

About Art and Garbage

I was invited to participate in a study programme on waste and environment established between the Federal University of Santa Catarina - UFSC, Brazil and the VU University Amsterdam, Netherlands. From this invitation, several questions were raised immediately: What to say about waste? How to raise effective questions to think about this issue in our contemporary societies? How to do it? It must be said that I have been reflecting on the relationships between art and anthropology, whose starting point was post-doctoral research conducted a year earlier, with the Art History department of the Université Paris I Panthéon Sorbonne, when I sought to enlarge my practice in the anthropological field via art while also acknowledging photography and video. From this, I chose to view waste through the art prism and through interdisciplinary research, bringing together artistic and anthropological activities. Between April 2014 and March 2015, I captured audiovisual data to make a videographic essay that aims to present artists in the Netherlands and neighbouring countries, who appropriate waste in order to question its production and presence in the world. These encounters were filmed from a documentary point of view and, in parallel, a small pocket camera worked as a visual fieldwork notebook, through which I evoked experimentally the experiences with regard to research, the city and the garbage.

In this context, a photographic production took shape in an unusual way, opening new possibilities to the project. Upon arriving, I began to photograph Amsterdam in an intuitive way, independent of the research, practising street photography, from the flaneur's point of view, as a "passionate observer" (Baudelaire, 1997) that guides his/her look via the poetry of things in the world. Unexpectedly, these images made in a totally uncompromising way ended up giving interesting perspectives to the fieldwork, so finding a function in the context of research. Unlike previous series, where the portrait had a key role in

building a visual narrative, in the series held in Amsterdam, the absence of dialogue with residents of the city is striking. Photographs acted mainly as charting, promoting reflection on disposal in the city and awakening senses, as I was letting myself observe through urban poetry.

First of all, to let myself be guided by sensory and spatial experience supported by photography, I was able to get some intimacy with the urban space. In this case, photography was used "to discover" (Guran, 2000) the city and map my route, which later was of great service to me to move like most of its residents: by bicycle. Secondly, the garbage had become a constant presence in the images. Not that I necessarily had the intention to photograph it, but I was 'programmed' to see it. And without realizing it, once again (as in "(in) Security"), I started to produce images that portrayed the 'normality' of things and to question them. We are so accustomed to their presence on the streets - bins, bags, containers - we do not interrogate them. Maybe because all these envelopes are there precisely to protect us from everything we discard, we do not see it really, we do not sense its odours, we have no real contact. In our societies, waste is something "out of place" (Douglas, 2001) and, even if it is there, we must have the impression that it is not. Finally, thanks to these pictures, I began to explore other directions during the fieldwork, which is noticeable in videos realized later that, like the photos, explore details, textures and atmospheres.

Taken together, these images are presented as intervals; they are static, silent. Their silence, they allude to the traces of people in the city and especially through their small leavings as they foretell something, discreetly, though we do not know what. Signs of the times to come? Their ambiguous character can tell everything, or nothing. They are not necessarily ethnographic photographs, on the contrary, they give rise to experimentation - defended by Scheider and Wright (2010) - in the ethnographic project. Thus, in this research, before taking the picture for their uses and functions, now classics to a visual anthropology, or

using it as in "(in) security", where the series is constructed conceptually, without realizing, I took it as a way to expand the ethnographic experience, in an immersion process in the fieldwork through the senses.

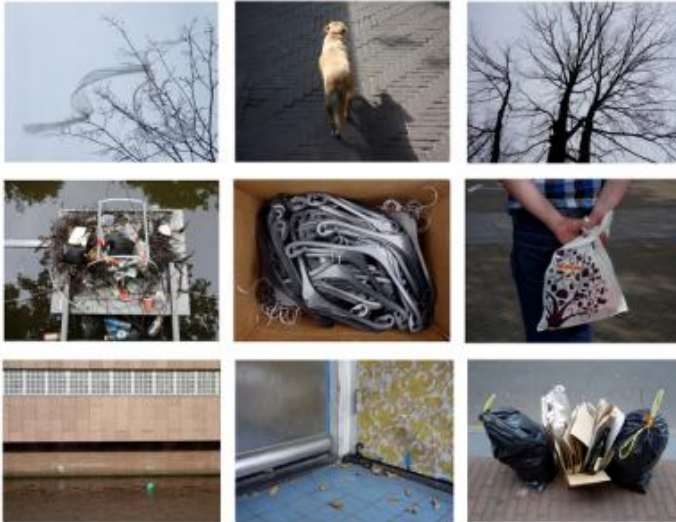


Figure 6. Untitled – photographs made in Amsterdam, 2014/2015

Notes

1. Part of these series can be seen on www.andreaeichenberger.com
2. The research project entitled “From what remains: Looking to the waste and the environment (some artistic experiences)” is part of the project “Modernity, environment and new notions about waste and purity”, related to the Program CAPES/NUFFIC, coordinated by Dra. Carmen Rial (Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina – UFSC, Brazil) and Dr. Freek Colombijn (VU University, Holanda).

3. This work was the subject for post-doctoral research on History of Art at Université Paris 1 – Panthéon Sorbonne and received the award UPP/Dupon Découverte 2012. For more information see Eichenberger, 2014.
4. Projected by Pronera (National Program for Education in Agrarian Reform) and financed by INCRA (National Institution for Agrarian Reform)
5. Giving back the portraits became a practice. They are printed and sent by post or delivered personally when it is possible.

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