



Ethnography and Artistic Research

12 November 2015

Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts, Brussels

Org. Brussels Arts Platform

www.BrusselsArtsPlatform.be

Call for Participation

Deadline 20 September 2015

Introduction

The way in which artists deal with research around, in and about their own artistic work often ties in with an ethnographic approach. Firstly, the object and subject of artistic research is problematic: the artist is researching his own creative processes and outcomes, viewing himself as a third party, and objectifying himself as a subject. Moreover, he is continually confronted with a cultural gaze. Secondly, the artistic researcher will document and analyse how his project came about and how it evolved. The aim here is both to understand and to communicate these artistic practices. A third element is the method that the artistic researcher develops in order to arrive at clear reflection and communication. This method draws heavily on the ethnographic technique in which the 'participating observer' becomes more of an 'observing participant': the artist is always the leading participant in the creative process and from this position (and within it) is seeking to map the process, as well as its materials and contexts.

It is from these different perspectives that the Arts Platform and the Schools of Arts of Erasmus University College, RITCS and KCB are organising an *Ethnography and Artistic Research* Symposium on 12 November 2015.

Contextualisation

There are plenty of (local) examples of artistic practices where artistic research and ethnography converge and/or collaborate. Elly Van Eeghem, for example, focuses on *urban cracks*: places where the urban fabric is cracking. She maps both the cracks and the observation process itself, creating mainly video installations that depict both the 'cracked' neighbourhood and her observational behaviour, and subsequently positions her installations within these neighbourhoods. Simon Allemeersch spent many months setting up a studio in one of the blocks in Ghent's Rabot neighbourhood that was threatened with demolition. He had discussions with residents, who he initially had to invite to attend, but who subsequently took to dropping in spontaneously. He went on to tour a series of theatres and arts centres with a kind of stand-up lecture on urban development, which in its turn consisted of video recordings of discussions and walks through the apartment blocks, combined with an in-depth analysis of the urban planning history.

But the relationship between ethnography and artistic research – or art itself – is often much older than we suspect: the work of composers such as Bela Bartok and Leos Janacek would be unimaginable without their ethnographic observations – even if these were not defined as such. And arguably the entire history of jazz music is nothing more than consistently applied ethnography. Conversely, some people describe ethnography as the jazz of (behavioural) science, due to the enormous capacity for improvisation that it demands. However, these observations also give rise to some pertinent questions.

Since the art historian Hal Foster problematised the relationship between art and ethnography in the mid-nineties, the discussion about this has never died down. Both artists and theorists have continued to ask themselves how an ethnographic view of a social reality could lead to altered artistic attitudes and to a different kind of artefacts. In addition to this, Foster's original question has continued to dominate, namely whether the designation of 'the other' – or 'the Other' – as rendered visible by the ethnographic gaze, was not in fact a devious way of strengthening the omniscient subject of the artist, now imbued with the authority of the ethnographer. In other words, did the ethnographic gaze not therefore become a pretext for reanimating a subject that had been renounced or shattered by post-modernism and post-structuralism, or for a kind of academically legitimised narcissism?

This question is essentially philosophical, because it continues profoundly to torment the 'existence' of both the 'subject' of the artist and the 'object' of the ethnographic other – and the relationship between the two. Despite this, artistic practices have developed both before and after Foster's problematising, some influenced by it and some not, which, in their research phases, make use of ethnographic methods and avail themselves of ethnographic, anthropological insights. Indeed, the challenge presented by this ethnographic gaze – looking and being looked at – is indisputable, both for the artist and for the 'other'. If, in addition to this, artistic research, as a necessary part of certain artistic practices, penetrates into 'academia', in other words if it becomes part of an 'academic' structure in which education and research are inextricably linked, then a regular updating of Foster's pertinent questions (and the current answers to these) is absolutely essential. Indeed, artistic research in an 'academic' context implies that the research processes should be systematically documented, reflected upon and made transparent. It also means that methods and creative developments made during the research are shared with emerging artists and other cultural players. Additionally, this type of artistic research almost always involves questioning the type and calibre of the 'artistic knowledge' that is generated by these kinds of processes. The premise that art, as a process and as a result, can bring about an alternative interpretation of scientific methods and output is also defended outside this academic context and has, for example, consistently been explored by Jacques Rancière, from the time that he wrote *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. In addition to this, ethnographers and anthropologists themselves, aware of the rhetorical and poetic nature of their work – and especially of the way in which they translate and exhibit this work – even turn to literary, visual and/or performative representations designed to highlight the sensory nature of their labour.

Artistic research in Ghent, Antwerp, Brussels and elsewhere, in the context of a PhD in the Arts or in other configurations, often draws on ethnography as a method, an attitude, and a (supposed) paradigm. Moreover, this often takes the form of developing 'immersive' practices, or 'participatory observation' of social realities, which artists use to gather knowledge in order to subsequently integrate it into the creative process. But it also takes the form of ethnography as 'contra-hegemony', or the exploration of alternative imaginative worlds. Here, the emphasis lies on describing the growing complexity of social relationships, as opposed to the simplification and reduction that is often the objective of dominant ('hegemonic') academic and political approaches. This is chiefly motivated by a firm belief that an artistic transformation of the ethnographic knowledge of reality will indeed deliver a (radically) different sort of social, cultural and economic knowledge of that reality.

The theme of ethnography in artistic research

This symposium aims to bring together artistic researchers for an intensive confrontation with the 'ethnographic paradigm' – insofar as this can be generalised – both within

artistic research and beyond. Researchers are working in a highly varied range of artistic disciplines and this of course means that ethnography's place is equally diverse, both in mono- and in pluri- or interdisciplinary practices. For the creator of an *auteur* documentary, the ethnographic gaze is relatively self-evident, and its relevance increases as he/she moves away from his/her familiar surroundings. The 'object' of this gaze can therefore chiefly be a cut-out of the social and/or cultural reality, or a network of political practices. However a researcher of (historical) musical performance practices is perhaps dealing with relatively autonomous cultural realities, which are more inclined to invite critical re-enactment than engaged reflection. There are numerous such nuanced examples that can be given. Consequently, there is no such thing as a confrontation with true ethnography, as a toolbox or as a theoretical paradigm: it is in fact about multiple encounters and attentive reflection. This symposium will look at both the awareness of this plurality – as a leitmotif – and its tangibility, dealing not in generalisations, but in practical discussions. It will be an encounter between artists, and between artists and scientists.

Contributions, which should preferably originate from participants' own practical artistic research, could be based on the following possible questions:

- To what extent is the position occupied by the artist in her/his work that transforms an observed and described reality linked to the position occupied by the observed and described 'other'?
- What significance, if any, does the observation, description and artistic treatment of 'otherness' have for the 'hegemonic' culture of which the artist himself is part?
- Does either the end result or the process of his/her creation have a (subversive) influence on this culture (for example, historical performance practices in the case of music)?
- In what way does 'transgression' – the crossing of cultural boundaries from an ethnographic perspective – influence the very starting points (research questions, methodology, etc.) of artistic research?
- Which ethical questions arise when ethnographic and artistic research penetrates into more or less closed environments of cultural 'otherness'?
- Can conflicts be said to arise about the historical time – in terms of tradition, contemporaneity, or even 'primitivism' – in which the artistic researcher, as the subject, and the observed and described cultural practice, as the object, respectively find themselves?
- Does the artist transform her or his own 'self' into an 'other', or is the (observed and described) 'other' transformed into a 'self' in the artwork?
- In what way can 'ethnographic' observations be integrated into artistic practice and the artistic end result?

When it comes to contributions to this Arts Platform symposium, these questions should not be seen as exhaustive. At most, they are intended to support testimonies, with all the attendant doubts that reflection throws up, about the relationship of contributors' own artistic research to problems that arise when taking an ethnographic approach – preferably contributors' own potential ethnographic 'efforts'. These might be accounts of immersion and observation, of methods, of documentation and reporting, or of new and unusual collaborations – in short, of anything relevant to the discussion. The above questions can be part of this – especially where methodical doubts take on an ethical dimension – and these can help to place contributors' own approach in a wider context. In terms of the form contributions might take, we impose no limits on creativity. There is, however, a time limit on contributions (a maximum of 30 minutes), but within this,



anything is possible, provided that we are informed of any technical requirements in good time.

Practicalities

The symposium *Ethnography and Artistic Research* will take place on Thursday 12 November 2015 (in the afternoon) at the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts in Brussels ([directions](#)). The event will be in English.

Researchers who are interested in participating should send a short CV and a description of no more than 750 words (in either Dutch or English) to Klaas Tindemans (klaas.tindemans@ehb.be) **by 20 September**, together with a brief overview of their technical requirements. Please do not hesitate to contact him for more information about the call or the symposium.

Brussels Arts Platform is offering a travel grant for a foreign junior researcher giving a presentation at the symposium. Candidates wishing to take advantage of this are requested to include an estimate of their travel and accommodation costs in their application. For more information about this, please contact Annelore Brantegem (annelore.brantegem@ehb.be).