

Sense & Knowledge

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Projecting Migration:
Transcultural Documentary Practice
Eds. Alan Grossman & Áine O'Brien, 2007,
Wallflower Press, ISBN 978-1-9056-7404-6

Border Country
Melanie Friend, 2007, Belfast Exposed Photography /
The Winchester Gallery, ISBN 978-0-9524-2179-5

It always seems like a good idea for practitioners in closely-related disciplines to engage in a bit of comradely comparison of their ideas and methods, and to try and overcome the arbitrary divisions imposed upon them by the academy. Artists are always at it; showing computer scientists and engineers and philosophers and mathematicians that really, it's all just knowledge, that we're all climbing different faces of the same mountain.

The most frequent problem for these encounters concerns specialist language, and disciplinary knowledge. We often like to imagine that we are polymaths, autodidacts who can dip into the humanities, sciences and social sciences as we choose – a notion that sometimes seems to be supported by the way that 'contextual studies' are offered in art colleges, with their single-semester options on women's studies, or film studies, or media studies; and by the sheer multiplicity of discourses surrounding professional art practice itself, with their heady blend of fashionable philosophy and social theory. The idea of 'disciplinary knowledge', then, seems a little old-fashioned, even curmudgeonly, in an age of 'transdisciplinarity'; and yet, at the same time, not many artists would argue that their own specialised training counts for nothing (even art is a closed shop).

Projecting Migration is an anthology presenting work that transgresses multiple boundaries. Its materials are produced by visual anthropologists, ethnographers, documentarists and film and video artists, sometimes working in collaboration with one another, all of whom are engaging with themes of diaspora, migration, and representation, between and within cultures and in various forms. The practices, then, are disparate, and so, importantly, is the manner in which those practices approach and discuss their subjects. Importantly, the editors don't attempt to impose a spurious *post hoc* unity of approach onto the enterprises they present; but they do outline, quite precisely, how best to conceive of their aims, and what's at stake in the venture. In their introduction, Grossman and O'Brien posit a splicing of the concepts of 'habitus' – the term Bourdieu coined to denote a level of learned or conditioned behaviour that is nonetheless performed by conscious 'agents' – and 'the everyday' – Henri Lefebvre's mechanism for describing the particularised forms of resistance employed by individuals to confront or work around or within overarching structures and institutions. "In positing a critical convergence of 'habitus' and the 'everyday', we advocate a media practice-based response to what Arjun Appadurai calls the 'optical challenges posed by the global' that demand a 'new... pedagogy... for producing and sharing knowledge about globalisation, elicited from the bottom up'..."¹

The ambition of the collection, then, is no less than to discover new ways of looking; and through that, new ways of knowing. It's clear that these cannot come only from one existing 'optical practice', since the challenge is to methodology and perception as much as to conditions and structures.

That said, there is perhaps an assumption in the book that social science, particularly anthropology and its language, are somehow a universal context, to which all the various other methodologies and practices should ultimately relate. There are some reasons why this might at least be a good starting point; within the last 30 or 40 years, the discipline of anthropology has revolutionised its understandings of what it means to observe



Border Country Melanie Friend

and to represent a subject; the 'deep reflexivity' described by anthropologists, and their account of how the position of the author in large part accounts for the work, would certainly be useful for many artists to consider before embarking on another 'community project'. Artists seeking to 'portray' a 'community' they've met for two hours every other Thursday for the last three months might also choose to reflect on the 'longitudinal project', which anthropologists sometimes embark on for months or years, without preconceptions, at the outset, of how they might document their encounter.

But inevitably something is lost in the translation here, not between the various informants and their interlocutors, but between the various contributors to the book. The difference in expectation even between types of quite narrowly-defined 'documentary' practice, let alone between the array of very distinct approaches described in this book, means that certain aspects of process and research are privileged by the book's social studies slant, while some questions concerning the manner of presentation, that's to say, specifically aesthetic concerns important to visual art, in its gallery context, are underemphasised. It's clear that there are visual anthropologists interested in the approaches and techniques of visual art, but reluctant to consider those apparently 'external' presentational or experiential devices through which artists introduce a reflexive 'distance' into their practice; and there are artists willing to present their work in terms of anthropology without necessarily being acquainted with its particular disciplinary reflexivities.

Immediately worth mentioning are chapters by the Canadian-Lebanese artist Jayce Salloum, and by the collaborative duo of David Coplan and Gei Zantzinger. Salloum's account of his ongoing 'untitled' series of video works, shot in Lebanon, France, the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere, argues most clearly, of all the contributions in the collection, that existing modes of 'documentary' may be entirely inadequate for the type of 'intersubjective', and yet broadly political, work that he pursues. He describes his work, which he has installed in a series of permutations as he adds further material to it, as an 'active archive': the pieces could be watched in their entirety, but crucially are not 'durational'. Rather, Salloum makes a virtue of the collisions that occur in the gallery, between different types of material – interviews, repurposed archive footage, general 'observational' shots in his various locations – and between different contexts and locations.

Coplan and Zantzinger's collaboration is unusual for the period of time over which it

stretches. Respectively an anthropologist and an ethnomusicologist, they collaborated in the mid-1980s on an ethnographic film exploring the performative song forms of Lesotho, which 'dramatise' the life of the migrant workers who travel to work in the mines of South Africa. After performing preliminary field work, during which he recorded and translated some of the songs, Coplan then sent the transcriptions to Zantzinger, who, responding to the various modes of imagery and address used in the songs, worked out how they might film them. The account given of this original process, with all its inventive and responsive approaches to the material, is fascinating in itself, but the point of the chapter is to explore their subsequent reworking of the material they filmed when, 20 years later, DVD technologies offered new possibilities for representing the songs and their social contexts within the workers' communities. Once again, the chapter directly questions what might be expected of a documentary and what it might hope to achieve over the course of its life.

It's also essential to mention the DVD-ROM that accompanies the book, and which documents the projects described in each chapter. This is an invaluable addition, enabling the book to be used as a truly 'open' document, with references in the text pointing to specific clips on the DVD; the disc itself is easy to navigate, well-designed and well-authored. In a work that's based so specifically on practice as research, though, this might have been an opportunity to expand the field of references beyond the textual and theoretical – in other words, the DVD could have archived not just the contributors' own projects, but also excerpts of the work that they would regard as the 'visual references' for their practice. This is an important consideration for practice-based research generally, and whilst there are obvious problems of copyright, there should be the possibility of developing some means of 'visual citation' in a scholarly context such as this. Documentarists and artists respond to visual ideas just as they respond to written texts and theoretical positions; it's crucial to acknowledge this if visual practice is to be more fully embedded in a meaningful research context.

It's not clear that the extremely ambitious objectives of this collection are met equally in all the contributions. It's enormously significant, however, that the goals have been stated with such clarity. It's for other practitioners now to respond to them, and to consider exactly how effective 'transdisciplinarity' might be achieved.

Questions of how to look, and how and what to represent are brought up immediately by Melanie Friend's troubling book of photographs *Border*

Country. The book documents spaces in various 'immigration removal centres' around Britain (one of the provisions of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 was that 'detention centres' were euphemistically renamed 'removal centres'). Friend's photographs are all evacuated of subjects, so what we focus on are the banal details of the detainees' surroundings: the peculiar architecture of the suspension of humanity, made more oppressive for its sheer mundanity. The photographs might be disturbing, in their cold starkness, but there is a more unsettling feeling that, for multiple reasons, this project doesn't and can't work.

Extremities of circumstance, such as those in which Friend's subjects find themselves (choosing not to 'portray' them photographically, she includes an audio CD that contains interviews with various detainees), are arguably not 'representable' in the manner that Friend attempts; or rather, it's highly doubtful whether the representation is capable of conveying anything whatsoever of the 'experience' to us as viewers. Friend is clearly aware of the limitations and constructedness of her medium, and she wants to unsettle the images with the interruptive audio interviews, so that the refugees' stories and questions flow into the empty spaces shown. But even then, Friend is unable to discern, to describe and to unpick the multiplicity of 'depersonalising' relations of power in which the asylum detainee is caught. These are not only the obvious powers that hold them where they are, and which describe and define them, as rightless, stateless non-citizens (even whilst ordering these non-subjects to present themselves before the state), but also the framing power of Friend's aestheticising gaze, which awkwardly squares the ethical circle of their 'representation' by choosing not to show them at all. In Friend's interior photographs, the ordered rows of furniture tellingly describe their recent human occupants, and by extension the stream

of such occupants now 'removed'; but in her own eerie evacuation of the spaces there's almost a double erasure, a further removal – an aesthetic completion of the state's task.

In the book's contextual essay, Mark Durden describes the 'neutrality' of Friend's photographs, and this apparently innocuous claim reveals more than might immediately be apparent.² The photographs are anything but 'neutral': they're highly stylised, super-detailed, high-colour images, coolly composed and framed in a manner betraying an absolute awareness of the formal obsessions of contemporary European art photography. Perhaps what Durden means is that, for photographers like him, this 'style' is so ubiquitous that it's non-style, so internalised that one doesn't have to think about it, just set up the lights, point the camera and let the lens dissect the photographic subject. Friend is quite obviously aware of the immense problems with documentary's conceit to be able transparently to 'know' its subject, but with her too-clever attempt to circumvent the problematic altogether, she shows that she is, albeit reluctantly, thoroughly caught within it. How can 'experience' as an excluded non-citizen be made 'knowable' to the viewers of a rarefied series of photographs applying high German aesthetics to the spaces of state racism and arbitrary disappearance? The (presumably liberal, well-intentioned, already sympathetic) viewer of Friend's photographs knows nothing more afterwards about how this human conveyor belt functions as a thoroughly integral part of their state.

Friend's interviews are harrowing, depressing, frustrating – but they are not, crucially, enabling. They permit no solidarity, no active engagement, because they posit their subjects as passively caught in an ultimately incomprehensible (and unalterable) situation. They offer a record of the informants' stoical dignity and intransigent humanity, but they also serve as bleak 'memorials': most of them have now either been deported, or,

in a few cases, have been granted leave to remain; either way, they pass out of the limited, narrow range of the microphone, of no further interest because, one way or another, they have shed their 'total identity' as 'asylum seekers'. There's a very clear sense in which this determined positioning of the subjects, and the lack of reflexivity that it reveals on the part of Friend, as interviewer, merely repeat or perpetuate the ongoing dehumanisation.

There are no formal qualities to the experience of being made stateless. The cold detachment of Friend's photographs, and her failure to interrogate this as she might have hoped through the audio interviews, together produce a kind of haughty 'compassion' that's ultimately thoroughly counterproductive. It's essential that artists continue striving to find ways of representing the new or drastically reconfigured experiences of subjectivity that globalisation occasions, and that these representations engender new forms of knowledge. But this knowledge must be of that kind described by Johannes Fabian, and cited by Grossman and O'Brien:

"Sense and knowledge must not be confused. Sense or meaning can be brought along: they affirm and support – most of the time ideas or values already held... The term *knowledge* [...] should be reserved for insights that the knower does not already possess and that, when they occur, change the knower."³

Notes

1. Alan Grossman & Áine O'Brien, 'Introduction' in Grossman & O'Brien, p. 6.
2. Mark Durden, "'Who is more human than the other?'" in Friend, p. 52.
3. Johannes Fabian, quoted in Grossman & O'Brien, p. 10.