Visibility in the Gallery: Anthropology as Curating Co-Authorship

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Ingibjörg Magnadóttir, Teikningar 1997-2013



Introduction

In Anthropology, the practice of ethnography, as our principal method of enquiry, has always been a collaborative endeavor. In the anthropology of art, when working to try and understand the artistic or crafted, we observe and often become apprentice to those we seek to understand. Ethnography, as a research method, is based on the premise that the best way of understanding others is to immerse yourself in their experiences. Conversely, however, moving from experience into description has traditionally required a moving away from our informants, and our anthropological knowledge, represented in writing, is interpreted as distinct from that which gave rise to it. My research on drawing with contemporary Icelandic artists attempted to counter this division by calling into question the role the ethnographer has in the field, opening it out and exploring how drawing, in this instance, can aid an interdisciplinary practice that can account for and learn from the practice of multiple discourses.

This paper takes the exhibition Peripheral Vision, held at Kling og Bang art Gallerí in Reykjavík, Iceland in 2010, as the starting point for thinking about this process and in particular, the drawing practice of Icelandic artist, Ingibjörg Magnadóttir. The exhibition was one outcome of my ethnographic research into drawing practices for Icelandic artists and showcased the work of ten informants, whose art practice I had studied and worked alongside over the previous 12 months. Ingibjörg's drawings raise the issue of how particular compositional forms can create a lacuna that potentially supports a shift in a drawing's context and meaning, opening up a space through the work that allows for the privately drawn line to be reimagined though an ethnographic lens, towards an interpretative anthropology. This movement is legitimised through two avenues: a collapse of ethnography's purported singularity of method and description and the expansive definition of curation, which allows my work as an ethnographer to be imagined within this role. Taken together this, potentially, allows anthropology to occupy the position of co-author.

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Icelandic artist Ingibjörg Magnadóttir's artwork dispenses with any overt interpretation. Instead, the audience is propelled into her surreally crafted worlds, resplendent with symbolic tropes, clandestine myths and African priestesses. Her performative installations are the mainstay of her practice and her drawings, which have never previously been exhibited, occupy a distinct and seemingly immaterial aspect of her creative output as an artist. She draws on small sheets of white cartridge paper, using crayons and pens or sometimes watercolour paint, they are quickly executed, expressive and child-like in their appearance. In would appear that her intent is not to convey dexterity, to master the translation of the visible world onto paper, but to mark the surface. The marks made however are not preconceived and in keeping with this manner of working she rejects any interpretative reading of her drawings after their execution. This stance supports an autotelic reading, an essentialism which renders the work as autonomous, potentially even from the artist. Her disregard of the revelatory capacity of drawing to bring forth ideas and concepts, to think through something, is rejected and means that her drawings should not be equated with working sketches or preparatory studies; rather they occupy a more undefined or fluid identity for the artist. They support an approach to drawing which deems it to be pre-conceptual and which offers a kind of process of relating to the world that comes before any registering of it cognitively.

Free floating shapes quickly executed that seem to take joy in the marking of a surface and half realised organic figures would then suggest that this approach is engendered through



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privileging the body during the making process and following on from that, as the site of meaning for the work. But the work's autotelic form should, I argue, not be used to support a privileging of the making body. The stress on the pre-conceptional in drawing, and with it, on the instinctive material touch or 'autographic first hand gesture' (Petherbridge 2010:156) of the artist, risks imposing a singular framework on the drawings, collapsing the particular forms used into a predetermined register that aligns drawing exclusively with the bodily gesture. Ingibjörg's work suggests something different. I would argue that they are best understood in relation to her entire practice and are a way of countering what she does elsewhere.

Her performative installations differ from her works on paper through their prior determinate intentionality. Reminiscent of the theatre, her pieces have a strong narrative arc, in which she takes on the persona of a character, typically archetypal figures who offer guidance and advice. Priestesses, preachers or healers, they exemplify a didactic form of communication. But this is shrouded with an ambiguity as to what they are purporting to teach us. These figures are not mute, but neither do they offer one definitive reading, leaving the audience unsure as to what exactly we have been told. Ingibjörg's performance work is steeped in a participatory approach, which asks the audience to propose their own meaning. In the group exhibition the Apostles' Clubhouse (2006) at Reykjavík Art Museum Ingibjörg dressed up in the garb of an African priestess, seated on a plinth ostensibly praying, the scene decorated with foliage and greenery, she projected an air of commanded reverence. In line with symbolist vocabulary she talked of her disdain for predetermined meaning and claimed that she was unconcerned with offering a precise reading for her audience to take away, presenting instead an absence of certainty. This extended to how her work is performed. Although highly choreographed events, she does not want the audience to be aware of the labour involved in constructing them and so she makes a habit of not overly rehearsing her performances in advance, thereby preserving a sense of spontaneity and improvisation. For her performance for the Sequences Time-Based Arts Festival in 2009 she rehearsed the day before, a first and final run-through with a cast of seven. Thus the actual performance was largely improvised in front of the audience, with her use of non-professional actors, often family and friends, aiding this sense of immediacy and invitation to chance. Overall then, her installations are premised on both suggesting and eclipsing meaning for the audience.

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Returning to her drawings, we can note that they share with her other work her desire to oscillate between these two poles. But perhaps the drawings achieve this through a different process, which is less about engineering a polyphonic presentation for the audience than it is about the abstract forms that she draws and how she relates to them. Form, whilst often used to suggest the formal appearance of a thing or its surface qualities of colour, tone or depth, also alludes to a particular sensibility that any chosen medium allows for or engenders. Drawing, for example, is peculiarly able to display an artist's working process and in doing so is arguably open. The sparsity that can be suggested through the singular line of a pen can also be read as tentative and hesitant: drawing displays the creative doubt and narrative of its making, and in doing so ensures that the work is read as without closure or having a final settled shape. This is not limited to the audience of the work but is also a factor in how the drawings function for the artist. This openness of form arguably aids Ingibjörg's sense of their worth. In conversation she noted that her drawings directly reflected her immediate feelings and experience at the time of their making and in exposing something that she had not previously known she described them as private to her. The ability of her drawings to offer up an unmediated response extended to refuting any singular meaning, or



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arguably any meaning at all. In this she differentiates between how her drawings and performances come into being, the degree to which they are preconceived and from this, their anonymity from her. The dilemma of how to ascertain the boundaries between the substantiality of art-making processes and their 'meaning' is a perennial issue and one that is not limited to any contemporary theory of drawing. In Gumbrecht's (2004) use of the term 'meaning', he identifies as contestable what is usually imagined to be immanent in meaning, thus offering a more nuanced reflection on the role meaning may have for the artist and potentially countering the tendency to naturalise the drawing process as though it were pre-given through the body. It was these very qualities that aligned Ingibjörg's work with the objectives of Peripheral Vision, for which she displayed three sets of drawings in the exhibition. The first was a group of six, the second a smaller group of four and the last a pair of drawings. This last set were the only titled pieces, called *How Things Were*. As the exhibition's curator it was the very absence of any predetermined meaning that compelled me to think about her work for the show.

The original intention behind the show was to illuminates drawing's ability to reflect the just out of sight, the borders of our perception and thinking. But through the curation of the





Previous page - performance by Ingibjörg Magnúsdóttir, for the *Apostles' Clubhouse* exhibition, Reykjavík Art Museum, 2007 Above - performance by Ingibjörg Magnúsdóttir 'The Island' 2011/2102

exhibition, and brining together a variety of artists within an imposed environment, concrete references and interpretations diluted the autotelic instinct that drove the work. For Ingibjörg, the purpose of her drawings lie in her wish to keep them open and free. The possibility that anything can be taken from them is important for her, as is her disdain for the conceptual underpinning of artwork more broadly. Within her performances this intention is more orchestrated and becomes the subject of her work. But trying to rid the performances of any prior design was something that she grappled with, and regardless of how much she left to improvisation she felt they were engineered in a way that the drawings were not. As an artist she sought out a form of creativity that was relied upon a kind of mystification, even if only at the time of making, where the artist herself is unaware of what is occurring. Whilst ostensibly about the fleeting and hesitant within drawings, it can be argued that Peripheral Vision ruptured how Ingibjörg saw her work, potentially bringing them into line with the rest of her practice and imposing a coherence that was absent in the moment of their making. This shift however came about through the imposition of meaning from outside the work itself, through the prism of curation.

No longer a custodian of collections, today the curator is more readily understood through the notion of creation. The recent suggestion of a 'turn towards curating', proposed by O'Neill (2007:14), alludes to a widespread move to open up the role, but also to its abstruseness and the multivalent and porous nature of the task. In tandem with this are curatorial practices that span many disciplines and the potential multiplicity of authors for any artwork or project. The interpretative framework of the curator is often imposed after the work's execution, potentially rupturing the artist's intention. This imposition of *a* meaning is contingent upon the work's formal properties: its openness of form allowing for subsequent transformations to occur, shifting interpretation into authorship. Taken with the opening out of ethnography's descriptive potential in recent decades, and the variety of methods now employed by interpretative anthropology to understand the other, curation and anthropology share a similarity of purpose and through this legitimated my role as curator. But as practices *of* purpose, anthropology and curation, are not necessarily aligned with those of art. The process of curating Peripheral Vision illuminates these dilemmas. As an anthropologist working within the art community, Peripheral Vision marked the bringing together of curation, art and anthropology. The work was by and large abstract and offered itself up to multiple interpretations. Conclusion

To conclude: as a lens, or way of seeing the world, anthropology produces specific kinds of description through employing particular forms of representation. But as a discipline it is also mired in oppositional categories that, as anthropologist Chris Wright argues, position 'the aesthetic' against the 'anthropological' (1998:18). The crisis of representation within anthropology, a disciplinary self-reflexive moment began in the 1980s which questioned both our right to represent others and the accuracy and methods we chose, has demanded that we speculate upon how our interpretations are crafted: and the role that aesthetics and form play within this. Peripheral Vision illuminates this dilemma: and asks how, or if at all, anthropology can understand the autotelic, work that is complete within itself. And, then, is any subsequent interpretation an imposition, alien to the very sensibility the work is hinged upon? Drawing's openness of form lends itself to a particular type of imaginative dialogue, in this instance with anthropology, but it is also rooted in its particularity and as Peripheral Vision bears witness too, this calls into question how we can understand drawing anthropologically without losing sight of its specificity.

More information about Ingibjörg Magnadóttir can be found at www.imagnadottir.com

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