

Jostling Ethnography Between Design and Participatory Art Practices...and
The Collaborative Relations That It Engenders

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In late 2011, a conference was held at Duke University organized by the current editors of the journal *Cultural Anthropology*, to recognize the 25th 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 U.S., 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 honor 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 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 recognized 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 hypertheoretical 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 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 specialized 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 emphasized 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.

The Center for Ethnography, UCI, and Its Developing Concerns, 2005—

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 textualizing 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 reimagined and challenged, I argue, in addressing the problem anew of situating the virtues and effects of micro-scale, ethnographic work in a networked, globalizing 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 realized 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 2005, *Frictions*, 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 materialize 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.

These, then, have been 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 defacto 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 entre 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 suggest 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 the 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 90s 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 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, or perhaps limiting case one,-the 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 aficionados, 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, reenlivening 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 receptions 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, 1960s. development paradigms. Its successors are collaboration based philanthrocapitalist projects (e. g., the Gates Foundation, but 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 enunciatory 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* (2012) on which I want to dwell here a little—as providing a thrust for anthropological ethnography that frankly it would not as likely to do for itself. This will lead me into a brief discussion of the "214 square feet" 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 design 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 characterization 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 Andre 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 characterization 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 the *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 characterization 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 or Prototypical 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 theater 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, 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 contraption 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 interest 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 square feet” --An Exemplary project, in Conclusion.

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 organized, 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 fieldwork concept, and thinking more like Brecht, for instance, while keeping clear of the specific assumptions and aesthetics of theater craft.

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 organization 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 theater 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 materialized in a staged environment, which in turns serves an ethnographic purpose by inviting audience 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 synthesize 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 organizations 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 meaning 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.