Design anthropology is not a distinct style of knowing

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Position statements

Rachel Smith and Ton Otto (2014, 2013) have argued that design anthropology represents a distinct way of knowing that incorporates both analysing and doing in the process of constructing knowledge, and is based on emergence and intervention. Smith (2013) has described design anthropology as an interventionist design anthropological approach, which is "a future oriented processes of inquiry and exploration which not only develops alternative perspectives or opportunities but function as *sites of cultural production and transformation*". Otto and Smith (2014) further state that "in design anthropology, knowledge is created *in* and *through* action, rather than as the result of *observation* and *reflection*", which is the case for more traditional forms of anthropology.

With references to Ulf Hannerz' work on "studying forward" (2003) and supported by examples of my own anthropological work (Heijnen 2013), I suggest that the style of knowing of design anthropology is not as distinct from the style of knowing of anthropology, as Otto and Smith postulate. The current movement from user-involvement to co-creation in design processes and pressing challenges of the contemporary world ask for an even closer relationship between anthropology and design anthropology.

Hannerz's hyperglobalisers, sceptics and transformationalists

Talking about possibilities for an anthropology of the future on a global scale, Ulf Hannerz, in his article "Macro-scenarios. Anthropology and the debate over contemporary and future worlds" (2003) quotes David Held when he distinguishes between three groups of scholars addressing the future in 'the globalisation debate': those of the hyperglobalisers, the sceptics, and the transformationalists (Held in Hannerz 2003: 177). Shortly, hyperglobalisers see a new epoch of human history, a radically new world order, sceptics see nothing so remarkably new in the current condition and transformationalists is the group where most anthropologists can be found, because they map continuities and changes in old social and cultural forms as well as study the emergence of new phenomena and relationships, and see intellectual opportunities in conjunctures and contingencies (ibid.).

Studying forward: co-creating future pathways

For more than a decade I have conducted anthropological fieldwork in the North Atlantic area, primarily in Iceland. One of my research projects addressed the social practice of dreaming in Icelandic society. I never had a personal interest in dreams and only seldom did I share my own dreams with other people, before I started living in Icelandic society. But being convinced that the topic and field of my attention should grow from my engagement with the people in Iceland, I choose to settle in Reykjavík to study the Icelandic language and simply to wait for a topic to emerge from my engagement with daily life. After several months, a different way of talking

about, looking at dreams and using them in everyday life stroke my attention, further articulated by my foreign background and perceptions. After I asked my Icelandic friends for advice on whether this was a topic of their reflection, interest and concern, dreams became the topic of my professional attention.

Because my fieldwork spanned over a long period of time, my role in Icelandic society changed drastically. In the beginning I acted, and was perceived, as a novice, who carefully listened to dream telling and interpretation, and observed how dreams were circulated in society and how dream narratives, through retelling and negotiating of possible interpretations, evolved over time. In this initial phase, while my interest for dream narratives was not yet widely known, I was able to observe the sharing of dreams in its "natural communicative context" (Tedlock 1991). However, my interest in dreams became quickly known and just my presence could evoke the narration of dreams, as well as silence on the topic. With time -- when my dreams had become more Icelandic, my language fluent and Icelanders began to refer to Iceland as my home-- I felt that I myself had become part of the Icelandic "natural communicative context".

It was at that time when I was socially identified (and felt) as being Icelandic that I started to "create knowledge *in* and *through* action" (Smith and Otto 2014). People asked me to tell them my own dreams, which they then interpreted – in case they were sufficiently Icelandic. Because my interest in dreams became widely known, people often came to me to tell dreams or addressed the topic when I met them at various localities. Also in periods when I was home in Denmark, when normal face-to-face dialogues were not possible, I received messages via e-mail, or was called by people who wanted to relate their dreams and hear my opinion. I was invited to participate as critical expert on Icelandic dreaming in courses on dreams that Icelandic specialists organized for their fellow countrymen and was asked to perform life on television in Iceland's main Breakfast show.

For many Icelanders dreams can be sensitive. Dreams are seen as portals for people to travel to other times and places and are thought to reveal what has happened in the past or which pathways will unfold in the future. My observation that people acted on the basis of dream experiences made me fully aware of my role in co-creating futures with them and of the responsibility this implied. In the beginning, I tried to resist and to perform within the boundaries of Icelandic cultural production that I had observed an analysed. But it was one evening, back in Denmark, that an Icelandic friend of mine made me aware that my understanding of how dreams were used in everyday life, and how culture --- and futures -- are produced was much too rigid. He called me late at night, and asked me to explain a dream he had dreamt. The dream dealt with a woman. I used the knowledge I had gained from what I had heard during my fieldwork, and from my analysis of dream symbols in my collected material. I moved away from a psychoanalytical perspective, where meaning-bearing elements of a dream are interpreted as representations of [parts of] the self and explained the dream from an angle of "disembodiment", a detachment from the dreamer's body, which is a characteristic of Icelandic dream interpretation: A house in a dream relates to a house in waking reality and is not a symbol for the state of the dreamer's body or mind. Additionally, it is supposed that a dreamer can dream a dream that has nothing to do with him or herself but which is passed on and the dreamer then need to identify the person for whom the dream is dreamt.

To return to my Icelandic friend: he was dissatisfied with my explanation. He asked me whether it could be possible that the dream referred to him and the woman who had appeared in the dream personally. My interpretation did not work, because I stuck too much to a univocal interpretation of Icelandic dream sharing and had ignored that people actively seek alternative opinions, also from foreigners, "google" the meaning of symbols or try to look them up in books with dream symbolism, often of foreign origin. This experience was an eye-opener, as I began to see the complexity of knowledge generation, in this case directed towards the future and my role in these creative processes (Heijnen 2013).

Conclusion

Ulf Hannerz (2003: 185) argues that anthropologists have a role to play, perhaps even have an obligation to engage with the human endeavor to try to develop a sense of what may come next. Yet, as he states (ibid.), this is not necessarily just a matter of being prepared, but also: "one of increasing one's capacity for influencing the course of events, perhaps resisting certain developments rather than getting ready to accept them." These statements align very well with the agendas of design anthropology (as well as of Participatory Design) where empowerment of the stakeholders involved in a specific design setting is often targeted as one of the objectives of the engagement.[1] The question, then is, whether we can distinguish between design anthropology and anthropology as two distinct styles of knowing. As I have shown with an example from my own fieldwork, intervention as a method (even though not often explicitly stated in anthropological literature) is embraced by the intensifying degree of participation of anthropologists in their fieldsites, evolved over time. Additionally, knowledge creation *through* and *in* action (Otto and Smith 2014) helps anthropologists to grasp the multivocality of everyday life and the complexity of social phenomena and practices.

I do not ignore that there are differences between design anthropology and anthropology: the former is (1) directed towards the creation of products and services, (2) implies a carefully selected and created design setting, (3) has a limited time frame for design processes and (4) is a collaborative endeavor between stakeholders from several disciplines and backgrounds (Otto and Smith 2013: 3). But I would rather see these differences to be valued as the fertile ground from where anthropology and design anthropology mutually can influence each other. The complexity of the contemporary world calls for an engaged and critical anthropology that not only studies backwards but also forwards. With the recent political attention for co-creation, the focus on the involvement of communities in design processes and the ambition that this will lead to empowerment of the participants, design anthropology can gain from critical reflection in anthropology and from an approach that opens up more traditional design settings. The movement from user-involvement to co-creation processes underscores the urgency that design anthropology (as well as Participatory

[1] See e.g. the European research and innovation project *Organicity* in which I participate: http://organicity.eu.

Design) approaches anthropology.

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