

Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference (EPIC) 2008

Keynote

REASSEMBLING THE VISUAL

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I'd like to start with a simple thought experiment. If I name some artists and designers, what comes to mind when you hear their names? Try it now. I'll pick well-known names so that there is a strong likelihood you will have seen some of the work. Picasso, Mies van der Rohe, Charles and Ray Eames, Andy Warhol. It's likely that it's an *image* of their work. Now, let's consider some of the authoritative accounts from ethnography. What comes to mind as you hear these names? Malinowski, Levi-Strauss, Clifford Geertz, Mary Douglas. Is it a page of text that you have in mind? Most likely not. If I now ask you to pay attention to something visual that you associate with their work, perhaps it's a diagram that comes to mind. But it's more likely to be an image you associate with their work, perhaps a photograph he or she took, or perhaps a photo of the researcher.

We expect art to be visual and/or performative. And we expect designers, especially those educated at art school, to create visual artefacts as a key part of their practice. But typically, we still expect to *read* the work of ethnographers. Visual anthropology has done much to challenge this. It has brought to attention the visual features of cultures being studied. And it has developed visual methods, such as photography, film and video that can be used to record and disseminate knowledge (Banks and Morphy 1997; Pink 2007). The photographs and videos at this conference are evidence of the impact of these visual practices. But words are still dominant in ethnography.

In what follows, I will propose that ethnography should attend to practices in contemporary art and design – but not because they are visual¹. Some artists and some designers are gathering data, in fact, they are creating data. They analyze this data and they generate theories. This matters to ethnography, not because these are visual methods, or because the data are often visual data. What matters for ethnography is that what these artists are doing is creating accounts of human experience. They are creating topologies which show how what we call objects cannot be separated from what we call the social. They create experiences in which the visual is important, yes, but what is more important is the assembling of humans and objects in novel ways to say something about the human condition.

As I develop my argument I will draw on two important ideas within Science and Technology Studies/Actor-Network Theory (STS/ANT). The first concerns the roles of objects in constituting social relations, and the second the ways that social scientists create accounts.

¹ In *Contemporary Art and Anthropology* (2006), Arnd Schneider and Chris Wright argue that anthropology should overcome its iconophobia and emphasis on text-based representation by being attentive to practices in contemporary art. Where I add to their argument is my deployment of STS/ANT which is attentive to the ways objects are involved in constituting actor-networks.

Latour and Woolgar (1986) and others have controversially foregrounded the roles of objects, which they see as taking part in the ways that knowledge is created, facts are established, and controversies are stabilized. We might say that STS has noticed the objects that are involved in producing scientific knowledge, but without seeing them. Follow the actors, say Latour and colleagues, and many have diligently gone off to watch what objects are doing. They have followed them, but have they *looked* at them? Have they paid attention the way an artist or designer would, to the use of this material, rather than that one, to this font rather than that one, or this colour rather than that one? And if they have seen objects assembling the social, as Latour (2005) describes it– why do we have to rely on reading about what the objects have done, rather than seeing or experiencing it?

Having paid attention to the role of objects in constituting social relations, in recent years, these scholars have acknowledged the messiness and contingency in their accounts. John Law (2004) has drawn attention to the performativity of social science's research methods, and emphasized their limitations in creating accounts of the messy realities in which we are implicated. Bruno Latour has organized two exhibitions, both in collaboration with artist and curator Peter Weibel, in which he has sought to assemble through material means an argument about the role of artefacts in constituting associations (Latour and Weibel 2005). More recently Nigel Thrift (2008) has developed a 'non-representational theory', which emphasizes the practicing of performative and embodied knowledges. These can be seen as attempts to shift the social sciences towards paying attention to objects and bodies and what they do, away from an emphasis in their accounts on representation, towards the importance of practice.

My question today is, what would it mean for the social sciences to pay attention to artists who are already doing this? In answering this question I will offer examples of three different works, which to me can be read both as works of art or design, but also as the sorts of accounts of socio-materialities which offer ways to address the challenges posed by Law, Latour and Thrift.

Some artists, some designers, in the ways they go about making their work, are a kind of scholar in this tradition of Actor-Network-Theory. Going further than Michel Callon's (1987), argument that engineers should be thought of as engineer-sociologists, I am proposing that these artists and designers are ANT-practitioner-theorists. Their works can be seen as topological assemblages of objects and humans, or as actor-networks, or as accounts of actor-networks.

The first of my three examples is a project by Anna Best called *PHIL* (Best accessed 2008). Anna was invited to work in particular part of London in which there was a discussion then taking place about the role of the arts in economic regeneration and the engagement of audiences with art in the public realm. First, she went through the electoral register and found people who had the letters *phil* in their name – Phillip Scott, Philippa Bessant, Louise Philpot and so on. She got in touch by putting flyers through their doors and ringing on doorbells and 15 people agreed to take part. Then she asked 15 musicians from the London Philharmonic Orchestra to go to the homes of these 15 people and play their part of the score from Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nacht Musik*. One musician went to each home. Here are some of the photographs that

documented these encounters. This was a solo performance for a tiny audience, often one person, in which the musician kept time to a video of the conductor. This pairing of the orchestra member playing their part, in the home of someone with *phil* in their name was repeated 15 times. Anna Best recorded each of these 15 encounters on video in close up and in a wide shot. The resulting 30 videos were then assembled in a darkened gallery space and members of that audience were asked to press the play buttons to start the videos playing. I'm now going to play you some of the video that documents that performance.

The second example is by Chris Evans, an ongoing project called *Radical Loyalty* (Evans accessed 2008). Like Anna Best's *PHIL*, this project involves ideas about what constitutes the local and the relations between audiences and artworks. Also like Anna Best's project, *Radical Loyalty* is hard to describe in a few sentences or by showing you an image, because it is not easily reducible to a determinate art object or event. Chris Evans will design a sculpture park in the industrial town of Järvakandi in Estonia. The forms of the sculptures are determined by a number of interviews he conducted with senior executives from companies such as Daimler Chrysler Finance and Starbucks. In these interviews he asked them to describe what they understood "radical loyalty" to mean. Chris uses the word "consultant" to describe his role in those interviews, in which he was helping give form to the interviewees' ideas. What resulted were sketches and maquettes for the sculptures, some of which have been already been shown in galleries. But the project is yet to be completed, because these sculptures will be constructed by Estonian artists that Chris has hired. Under communism, their job was to create public monuments. Now Chris Evans, a British artist, has asked them to produce sculptures that visualize the ideas of senior executives about radical loyalty, to be shown in a public sculpture park in a former communist state.

The third example is my own project *Personal Political Indices*, or *Pindices*, a collaboration with sociologist Andrew Barry (Barry and Kimbell 2005). A version of this, called *Physical Bar Charts*, has been part of this conference, the tubes on display in the foyer and the button badges some of you have helped yourselves to and worn. This work is concerned with the visual assembling of data and its disassembly, as the objects of the data-gathering – the badges – are taken away, put in pockets and bags, or worn. The badges become actors since they spark conversations between people, producing, temporarily, a network. In the version at this conference, there has been a question about how visible you have been this year to prompt you to take badges as a way of answering the question. There was also space for participants to forecast the levels of the tubes by the end of the event, and an invitation for you to give your reasons for these forecasts. Some of you have worn badges, some have not. Like the other two examples I have shown, it is not clear where the work is located. The tubes and the badges are very visible objects, and yet the success of the piece lies in the badges being taken away. The record of the taking of the badges produces the *Physical Bar Charts*, a visual account that shows, inversely, which badges are most popular. Data are created at the same time as the results of the data are assembled. And yet an important part of the piece is not documented – the traces that the badges leave in conversations here, or when you get home, or when you find a badge that pricks your finger when you put your hand into your pocket a month or two from now.

These three works, I propose, are visual reassemblies that create social arrangements. In each, the artist creates some data and, at the same time, creates a form for engaging with the data and with theories of the social that are implicated. These projects arrange people and objects into sets of relations. They collapse the global and expand the local and hold this in tension. My title here today – Reassembling the Visual – emphasizes the visual but Latour's (2005) book title *Reassembling the Social* could also describe what these practitioners do. They call themselves artists or designers, but this is not what is important. They work with visual methods and visual data but this is also not what's critical. What's important is that their practice involves crafting arrangements of humans and objects into accounts of human experience.

But to return to my question about what would happen if the social sciences were more attentive to these practices? One way of doing this is to think about the ways in which ethnography as a discipline engages with design as a discipline. In considering this, I will draw on empirical research into interdisciplinarity conducted by Andrew Barry, Georgina Born and Gisa Weszkalnys (2008). They propose three modes of interdisciplinarity – the ways that disciplines engage with each other. In my appropriation of these modes I will be paying special attention to what the practices of design might mean for ethnography.

The first mode in which ethnography and design engage is the *service* mode. Ethnography uses design to style the tools of ethnographic research. Communication design skills, for example, can help with the arrangement of text, photographs and diagrams, or the editing of video footage. This is design as styling, helping deliver the messages of ethnographic research. Viewed the other way round, we can think of ways that design makes use of ethnography in presenting its arguments, lifting from ethnographic research its data or its analysis. This mode is design craft in the service of ethnographic research or ethnographic data in the service of design process.

The second mode is *integrative* and *synthetic*. Here ethnography works closely in partnership with design to develop artefacts which might persuade stakeholders. Design methods and processes are deployed to help critique existing arrangements or imagine proposals for new ones, stimulated and complemented by ethnographic research. Examples here are prototypes or mockups of product or service ideas, or narrative devices such as scenarios. Design here is much more than styling; it is essential to the imaginative possibilities of research, not just making it more visible and digestible but synthesizing it in the creation of visual artefacts that suggest new ways of doing things, new products and new services.

The third mode is one in which design and ethnography lose their disciplinary identities, not to merge into to some happy communion but rather an unhappy one. In this mode, what happens is a reassembling of the visual, creating accounts within which audiences and stakeholders find themselves entangled. This mode is *agonistic-antagonistic*, meaning the disciplines are in continual argument. Paraphrasing Barry et al, here design is in a self-conscious dialogue with, criticism of, or opposition to, the intellectual, ethical or political limits of ethnography, and vice versa. Working in this way involves a kind of invention; the creative clash between design and ethnography generates knowledge in the form of methods and forms that may not make sense to either discipline. I am not well-placed to comment on whether anthropology can or does operate in this mode. But through the examples I have given

of works by artists and designers which reassemble the social through reassembling the visual, I make a claim that some kinds of design is well-placed to do so.

To summarise, I have borrowed Barry et al's three modes of interdisciplinarity to think about the ways that ethnography might engage with design: the service mode, the integrative-synthetic mode and the agonistic-antagonistic mode. The three projects of visual reassembly I described earlier are, to my reading, examples of the third mode. They are works produced in the context of art and design but blur beautifully with other areas of practice, regeneration, business and social science. I could have chosen to give you an example to illustrate each mode, but you are already familiar with modes one and two – they are the core practices of design and ethnography in organizations. The third mode, however, is tricky, destabilizing, critical, hyper-reflexive, contingent, resistant– all virtues that are cherished in art and design and in ethnography. The third mode reassembles the social and material possibilities of disciplines.

To bring this conversation back to this community, what might be the implications of reassembling the visual, of operating in the agonistic-antagonistic mode?

I will try to answer this by considering one kind of device that has been discussed within this group of designers and ethnographers (Loi 2007). The cultural probe is a device that many of you will be familiar with. Originally conceived of by Bill Gaver and his then colleagues at the Royal College of Art in London, the cultural probe has now become something around which a controversy has emerged. In their original paper (1999), Gaver et al described the cultural probe as a design method to help with inspiration, to enable the authors create a way of thinking about a new research area. In a more recent paper, Gaver and others (2004) have commented on the way that their original idea has been adopted and adapted by other researchers, in ways which disrupt their original intention to hold a place for uncertainty. The probe is now part of the toolkit of some designers, used not just for inspiration but also for data-gathering and to open up conversations with stakeholders (Loi 2007).

Here we have two kinds of cultural probe: one conceived of as a design research method to stimulate inspiration and hold a place for uncertainty; and another, a method used to gather data to reduce uncertainty about users. How can we make sense of this? If we view the cultural probe pack through the lens I have just described, it is not mode one: design used to style a data gathering method. Nor can we see it as an example of mode two: design integrating with ethnography to create a new method.

In my reading of cultural probes, they are an example of mode three. The cultural probe as a method is an agonistic-antagonistic intervention into discussions about what constitutes data and data gathering by doing a strange kind of enquiry. The probe is a kind of rhetorical form since it has to capture the imagination and engagement of the people it is given to, but the hope is that the probe brings back something that still leaves room for uncertainty. Researchers designing and using probes packs are reassembling the social paying, particular attention to visual data. They are involved in constituting messy realities in which they, the stakeholders and the objects in the packs are all entangled. Cultural probes, playful triggers (Loi 2004) and the other novel forms emerging from design and art are ways of reassembling the

social through paying attention to the visual. As such they offer an intriguing way for this community to reconceive of the boundaries between its disciplines.

To conclude, I'd like to imagine what might happen if ethnography *did* begin to engage with the reassembling of the visual I have outlined today. What sorts of activities might we see? Within organizations commissioning research, there would be projects in which visual reassemblies would serve to show how data are created. These accounts would challenge the existing polarities between quantitative and qualitative, between data gathering and data analysis, between ethnographic research and design research. Like Anna Best's *PHIL*, these would be public experiments (Schaffer 2005) which would offer accounts of human experience.

At conferences there would be possibilities to do and to engage with visual reassembly, not just as workshops, or poster sessions, but as a kind of paper, as an argument. These would not be decorative add-ons, but integral to the event. The artefact and scenarios sessions at this conference are examples of how this might work. But imagine going even further and being involved in reassembling the visual for and with this public, and other publics, in the ways that Anna Best or Chris Evans have done.

An example I can offer is an exhibition *Imagining Business* I organized earlier this year at Saïd Business School with sociologist Nina Wakeford and curator Alex Hodby (Hodby et al 2008). This came about in dialogue with my colleague Paolo Quattrone, who, with Christine McLean and François-Régis Puyou, organized an academic workshop entitled *Imagining Business: Reflecting the Visual Power of Management, Organizing and Governing Practices*. I proposed that if we were to hold a workshop at which academics gave papers and showed Powerpoint slides about visualization in organizations, we should have artefacts there as their own arguments. The images I show here are of the seven works from the exhibition that became part of the workshop. As well as Chris Evans' *Radical Loyalty* which I described earlier, and my *Physical Bar Charts*, there were contributions by Carey Young, Nina Wakeford and consultancies live|work and Wolff Olins. The exhibition was distributed in spaces within the business school, and was open for three weeks before the workshop.

Carey Young's piece *Everything You've Heard is Wrong* (1999) is a video from a talk she did at Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park in London, a site associated with free speech. Here she gave passers-by advice about giving presentations while competing for attention with the usual collection of political and religious speakers around her. Nina Wakeford's pieces included *Here Comes Experience!*, an audio work in English and Mandarin in which designers described experience models they use. Her piece *Trials of Strength* (2007) consists of bright blue balloons filled with helium, from each of which dangles a mercury thermometer with no markings on it. This piece was located in one of the lecture theatres used in the workshop. The service design and innovation consultancy live|work showed how they reassembled a client's data by making the sorts of artefacts they produce in their day-to-day practice. And finally branding consultancy Wolff Olins created an installation proposing the idea of 'new' as a way of stimulating innovation.

Imagining Business made space for visual assemblages created by different kinds of practitioner as part of an academic workshop. As organizers, it was important for us

that participants had an opportunity to engage with these works, and the exhibition as a whole. We organized a guided walk-through in which some of the artists and designers talked about their work, with sociologist Noortje Marres taking the role of discussant. Was the exhibition successful? When one senior ethnomethodologist told me he thought the *Physical Bar Charts* were not much more than a questionnaire, I realized how difficult it might be to get ethnographers – even the ones who really pay attention to things – to *look* at exhibitions when they are used to *listening* to papers.

Before I finish, I will summarise what I have tried to do. I have argued that the social sciences, that ethnography, should pay attention to practices in contemporary art and design that are involved in reassembling the social. These practices make use of visual methods and create visual data, but this visuality is not the important part of my argument. What is important in the projects I've described, is how Anna Best and Chris Evans, for example, arrange people and objects into sets of relations, into actor-networks. Data are gathered, data are represented, and theories of the social are entangled with the experience of the form of the work. These are important accounts of the human condition. And they seem to be operating in the third mode of interdisciplinarity I described – the agonistic-antagonistic mode, which questions what disciplines do. As such, they present an opportunity for ethnography, especially for ethnography within multidisciplinary projects in organizations.

A few months ago I went to Highgate cemetery in north London, close to where I live, to pay my respects at the grave of Karl Marx who is buried there. At the bottom of his large tombstone is engraved the famous quote: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.” I will end with my own provocation which I hope to have an opportunity to discuss with you further: Ethnography has only described and analysed the world in various ways; the point, however, is to reassemble it!²

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² My thanks for Andrew Barry for this suggestion.

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