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Ethnography at the edge of the future



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Hugo Burgos (HB): Looking at your body of work, it is clear that we can find your work along the lines of visual anthropology, digital ethnography, sensory ethnography, and now the study of everyday life –with applied aspects. We know the core of your work is ethnography, how can you explain this transition?

Sarah Pink (SP): Visual Anthropology is where I started and it has been the biggest influence in my career. As an undergraduate I worked in a photographic project for one of my dissertation assignments. At that time I was interested in a sort of reflexive documentary that was influenced by David MacDougall's work, because I wanted to start thinking about how to use the camera as a way to understand people's experiences of the world and the research process per se. After my master's program, I did my Ph.D. in Social Anthropology at the University of Kent, and that is when I carried out my research about women and bullfighting. Once I arrived in Spain, I realized that people filmed the bullfight and it was televised. Very few bullfighting fans would video the bullfight. Photography was actually at the core of that culture. So instead of using video, I mainly used photographs. The interesting thing about learning how to photograph the bullfight was learning how to anticipate. To know when to take the photograph, you need to know what is going to happen next, so you need to learn the steps of the performance in order to be able to photograph it. As a result, I learned a lot about the use of photographs as part of the research process.

The moment I started collaborating with Unilever Research in England was when I started to do, what I call, video ethnography. I

did three projects with them, two being the most important ones: one about everyday life in the home, and how the home was cleaned and maintained, and the other was about laundry. I have actually continued to do research about laundry, not only in the context of collaborating with Unilever, but also in the background of my research about energy and digital technologies. Then in that work I started to use videos as a way of encountering research participants, their homes, their everyday lives; and I developed the methods of the video tour and the video reenactments.

I still use those methods today; they have evolved and developed over different projects. That is a bit of a trajectory of how video is used in my work, and how particular methods, especially the reenactment and the tour are at the core of my work.

I have done some research about slow cities in England and Australia, from around 2005 to very recently; and some parts of that research are developed through the video tour. It involves tours of a town, following participants as they take me around their lives. It is a method I have really cultivated instead of using long-term participant observation fieldwork in anthropology, which is obviously something anthropologists who still believe that fieldwork is the core of the discipline would criticize. Personally, I do not necessarily believe it to be the core of the discipline. Maybe what I do is not strictly anthropology. We can spend days debating on those kinds of questions.

HB: That is a debate in itself. One of my concerns has been how to meld both theory and practice. It is very clear that when you deal with visual or programming tools, they are the first place of practice. If you know the tool, you will have a better start for what you want to achieve through that resource. In Visual Anthropology, visual tools can be used to register and document, but they force you to be reflexive about them. What does that mean?

SP: One of the questions I am frequently asked about the work I do in the home –especially on my article on reenactment– is: “Doesn’t what they do change?” The whole point of the reenactment method –we also have an article about reenactment, which was published in the *Journal of Visual Studies* in 2014–, is that I am not trying to observe what happens. The whole point is the much deeper, denser, more intensive collaboration with the research participant.

The idea is that while working with the participant using the camera we generate an abstraction of what they usually do. Because every time they do the same thing, they do it differently. Even if I stayed there for a whole year, and observed them every day, I would never know what they usually do, because it will always be different. They are the best experts on that. So the activity they do every day, what they know about it and their building in that kind of

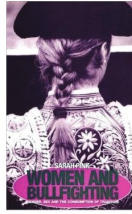
incrementally sensory –not necessarily consciously learnt– knowledge about what they usually do, is manifested in what they show me.

From all that comes together in that research encounter –some might call it muscle memory– some of it is more conscious, in terms of what they learned when they changed something or improvised something new that stands out. It is very much about working with them, actually understanding what is what they think they usually do, how they interpret it, and also what they do that they really don't realize they do, and how we bring that to the surface, and have them articulate it verbally. In consequence, there are very mundane, hidden things. A lot of things people would never talk about–not because they are not important, but because they are so obvious– are often the things that really matter the most.

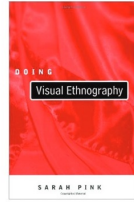
HB: I agree with you that there is beauty in recording, even though it is performance, there is this solicitation that invites to reflection. We have gone through the use of these tools in terms of documenting; now it is methodology. How do you see them from their epistemology? Does that come to mind when you are designing your research? It is not only about your reflexivity, or theirs, but it is also about modeling a world that you are not explaining through written text. There is something in the visual component of a reenactment that brings out what you cannot have through your regular academic text. There is an epistemology for this type of work, how would you declare it?

SP: What video work can bring out... is how it can communicate both in academic contexts and beyond academic contexts. This has to do with MacDougall's work. He has this idea that what we actually see when we view a video that has been recorded, apart from what is happening on the screen, is the position of the person who is filming. And what we actually see is the world as that person was seeing it as they filmed, from the position in which they were standing. Now, for me, it is not only that. When we follow someone through the world, we walk with him/her; we walk through the world while we are recording. What do we actually film? For me, recording a video is, actually, recording the trace through the world that we left with the video camera. We visually record what is in front of the camera, but we also record the process of moving through the air.

Books by Sarah Pink



Women and Bullfighting: Gender, Sex and the Consumption of Tradition, Bloomsbury Academic, 1997



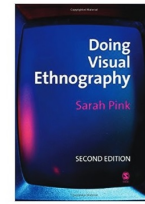
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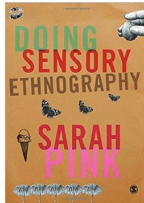
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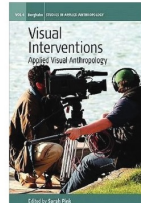
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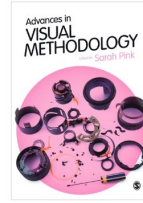
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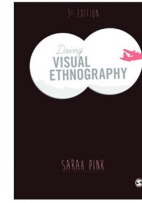
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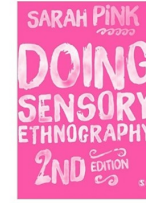
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Books by Sarah Pink

This is also ganged to Tim Ingold's work. He studies how we “walk” on the surface of the earth, how we walk through the earth. So we actually walk with the camera on the earth and we record our trace –movement– on the world. There are two ways of thinking about that. The important one for me is reviewing the video –myself. When I review the video myself, I do not just view a recording of what happened, I do not view the same thing again and again. Every time we view something, we move thought the world with it. It is actually thinking about movement as the absolute core to understand what video does. I have written about an anecdote of the English language. We usually say: “Should I play back that to you?”, but we never play anything back, we always play it forward. That relates also to Doreen Massey's work. In the book *For Space*, she wrote about the time when she went back to her parent's home, and she would say: “you never go back, you always go forward”. Neither Massey nor Ingold writes about video. However, we can apply some of their ideas to what we do when we view video. When I view the videos by myself, I move forward with them. I do not move forward in terms of time, but I move forward in my thinking, I move forward in my understanding. It is not like watching it. As we take it back to the beginning of it again, we do not go back to the beginning, we always watch it anew, always with new eyes, and we always produce new ways of knowing with it, as we move forward with it. So when you watch it again, you know with it in a different way. It is about learning with it while

knowing about it. Something your knowledge knows about becomes fixed. But if you know with something as you review it again from a new beginning, together with it, then you know with it. It is about thinking as ongoing knowledge, and not Knowledge. It involves knowing, rather than knowledge. Knowing is continuously emerging from the video recording as we move ahead. That is the way I like to think about video.

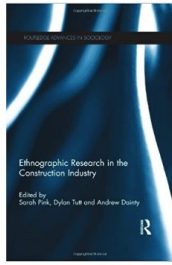
HB: It is beautiful because I find a connection with Jean Rouch and the whole idea of shared anthropology. It is live filming performance, including everything, being transparent about the whole process. I like the idea because we are dealing with inscription devices. I am thinking about Derrida: both video and text –that is what they are. Of course the means is different. I think it is really interesting to think about how you can play with time, memory, and experience.

SP: Absolutely.

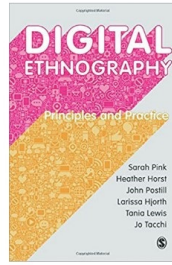
HB: This is very John Cage, no repetition is exactly the same as another one. Now that I have heard you talk about the visual aspects of your research –it does not have to translate– but how you address working with digital media, in terms of doing digital ethnography, in terms of studying hyperspace and virtual space.

SP: In my work, the core of my interest is the question “how to create anthropology?” –Which I co–create with others– that moves beyond traditional anthropology, which situates itself in the past. I am interested in doing an applied, public, and interventional design anthropology, which is future–oriented and seeks to intervene in futures and we cannot even imagine what they will be. We have a network, within the European Association of Social Anthropology, the Future Anthropologies Network (FAN), and we have a manifesto for a new type of anthropology, which is interventional, future focused, and brave. It breaks down boundaries and goes beyond traditional anthropology. The core of my interest is how we can understand our movement into the future, our movement into what happens next. How we can do ethnographies that account for those moments where we step over the edge of the present into the future. And this we do all the time.

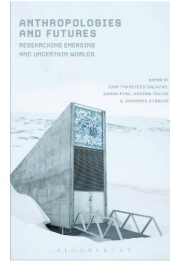
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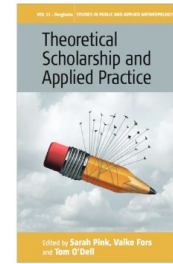
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Sarah Pink, Vaike Fors, and Tom O'Dell, *Theoretical Scholarship and Applied Practice*, Berghahn Books, 2017

Books edited or co-authored by Sarah Pink

We can also try to think about how we can carry with us into the future things which might produce change and that is why I work with designers: in order to enable them to create things that we will be able to take over into the future with us.

HB: It is easy to understand how you have to deal with the digital aspects of everyday life, whether you are studying them, or not.

SP: The digital aspect is inseparable from the everyday. I have two takes on digital ethnography. First, it is not about doing ethnography online. There are two places where I have written about that with other people. One is the book *Digital Ethnography*, which I co-wrote with Heather Horst, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis, and Jo Tacchi, from RMIT University. In the introduction we wrote about the relationship between the digital and the material world, and how we tend to separate them: the online from the offline. The adventurous part of that book is that it is very interdisciplinary because we had people coming from anthropology, media, cultural studies and material culture studies. In that book we did not want to see digital and material as separate worlds. The other place is the book *Digital Materialities*, edited with Elisanda Ardèvol and Dèbora Lanzeni. In our introduction we articulated our concept of digital materiality in a way that is very coherent with the ideas I mentioned about Tim Ingold's work, although Tim does not actually write about digital technology. The notions of technology and imagination are very interesting for us. It is thinking about how the digital and the material are part of the processual world, and we can no longer even think of them as being separate from each other.

HB: What always happens when doing visual work, or digital ethnography, is that you are related to the technological tools of the time, but also to the discourses and the context in which they were created. We cannot think of virtual reality now without thinking about what happened twenty years ago as this was implemented as

simulation for the army. All the discourses now take us to “this is the peak of the moment, this is the highest thing that can happen to our experiences”, and it is a good thing to have a critical perspective on these issues. How do you locate your idea of the ethnography in the future? If we know this future is going to change, but is also subject to many forces, and power, discourses, as Stuart Hall would say, “we live under conditions that are not of our own making”. Technology has some very strategic forces, whether it is technology for the military complex or just for business, so how do you address that?

SP: I guess for a social scientist it is quite obvious that a technology is not going to change the world. A technology is only ever present possibility. Technology only realizes itself, or becomes something, when people engage with it. And that takes me back to what we were talking about: when we step over into the edge of the present into the future, what is accompanying us? If we want to design a new technology, we need to actually think about a technology that would be appropriate and desirable for people to take into that future with them. We do not know what that future is going to be, so that technology needs to be sufficiently open for it to become part of the future with the person. We do not know what will happen in the future, but it will be the things that accompany us, as we move into our futures, that will become technologies with us. So that is my take on how to think about our technological future: what we will take into our future with us and how with them we will become what the future will be...but by then we will be in that future and we will be imagining another one.

HB: That is a great thought because it steers away from technological determinism, which is not your case, but still, the future lies in us.

SP: There is so much technological determinism. Last year, some of the things that preoccupied me and some of my colleagues were big data analysis, predictive analysis, data driven policy, data driven design... As a result, one of the projects that we started last year at RMIT at the Digital Ethnography Centre was a Data Ethnographies Lab. We did our first workshop as a kind of exploratory workshop, to actually see how we can articulate the relationship between digital data and big data, and ethnography. With the workshop we got to write a position paper and we thought about publishing it in the *Journal of Big Data and Society*, but they will publish it in two years and it will be too late. We decided to launch it as soon as we could. We launched the position paper and short edited videos from the workshop using our data ethnography website (<http://digital-ethnography.com/>). Now we are focused on data and ethics, data and play... Recently we had a broken data workshop, which actually took broken world theories. We looked at how we can apply theories of

damage, brokenness and repair to digital data. And how those theories enable us to critique big data, predictive analytics, and the kind of assumptions they can make about what people really do in the world already, and what people might do in the world in the future.

HB: It is very problematic.

SP: For an anthropologist, it is terrifying, isn't it?

HB: I see a revival of the late 19th century medical anthropology, in terms of predicting delinquency. It is the same discourse, which is why you amass a bunch of data. There is a recent paper published by two Chinese researchers –who actually had a very high success rate– that used a control group, a very large group of people, who had never committed a crime, and another group that had committed crimes. Then they processed the data from their faces with facial recognition software, and they managed to prove that the system found the criminals through their faces. I am really concerned about this problem. And then you move onto artificial intelligence, machine learning, and the question is not if it will happen, but how we will be replaced. But then the question is “what are we actually replacing?”

SP: Exactly. How artificial intelligence can become part of our worlds, how we want to move forward into our future with artificial intelligence, and what will work with different people, and different groups of people. You now, it seems that artificial intelligence is inevitable because it is already becoming embedded in aspects of our everyday life. In some ways it is very appealing regarding some of the things it can do for and with us. But it also brings to me one of the concepts that have been quite central to my work in the last year: the question of what feels right for us, and what we feel comfortable with. I started to use that concept when I did the energy research because the core of the research with people and their use of digital technology and energy in the home was this concept of feeling right: What do you need to do to make your home feel right? One of the projects I am doing at a college in Sweden is looking at self-tracking and data. We are actually surrounded by data: our sleep patterns, our commuting cycles... We are very much surrounded by data, and also in ways that we do not even comprehend. There is this whole kind of data presence –and I think we learned this from the energy work about digital media presence: that it is always there, it is not on, it is not off, so we wrote about the standby mode (the concept of standby mode: it is there, you can touch it and get it perhaps when you need it, or maybe you cannot. Maybe it is there and you do not know where...). I started thinking of data as something present—as is the weather – and as part of our everyday environment. How do we make ourselves more comfortable in those worlds? The interesting question that starts to come on board for artificial intelligence is: how do we

live in a world with artificial intelligence in a way that we feel comfortable?

HB: I was going to ask you, since you are dealing with all those technological possibilities, or you are dealing with the future of technology. What is the priority? I mean it in terms of what you cannot let go of when you are studying them. Technologies will change, discourses will change, it seems that what you state, what feels right, becomes a new standing ground.

SP: How do we make ourselves comfortable in the world, how do we deal with anxieties? I have become really interested in predictive and anticipated technologies in the writing I have done about futures. We have a book coming up in the next few months called *Theoretical Scholarship and Applied Practice*, edited with my colleagues Vaike Fors and Tom O'Dell, who work in Sweden. One of the chapters I contributed to that book with is about ethics for a future-oriented anthropology. Ethical approval in committees and processes involve an anticipatory logic, which tries to prevent certain things deemed undesirable from happening in the future. Basically, there are certain societal and cultural ways that exist in order to try to stop things happening in the futures, which do not work –obviously–, we know that. Because the future is always uncertain when you try to predict it.

HB: I was wondering, and maybe this is a bit of a detour...to you it is very clear how you go from theory to practice, to applied knowledge, even to anticipating the world. What challenges have you faced when working in interdisciplinary projects? What challenges have you found when working through the visual, the digital worlds, and thinking about the future?

SP: I think it is about how to be very open. I have not found it difficult, but I found it important to be able to go beyond; it demands trying to cede to other people's expertise and ideas. For example, in our Data Ethnographies Lab, I have been collaborating with an amazing designer, Yoko Akama. What we have tried to do there when we have talked about design, plus ethnography, plus futures, is to create a way of working which is not ethnography, and which is not design. In fact, we must both cede in our disciplinary commitments and preferences to be able to create something that is post-disciplinary –that is a problematic concept, as well. As part of our design research process we had a symposium focusing on uncertainty at the end of 2014. We really tried to investigate processes and uncertainty, where uncertainty is central to everybody. There is also a question about what design documentation is, and what video documentary is, how we can actually blend those practices to create something that goes beyond the disciplines.

I think it is an incredibly interesting challenge in terms of how we get to work together with disciplines in ways we have to let go of what

we think our discipline is. We cannot defend our disciplines, we have to open them up to make them be damaged or broken a little bit by other disciplines, let those other disciplines leak into them, in some way, mutually. Then we can create something that is really different, and really interesting, and it enables us to think differently. It implies being able to stop defending our disciplines. I think as anthropologists we are very good at defending our discipline.

HB: To wrap up the conversation, one word that I think also plays into what you are doing is experience. This interests me because we are talking about experience as performed, experience as part of a document –whether it is written, recorded, performance–, and data, for sure, captures our experience. So, if we are talking about technological futures and possibilities, how do you think technology is affecting our experience, with all these continuous changes? What is the role of experience in your body of work and research?

SP: I guess experience is tied up with knowing, engaging with our environment in a processual way. Experience is incremental, it is ongoing. I would not want to say that technology has changed our experience with the environment, because I was talking about digital technology as part of the presence of an ongoing emerging environment that we are part of. I really like Tim Ingold's work on the perception of the environment, the way we constantly engage with affordances of the environment, that we are also part of the world creating us as we move through it. Again, I would situate experience in movement, as being part of this complex process that occurs as we move through the world.

HB: What are your next steps? What will be the discussion you will be engaging with in the next ten years? What is this immutable thing, if there is such thing, you know is going to happen, disregarding whatever changes happen in the media and technology environment?

SP: All my work is so collaborative, and I work with such great people that it is fun. I guess I want to try to bring together this work: I am engaging beyond technology and design, and much more towards creative practice.

Notes

- * Sarah Pink is a british researcher based in Australia. Her research combines theo-retical and methodological scholarship with applied practice. She works across themes including digital media, energy, consumption, everyday life, sustainability, activism, tacit and sensory ways of knowing, safety and health and the construc-tion industry. She researches across urban, domestic and workplace environments. Her work is often developed through interdisciplinary collaborations across design, engineering and arts disciplines.

Additional information

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