

# Art at the Heart of Anthropology

## On the expression of anthropological insights<sup>1</sup>

Paola Tinè

[paola.tine@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:paola.tine@adelaide.edu.au)

### Abstract

In recent years, following the example of anthropological and sociological studies, the use of visual methods for the observation and production of insights has become increasingly important in many other disciplines of social research, such as social work, social policy, health sector and education. But why can visual methods of representation be so useful in social research? This article provides an overview of the historical evolution of the visual anthropological discipline, and of the debate about the relationship between art practice and ethnographic research. It focuses on the role of art as a means of communication and, in particular, as a way of expressing inner feelings, emotions, and all those inexplicable states of mind known in philosophy as 'qualia'. The theory developed by Ricoeur on the application of text-interpretation methodology as a general paradigm for interpretation in the field of social sciences, is used here to offer a proposal for the implementation of fine art, specifically painting, as a complementary method to express anthropological insights. (166 words)

### Key-words

Communication; Fine Art; Painting; Social research; Visual Anthropology.

### The author

Paola Tinè is a PhD student in Social Anthropology at the University of Adelaide (South Australia). After her studies in the Arts & Humanities (BA Human Sciences with a major in Cultural Anthropology, University of Siena), she specialised in Visual Anthropology (MA, University of Siena). During her studies, she has focused on the Ukrainian conflict and on the memory-building process in post-soviet states. Her recent work included a fieldwork among the Nepali-speaking Bhutanese community of Adelaide. Her current research is focused on social change in modern Nepal.

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## 1. Introduction

General consensus has been reached in the last thirty years on the importance of the use of visual media in anthropological research, with the American Anthropological Association stating in 2001 that “visual media are appropriate for the production and dissemination of anthropological knowledge because they can ‘convey distinct forms of knowledge that writing cannot’ and they provide a means to experience and understand ‘ethnographic complexity richness and depth’” (COX, WRIGHT, 2012:2). However, while there is general agreement on the use of visual research methods in the field, the use of art for the expression of insights is more problematic.

The original positivistic approach that marked the beginning of anthropology has been abandoned over the last century, giving space to a more interpretative approach. The current preoccupation of many anthropologists is to find a way to express those inexplicable feelings that form the experience of being in the world. It has become a modern tendency to use visual arts as a method of accessing these themes, often alongside traditional academic researches. However, while contemporary ethnographers commonly make use of visual methods for data storage, such as photography, filming, artistic diaries and portraiture of interviewees, there is still not a general agreement on how to produce visual artistic insights as an outcome of the research. Without renouncing to these methods, I believe that a form of art should be incorporated in the analytical phase of the research rather than in the data acquisition one. This does not apply to the photographic tool, because pictures are taken in the field and their power of capturing insights, which is mediated by the perception of the researcher, remains linked to the time and place of their creation. Instead, documentary production provides a good example of what I mean with visual methods as the result of a process of analysis of material. The documentary does not constitute a simple collection of videos, but rather a production purposely formed by the author in order to convey certain insights. While the debate on the production of documentaries as a valid part of sociological research has been extensive in recent years, a critical discussion on the development of other artistic expressions, such as painting, sculpture and installations as forms of anthropological knowledge is still to be fully developed.

In this article, after having distinguished between art practice during and after the fieldwork, I suggest the importance of post-fieldwork art production for anthropological analysis and expression of insights. Specifically, I wish to support the role of painting beside other visual practices. The two interrelated questions pervading my discussion will be: what can art express better than common speech and, consequently, what can social research gain from the use of art? I will attempt to describe the role of art in anthropological research as a work of interpretation, representation and expression mediated through a form. I hope in this way to encourage a discussion on this topic and to invite to experimentation along these lines.

## 2. The history and debate on visual approach in social research

The definition of Visual Anthropology I refer to in this article is the study of social and cultural contexts through the use of visual methods of data collection during the research (photography, video, portraiture) and/or through visual representation of insights at the end of the research. Visual anthropology supports the importance of integrating classical qualitative research methods, such as participant observation, informal conversations, interviews and questionnaires, with visual ones. This is different from the other use of Visual Anthropology that studies visual contents of a society, such as its artefacts (1).

The use of visual methods dates back to the beginning of anthropology, with images at that time considered as proof of scientific verification and impartiality. In 1898, for the expedition to Torres Straits, which marked the beginning of modern anthropology, Alfred Haddon used film to record events and rituals. The

original myth of photographic truth was eventually abandoned in favour of an increasing awareness on the subjectivity and manipulated nature of generated images. From the 1930s, photographs started being recognized as “constructed by the maker and the viewer, both of whom carry their social positions and interests to the photographic art” (HARPER, 1998:32). As a consequence of this epistemological transition, the use of photography decreased notably, only to re-emerge with a new premise in the 1960s (2). An important use of photography was made in 1942 by the anthropologists Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson for their study *Balinese Character* to document aspects of material culture. Their approach was based on the assumption that words would not be sufficient to “reveal and communicate Balinese culture” (PROSSER, LOXLEY, 2008). Contemporary anthropologists still follow the heritage of Mead and Bateson, integrating fieldwork pictures as data within their texts, but “what remains unresolved is whether the visual can attain a more productive role in anthropology as a medium of enquiry and discourse (MACDOUGALL, 1997: 292).

The debate on visual anthropology has been historically linked with the debate on the scientific value of the anthropological discipline (CARRITHERS, 1990; SPENCER, 1989). This idea of anthropology as science has been abandoned in the last fifty years, as result of a debate affirming the ‘partiality of the vision’ and the impossibility for the researcher to engage with a completely objective way of seeing that is not mediated by their personal experience and cultural formation. As a consequence, the subjectivity of the researcher has now been accepted and even glorified, culminating in a proposal for more narrative written researches that exalt the personality of the author (GEERTZ, 1988; SPENCER, 1989).

The discussion on the essence and validity of anthropological theories has led to a “problematization of the different possible ways of communicating ethnographic findings and insights” (RUTTEN et al., 2013: 465). Along these lines, some scholars have developed a critique on ‘writing culture’ (CLIFFORD, MARCUS, 1986; MARCUS, FISHER, 1999), with the aim of supporting the emergence of new artistic experimentations within anthropological research. Similarly, Tim Ingold has criticised the classical academic way of ‘knowing’ and the idea that a ‘truth’ can be found on “the library shelf, groaning under the weight of scholarly books and periodicals, rather than ‘out there’ in the world of lived experience” (INGOLD, 2011: 15). In the same way, the strength of a visual representation alongside traditional scholarly textual analysis is its ability to convey feelings more than just notions. According to MacDougall (1997: 292), we should start “rethinking certain categories of anthropological knowledge in the light of understandings that may be accessible only by non-verbal means”.

On the topic of what would be better represented through visual representation, other scholars have given various suggestions and practical examples of work, some focusing on the study of religion and spirituality (MORGAN, 2005; DUNLOP, DADROWSKA, 2015; WILLIAMS, 2015), on political fight (PINNEY, 2004) and so on. According to Paul Sweetman (2009: 491), “visual methods of research may be particularly helpful in investigating areas that are difficult otherwise to verbalise or articulate” (p. 491). Sweetman suggests that this would include Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, that way of being in the world that is “beyond the grasp of consciousness, and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit” (BOURDIEU, 1977: 94).

A large debate has been oriented toward the conception of visual anthropology as a practice engaging the senses, (PINK, 2009; COX et al., 2016). In 1982 a whole anthropological school known as the Sensory Ethnographic Lab was born in the USA from this concept.

Even if general consensus has been reached among the scholars on the use of art and visual methods in social research, a definition on some of the important elements is still missing in the debate, such as the way in which these visual methods should be used in order to be scholarly valid and what these insights should represent. It is interesting in this sense to mention some of the critiques that have emerged in the debate on the use of visual methods in social research. The first scholar to point out the scientific danger of the blurring

boundaries between art and ethnography was Hal Foster (1995:306) who noticed that in the artistic works defined as ethnographic “few of the principles of ethnographic participant-observer are observed, let alone critiqued. And despite the best intentions of the artist, only limited engagement of the sited other is effected”. Moreover, Fadwa El Guindi (2011:678) has criticised the 2007 book edited by Sarah Pink entitled *Visual interventions: applied visual anthropology* because it does not “consistently show awareness or knowledge of ‘the potential of visual anthropology theoretically, methodologically and ethnographically’”. Moreover, as she writes, “pictures used as page-fillers, without research purpose, diminish the value of visual anthropology” (EL GUINDI, 2011:679). The fear behind this critique is that visual methods are becoming a tendency that adds nothing to the research. The same can be said of those uses of art in the field, such as diaries and portraits of interviews that are introduced as part of the research outcomes even though they have not formed a part of the analysis process. Similarly, I believe that the recent practice of collaboration between anthropologists and artists for the creation of ethnographic art pieces cannot fulfil the goal of expressing the insights felt directly by the researcher in the field.

On this debate about the validity of art used for research purpose, my suggestion is that any work of art that has the ambition of been considered as a part of an anthropological and academically valid research should at least have an anthropological research as background. The “world of lived experience” (INGOLD, 2011:15) could be, as I suggest, part of the anthropological findings, without renouncing to the classical fieldwork research, analysis and writing.

### 3. Visual methods in and out of the field

The first observation I want to make here about visual anthropological practices is related to the context in which their production occurs. We need to distinguish between visual productions made during and after the fieldwork research.

Visual methods in the field include the use of drawing in diaries (HENDRICKSON, 2008; TAUSSIG, 2011), portraiture of interviewees (BRAY, 2015), photo elicitation (COLLIER, COLLIER, 1986), and also the delegation of the camera to the informants, in order to achieve a representation of the informant’s point of view (BAI, 2007; GINZBURG, 1995). Furthermore, most anthropologists make general use of a camera to take pictures and video and to collect data for later analysis.

However, as every anthropologist knows, a crucial moment of the research occurs after the fieldwork, when it is the time to produce insights from the acquired data. This is a very important phase of the anthropological research and equally as fundamental as the fieldwork itself. As some scholars have observed, if acquiring visual data is relatively easy, the problems start when the data has to be organised in order to become communicative (MAC DOUGALL, 1997; BANKS, 2008).

The use of visual methods in the post-fieldwork generally consists of documentary video productions, photo reports, installations or fine art productions. In all of these practices, the use of creativity by the authors is needed along with their sensibilities and insights. In other words, it is required here that the author adds something, namely an interpretation, and produces a representation of the related insights.

The difference between the production during and after the fieldwork can be found in the space and time of their making, thus determining a temporal and physical separation from the studied object and context. The production of visual material after the research constitutes the representation of emotions and feelings of the researcher and of the people observed. I do not want to argue here the supremacy of the visual production after-fieldwork, but I do wish to stress its potential to enrich the other visual methods used in the field, which have become more and more popular in the last years among social researchers.

With the exception of the portraiture of the interviewees, I notice a relative absence of the use of painting as a visual practice in the context of the post-fieldwork anthropological production. I wish to underline here the importance of art and especially painting as a research method, due to its communicative function. To explain what these art pieces can add to the classical written text, I will develop the concept of art as communication, with the ultimate goal of achieving a better comprehension on the value of artistic expression in social research.

#### 4. Art as expression of findings

In the long-lasting and irresolvable debate about art and its definition, an agreement has at least been reached among artists, scholars and art theorists, concerning the function of art as a means of communication. Through its communicative power, art has historically been able to function as entertainment or aesthetic enjoyment, as conveyer of emotions, as an avant-garde for political change or deconstruction of socio-cultural schemes and impositions, and as a medium for the expression of a certain concept (3).

The general agreement on the communicative role of art is based on the assumption that art is able to go beyond verbal expression, describing the innermost feelings of the artists themselves and other abstract concepts. This was the philosophical perspective on art that Immanuel Kant (1790) showed in his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, according to which art would correspond to the ‘aesthetic idea’:

“In a word, an aesthetic idea is a presentation of the imagination, which is conjoined with a given concept and is connected, when we use imagination in its freedom, with such a multiplicity of partial presentations that no expression that stands for a determinate concept can be found for it.” (KANT, 1790: 185).

I suggest here that art intended as a form of communication involves representation and interpretation expressed through a form. Let me explain further what I mean by this. Respectively, the operation of representation takes place after the collection of direct data as a result of observation during the research; this data must then be interpreted in order to pass to the production, which is the moment of expression of the author’s deeper feelings, thoughts and ideas. The balance between observation, interpretation and expression will take the form of an art piece, which could be abstract or figurative, more or less realistic. Any case study could be approached through visual methods in order to show all of those states of the mind that have been defined in philosophy as ‘qualia’ (4).

Any artistic anthropological work should constitute a visual insight into what the author has understood and felt, bringing the observer in this way to participate in the experience of the social actors. Furthermore, as Sweetman suggests, through artistic representation insights can be enlightening for the interviewees themselves:

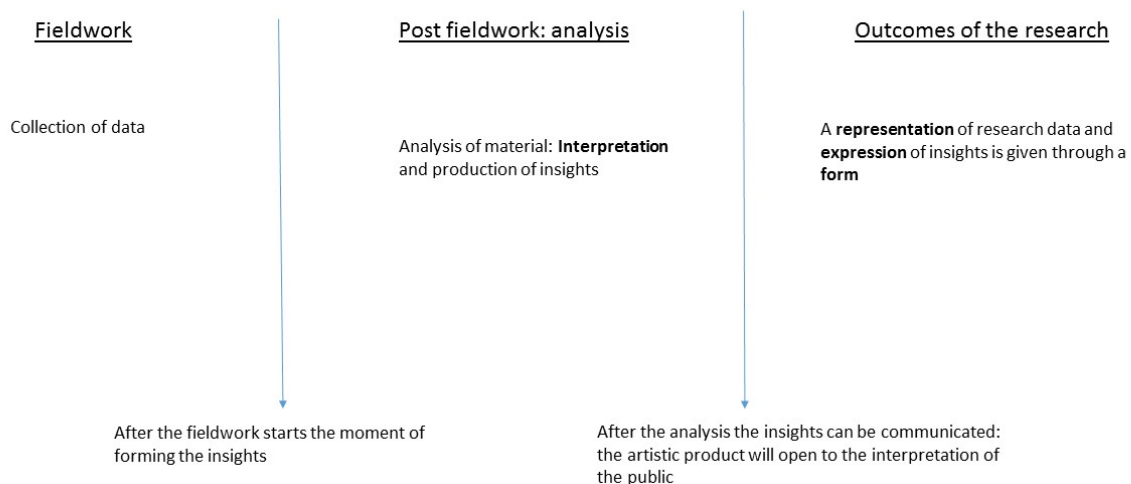
“Visual methods can play a part in revealing to *the informants* otherwise unrecognised aspects of their everyday lives and in so doing effect the sort of potentially revelatory self-transformation that Bourdieu suggests can be achieved through ‘socioanalysis’” (SWEETMAN, 2009: 493).

An important element related to art production is that like any text, it is open to interpretation. As observed by Ricoeur (1973), being “virtual and outside of time”, texts do not allow a direct communication between the sender and the recipient. As a consequence of this, they are open to the public interpretation. Ricoeur extends this definition of inter-textual interpretation to the broad field of social research, constituted by written texts. I suggest here that this concept can be further extended to any art that is intended as a research methodology in the anthropological discipline. Therefore this art should be recognised as a product open to interpretation and not as a product conveying immutable truths. Heinrich Bluecher (1951) offers a more

articulated definition of art as a means of communication, defining it instead as ‘engagement in participation’:

“To say that art is communication when it has the ability to bring the beholder into a procedure of participation means to underestimate and to misunderstand art because participation is a much higher possibility than communication and one which is surpassed only by the possibility of human beings in the creative human performance of love: the possibility of identification” (5).

In the same way in which Bluecher proposes a different approach to art, seen as participation rather than communication, in an article on painting as a research method, Graeme Sullivan (2012) talks of art as a form of understanding rather than explanation. The reason for this, according to Sullivan, is the potential power art has in “revealing new insights and understandings” (SULLIVAN, 2012: 3). Moreover, “if the intent of research is seen to be the creation of new knowledge (...) then art practice achieves this goal in a distinctive way” (SULLIVAN, 2012: 4). In fact, it is the understanding more than the explanation that is of central interest in this research activity. These terminological debates do not aim to reduce the communicative power of art, but rather to exalt it. The possibility of involving the recipient in the world of feelings of the author and of the people observed is the power of art as a method of research.



**Figure 1.** Art as communication of the research outcomes. **Source:** The Author.

## 5. A brief note on poetry

I wish to add here that the theoretical framework of my discussion does not assume the supremacy of image over word. In fact, words can also be used artistically, such as in poetry, to go beyond the more rational thoughts and try to express feelings and more abstracted concepts. As stated by Dale Jaquette:

“We can think poetry as an activity or product of an activity involving the use of words and sentences that is equally both language and art. Poetry is undoubtedly expressive, but importantly for present purposes, the more artistic or art-like the use of language is in poetry, the more typically opaque its meaning and elusive its exact interpretation.” (JAQUETTE, 2014:74).

Similarly to Jaquette, according to Bluecher (1951) “the trick of poetry is to take words out of their original communicative purpose in order to enable them to draw us into the participation of a certain experience.”

## 6. Concluding remarks

I have provided here a brief overview on the historical evolution of the visual anthropological discipline, and on the debate about the relationship between art practice and ethnographic research. I have focused on the role of art as a means of communication and especially as a way of expressing inner feelings, ideas and emotions, showing in this way why visual representation can be a useful tool in social research. As I have proposed, in fact, the use of art in anthropological outcomes can be a really important tool to represent the feelings of the researcher and the people observed, as well as mediating between their perspectives. To be academically and anthropologically valid, however, I have argued that the work of art has to be the result of a research on the field conducted with classical qualitative methods. Finally, I have argued that the visual production should add something to the final outcomes of the research and that visual productions taken directly from the fieldwork merely constitute interesting data, not anthropological outcomes. Simply including photography or realistic drawings in a publication is the equivalent of including a transcript of an unedited interview. While it may be interesting in certain contexts, it is the anthropological analysis of the data that produces theories and is the real heart of anthropology.

### NOTES

(1) These two approaches have generally been associated. A third use of visual methods has been defined in the last twenty years as a form of “collaborative representation” involving the collaboration of the researcher with social actors for the production of visual representation (BANKS, 1995).

(2) These ‘para-anthropologists’ used photography to classify racial types with the goal of providing scientific material for the study of humankind.

(3) This is the case of conceptual art, which represents the extreme outcome of the aim that began with impressionism to disrupt the formal aesthetic code in order to free the feelings. This was not, however, an argument that art before avant-gardism was empty of meaning. In recent years, conceptual art is recuperating painting, which had been discarded in favour of installations and is also reaccepting other classical techniques.

(4) In philosophy and cognitive psychology, the term ‘qualia’ refers to that experience of the world that is private and inexplicable.

(5) Heinrich Bluecher, *Fundamentals of A Philosophy Of Art - On The Understanding Of Artistic Experience* (1951), see: <http://www.bard.edu/bluecher/>

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