

Observing representational practices in art and anthropology - a transdisciplinary approach

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Abstract

It has been suggested that anthropology operates in “liminal spaces” which can be defined as “spaces between disciplines”. This study will explore the space where the fields of art and anthropology meet in order to discover the epistemological and representational challenges that arise from this encounter. The common ground on which art and anthropology engage can be defined in terms of their observational and knowledge producing practices. Both art and anthropology rely on observational skills and varying forms of visual literacy to collect and represent data. Anthropologists represent their data mostly in written form by means of ethnographic accounts, and artists represent their findings by means of imaginative artistic mediums such as painting, sculpture, filmmaking and music.

Departing from a paradigm that acknowledges the importance of transdisciplinary enquiry, the paper proposes a position suggesting that by combining observational and knowledge producing practices, both anthropology and art can overcome the limits that are inherent in their representational practices. The paper will explore how insights from complexity theory offer the necessary conceptual tools with which anthropology and art can work together in offering solutions to problems of presentation that emerge when dealing with complex issues.

Keywords: Transdisciplinarity, complexity, art, anthropology, knowledge producing practices

Disciplines: Philosophy, Art Studies, Anthropology

Introduction

More recently, in contemporary cultural life, art has come to occupy a space long associated with anthropology, becoming one of the main sites for tracking, representing, and performing the effects of difference in contemporary life. From this perspective, the two arenas are in a more complex and overlapping relationship to one another than ever before. (Marcus and Myers 1995: 1)

Based on the common grounds shared by art and anthropology, the paper will explore how knowledge producing methods and representational practices of both fields can influence each other and be woven together in order to represent the contingencies of a complex world more

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authentically. By examining the relationship between art and anthropology, the paper will aim to show that both anthropologists and artists need to be more aware of the possibilities there are to learn from each other in order to have a more effective impact when trying to make sense of the complex fields in which both operate.

Both art and anthropology rely on observational skills and varying forms of visual literacy to collect and represent data. Anthropologists represent their data mostly in written form by means of ethnographic accounts, and artists represent their findings by means of imaginative artistic mediums such as painting, sculpture, filmmaking and music. Following the so-called 'ethnographic turn', contemporary artists have adopted an 'anthropological' gaze, including methodologies, such as fieldwork, in their appropriation of other cultures. Anthropologists, on the other hand, in the wake of the 'writing culture' critique of the 1980s, are starting to explore new forms of visual research and representational practices that go beyond written texts.

The paper will take the form of a transdisciplinary theoretical exploration. The notion "transdisciplinarity" is situated within the larger paradigm of complexity theory as proposed by Edgar Morin^{1,2} and Paul Cilliers.³ Following the "logic of complexity" (Morin 2008: 20) the term "transdisciplinary" refers to a methodology which gives us a "conceptual tool to think together" (ibid.: 115) those fields of study that seem to be situated in opposing positions within the broader scientific context. The following areas are central and distinguish transdisciplinary inquiry from inter-disciplinary and disciplinary approaches. According to Montuori (2005: 154), transdisciplinarity can be summarised as being a methodology that is:

- * *"Inquiry-driven rather than exclusively discipline-driven*
- * *Meta-paradigmatic rather than exclusively intra-paradigmatic*
- * *Informed by a kind of thinking that is creative, contextualising, and connective (Morin's 'complex thought')*
- * *(and views) inquiry as a creative process that combines rigor and imagination".*

Taking its point of departure from the understanding that there are different ways of gathering knowledge about the world, the paper will suggest that by combining different strategies and methods of collecting and interpreting knowledge, disciplines could be enriched by these differences in ways that could change and enrich the knowledge claims that they make. Such a process would involve "the recognition of a *plurality of epistemologies* or positions, each expressing knowledge in different times and space, each in different ways" (Montuori 1998: 22). The dialogue between art and anthropology could inform a kind of anthropology that is not hesitant to use visual strategies in the production of ethnographic records. Text-based ethnographic models would benefit from "a critical engagement with a range of material and sensual practices in the contemporary arts" (Schneider and Wright 2006: 4). The paper will examine how representational practices are situated within the various fields of study of respectively anthropology and art. Thereafter the paper will attempt to illustrate how the two fields of study

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1. See Morin, E. 1992. *Method: A Study of Humankind, Vol.1*. Translated by Roland Bélanger. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
 2. See Morin, E. 2008. *On Complexity*. Cresskill: Hampton Press.
 3. See Cilliers, P. 1998. *Complexity and Postmodernism*. London & New York: Routledge.

can combine their representational practices (based on the understanding that both art and anthropology operate in domains rich in complexity) in order to create a transdisciplinary space in which the commonalities and differences can be forged to operate interactively. It is argued that the ways in which anthropologists and artists produce knowledge about the world and how they represent the world, should be explored “for their productive possibilities in developing new strategies of representation” (Schneider and Wright 2006: 25).

The paper therefore promotes an approach that is not wholly of art or anthropology but instead operates around the edges and borders. This study can thus be read as an endeavour to “destabilise from the margins by evoking and re-imagining social, cultural and aesthetic practices not through systematic, social-scientific fieldwork and research but through the capacity of art”, anthropology and our common corporeality to “reveal things in social life that would otherwise remain unseen”. (Irving 2006: www.anthropologymatters.com).

Art's place in anthropology

Anthropologists should not stop writing. But perhaps some problems we face when we write linear texts with words as our only tool can be resolved by thinking of anthropology and its representations as not solely verbal, but also visual and not simply linear but multilinear. (Sarah Pink, 2004)

The anthropological study of art is in the process of moving from a place where it has been viewed as a “minority interest”, towards a more “central role in the discipline” (Morphy and Perkins 2006: 1). In explaining why art was situated at the margins of anthropological studies, Morphy and Perkins (2006: 1) suggest that “disengagement from art as a subject of study reflected attitudes of anthropologists to material culture”. Difficulties in defining art also contributed to this dilemma. Traditionally art was seen as something that could be defined in terms of Western standards of aesthetic values. Caught up in the process of classifying humanity into civilised European societies and exotic Others, mid-nineteenth century anthropology included art “with other material cultural objects in the evolutionary schema developed by anthropologists such as Pitt Rivers (1906), Tylor (1871, 1878) and Frazer (1925)” (Morphy and Perkins 2006: 3). From Rivers, Tylor and Frazer’s understanding of art, “art objects” were defined in terms of their similarity or difference *vis à vis* art forms as found in “contemporary Western art practice” (Morphy and Perkins 2006: 3). This view of art objects has changed over the years and from the 1970s on “(a)rt, broadly defined, provided a major source of information” and offered “insights into systems of representation, the aesthetics of the body, value creating processes, social memory, the demarcation of space and so on” (Morphy and Perkins 2006: 10).

The tendency of art to “move towards the centre” of the discipline can be ascribed to the fact that art has become “associated almost equally with the two senses of the word ‘culture’” (Morphy and Perkins 2006:1). The two understandings of culture are explained as “culture as a way of life or body of ideas and knowledge, and culture as the metaphysical essence of society, incorporating standards by which the finest products of society are judged” (Morphy and Perkins 2006:1). Similarly, changes in the Western art world also resulted in a more serious engagement with anthropology. The artefacts that they saw in museums inspired modernist artists’ work in

the early 1900s. The encounter between modernist artists like Pablo Picasso and African sculpture in Parisian museums and collectors' houses "frequently figures as the prototypical encounter between art and anthropology" (Schneider and Wright 2006: 29). The encounter with the primitive was instrumental in bringing about changes in "our understanding of what art is and what it does; how it appeals to us, how it affects us, and what we expect from it (Schneider and Wright 2006: 33). Morphy and Perkins (2006: 11) agree with Schneider and Wright when they argue that the "rise of anthropology and the development of modernism in art were related, even though anthropologists neglected to study art either in their own society or in the non-European societies that were the primary focus of their research".

Observing art's representational practices

Starting to write about art's place and role in society and more specifically its relation to anthropology is as hard as it is to talk about art. Harrington (2004: 1) addresses the huge task that one sets up for oneself in venturing into this territory. Questions such as the following need to be addressed in order to offer a comprehensive study of the role of art in society: "What is art? Can art be defined? How do we know whether something is art or not? Does art consist in universally recognisable qualities, or is art simply what different cultural institutions declare about art? Can art bring about a better society?" (Harrington 2004: 1).

Morphy and Perkins (2006:11) suggest that in order to start the venture on examining what an anthropology of art could look like, two important issues are central to consider: "the definition of art and what characterises an anthropological approach to art. The two are related – an anthropological definition of art is going to be influenced by the nature of anthropology itself". By tackling the first issue, the study will subscribe to the following working definition of art offered by Degenaar (1993: 53):

The term art refers both to the imaginative skill applied to design and to the object in which skill is exercised. Art designates a range of aesthetic objects which have been given a special status according to certain criteria within a particular convention. An aesthetic object refers to material structured in such a way that it moved a human being by involving especially the imagination.

The definition is not intended to be exclusive; rather, it indicates the kind of objects that anthropologists are usually referring to when they focus on "art objects". Components of the definition are likely to be found in most anthropologists' writing about art.

The second issue concerning what characterises an anthropological approach to art, will subscribe to the explanation of Harrington (2004: 1), who suggests that "art must be interrogated in the context of the much wider social domain known as 'culture'" (2004: 2). By situating art within culture, the focus of study shifts from analysing art's form and contents or even notions of how to judge whether something is art or not, to "the lived experience of the individuals whose engagements with art are in question" (Harrington 2004: 3). By placing art in its ethnographic context, the anthropological study of art is one that approaches art "in the context of its producing society" (Morphy and Perkins 2006: 15).

By mentioning art in the same sentence as anthropology, or putting it in a title such as that of this paper, supports the idea that art and anthropology form "equal partners in a joint-venture of

cognition of the world” (Harrington 2004: 3). Such a statement in turn suggests that art “represents a source of existential social knowledge that is of its own worth and is not inferior to the knowledge of social science” (Harrington 2004:3). As part of a cultural system, art therefore can convey knowledge about certain things in life in a better way than for instance scientific methods of producing knowledge. This does not mean that art is better in producing knowledge, but that its knowledge claims are different and should be taken seriously as equally legitimate and as not being inferior to so-called scientifically generated methods.

Seeing as knowing

An anthropology of art should not just deal with art as an object for observation or as material object, but it should rather be able to tell us more about the *kind of knowledge* art produces when people engage with art. The politics of knowing and seeing are important aspects of observation. An anthropology of art should show “how aesthetic frames of perception enter into textual aspects of metaphor, analogy and vignette, into sensuous media of data analysis such as visual images and life-story narratives; and into conceptions of theatrical qualities in social action” (Harrington 2004: 6).

Knowing thus becomes conditional upon *seeing* (perception), which is conditional upon how an object is *represented*. What we know and how we interpret it, is influenced by how we see or perceive and *vice versa*, our observational practices are influenced by what we know. The connection between art and anthropology (whose main form of enquiry is the production of an ethnography by means of participant observation) is then established by the notion of seeing / perceiving / observing. The connection is furthermore strengthened by the shared notion of “representation”. Schneider and Wright (2006: 26) support these arguments by claiming that “(a)rtists and anthropologists are practitioners who appropriate form, and represent others. Although their representational practices have been different, both books and artworks are creative additions to the world; both are complex translations of other realities”. At this point one could mention that one of the aspirations of especially visual art is to solve the puzzle of how to represent the world. Kieran (2005: 99) suggests that “(l)ooking at art tests us, stretches us, deepens our inner lives and cultivates insight into both ourselves and the world”. The capacity that visual art has to convey knowledge about the world and how we make sense of the world, is explored in the novel by Paul Auster called *Moon Palace* (1989). One of the characters in the novel is a painter and whilst contemplating how he fits into the world, he stumbles onto the following insight concerning the role of art (Auster 1989: 170):

The true purpose of art was not to create beautiful objects, he discovered. It was a method of understanding, a way of penetrating the world and finding one’s place in it, and whatever aesthetic qualities an individual canvas might have were almost an accidental by-product of the effort to engage oneself in this struggle, to enter into the thick of things.

Auster’s description of the purpose of art as explored by the character in his novel is a very good description of how the act of engaging with art can produce knowledge about the world and how to understand ourselves. As Kieran (2005: 100) explains, “art works can cultivate insight, understanding and ways of seeing the world”. The ways in which the artist expresses his or her imagination by means of the how the “physical materials, conventions, genres, styles and forms which vivify” are applied in the art work thus “guide and prescribe our responses” (Kieran 2005: 102) to understanding the world. Hence, the specific knowledge we gain by engaging with works

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of art contributes not only to an expansion of the “horizons of our minds” (Kieran 2005: 102), but works of art also “challenge our pre-existing beliefs, attitudes and values” (Kieran 2005: 108) that we have of the world. Coinciding with Kieran’s notion that art can influence a person’s understanding of reality is Gadamer’s claim that “art and aesthetic experience are forms of knowledge” (Warnke 1987: 59). Such a cognitive understanding of art’s function suggests that the experience of looking at the work of art “can be one in which we recognise the truth of the representation, discard our previous understanding of the subject-matter and incorporate our new understanding into our lives” (Warnke 1987: 60).

At this stage it is important to qualify that “knowing by seeing” is not an argument for what is in philosophy known as the “metaphysics of presence”. This is a term used in post-structural theories of meaning and especially by Jacques Derrida, who criticised Saussure’s description of the sign. Saussure insisted, “the sign has two components, the signifier and the signified, of which one, the signified, is mental or psychological. This would imply that the meaning of a sign is present to the speaker when he uses it, in defiance of the fact that meaning is constituted by a system of differences” (Cilliers 1998: 42). This notion assumes that one can determine the meaning of the sign (a visual sign for example) or have full knowledge of it, if the speaker or observer is present to the sign. Saussure’s understanding of how meaning arises (and the rest of Western philosophy and the tradition of structuralism) rests on the premise that meaning becomes fixed when it is written down (or captured in a picture for example). Derrida, however, insists that meaning can never be fixed, seeing that “the meaning of the sign is always unanchored” (Cilliers 1998: 42). From this point of view, meaning is never present on the basis that “what we see is what we get”. By just seeing (or hearing) a word (or for that matter a picture or a person) we can never assume that we know it. Meaning is derived by actively looking for it in the sign’s relationship with other signs, how it has been framed, who is acting, in which context it appears. We thus cannot separate what we see (as scientists, artists, and people viewing art) “from the world it describes” (Cilliers 1998: 43).

The following quote serves to illustrate the argument that the politics of knowing, are strongly related to how the subject sees and is being seen in terms of a post-structuralist understanding of these terms:

It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. ... The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. ... Yet this seeing which comes before words, and can never quite be covered by them, is not a question of mechanically reacting to stimuli. We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice. As a result of this act, what we see is brought within our reach – though not necessarily in arm’s reach. ... We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are. Soon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen. The eye of the other combines with our own eye to make it fully credible that we are part of this invisible world (Berger 1972: 7-9).

Following Berger’s quote, it is argued that the relation between knowing and seeing is a dialectical relation. “Knowing” influences “seeing” and vice versa. The way in which knowledge is produced is thus relational and the meaning that emerges out of the relationship seeing-knowing is not fixed, but always already inscribed and changing according to the context,

according to who is looking, according to who is being looked at and according to what the effect of the action is. Seeing and knowing is mediated by the artwork and by the process of the effects of the relationship between seeing and knowing. By establishing the relationship seeing-knowing as dialectical, a possibility is opened for an argument that suggests that the relationship takes place in a complex and dynamic exchange of systems of meaning. Berger's assumptions also imply that our observational practices (the way we see) are constructed and complex. From this perspective, an anthropology of art should thus examine the relationship between observational practices and knowledge generating practices. Such an examination "should go beyond the mantra of the social construction of facts and should start analysing in depth the ecological dynamics by which communities of practitioners come to share a perception of what they deem as reality" (Pink *et al* 2004: 29).

The politics of knowing and being known and the politics of seeing and being seen are thus central when looking at art's role in a complex contemporary society. As Morphy and Perkins (2006: 22) argue, "art is an integral part of most, if not all, human societies and that by failing to study it anthropologists deny themselves access to a significant body of information. It can provide insights into human cognitive systems – how people conceptualise components of their everyday life and how they construct representations of their world". An anthropology of art should thus include and elucidate how the practices of observation, representation and interpretation are derived from the dialectical relationship between seeing and knowing. The power of this dialectic is also apparent to artists who are open to how their work is seen and what influence the act of seeing their work would have on its audiences. The South African artist, William Kentridge, is someone who uses this dialectic when producing his works of art, which usually challenge viewers to see in new ways. His extensive use of moving images, mirror stereoscopes, cylinder anamorphoses and multi-dimensional sketches are set up in such a way that they work as puzzles on the viewer. For Kentridge (2007: 39) seeing "is always a process of meeting the world halfway, in which we counteract the reports of the world onto our eyes with the pressure of the existing knowledge, understandings, prejudices and fixed ideas streaming out of us."

The elucidating properties inherent to art, its power to propose a new vision of the world, and the way in which it teaches us to see and direct the gaze, are important contributions for any fieldworker who is aiming at translating the complex realities of her subjects of study. From the perspective that art is part of our cultural and social practices, an anthropology of art should include "studying how pictures are put together and make statements about this world" (Pink *et al* 2004: 3). By understanding that the representational practices in art are not value-free, an anthropology of art should be able to offer an implicit critique of the approaches used when applying visual and representational methods. An anthropology of art should thus consider the "processes of research and representation" in order to "invite new ways of working with people, words and images" (Pink *et al* 2004:3).

The next section will explore how ethnographic methods have changed over the past years and how the awareness that visual information could be valuable in the process of generating anthropological knowledge, has been incorporated into ethnographic practices.

Observing the art of Anthropology

In social and cultural anthropology, a distinction is usually made between 'ethnography' and 'theory'. Ethnography is literally the practice of writing about peoples. Often it is understood to mean our way of making sense of other people's modes of thought, since anthropologists usually study cultures other than their own. Theory is also, in part anyway, our way of making sense of our own, anthropological mode of thought (Barnard 2000: 4).

One might be tempted to think that in a field like anthropology whose main method of inquiry is participant observation, there would be no need for theory. In his discussion about the relationship between theory and ethnography, Barnard (2000: 4) mentions that "theory and ethnography inevitably merge into one". This understanding of the relationship between theory and ethnography could serve as an analogy for the discussion relating to the relationship between seeing and knowing. Here it becomes important to qualify, that by using the term "seeing", its synonyms are also implied: the faculty of seeing, sight, vision as well as the act of acquiring insight, observing (whether by the act of seeing or by using all other senses). The following section will explore how the "politics of knowing and being known" (Lather 2001: 483) is at work within the observational techniques and practices of the ethnographer who is concerned about the politics of seeing and being seen.

When speaking of observing in anthropological terms, the main methodology of gaining knowledge is that of participant observation. It can be explained as a methodology that employs empirical resources (gained by means of active observation) to construct an ethnography of what was observed. On answering the question why participant observation is important, Dewalt and Dewalt (1998: 265) argue that "the apprenticeship experience results in 'ways of knowing' and 'learning to see' that are distinct from less participatory approaches". The anecdote of anthropologist Ivor Kopytoff who met several Suku intellectuals in Belgium who were children forty years ago when he did fieldwork in their village in the Republic of Congo, helps to further establish the connection between ethnography and visual representation. For the modern Suku, the importance of Kopytoff's work in their village lay in his preservation of "a picture of their society as it had been several decades ago ... in an way that rang true to them in terms of what they themselves knew" (Kopytoff quoted in Climo and Cattell 2002: 10). In a sense it can be said that Kopytoff's ethnographic work constituted a mental "picture of their past" which contained important meaning for their lives. Hence from the example one could derive that written down ethnographic accounts resemble pictures or visual images (*Bilder*, in German, is a better word that also refers to mental images) of what has been observed.

To linger a while longer on the idea of connecting anthropological practices and modes of representation with "ways of seeing" and the notion of "seeing as knowing" as mentioned earlier, a short excursion to the roots of anthropological knowledge production follows.

Considering that the observations (field notes) of the ethnographer become the raw empirical material and resources of the ethnography, one realises that the "birth" of anthropology correlates with the Enlightenment project of modernity and its positivistic practices of measuring the world and putting things into nameable categories. "As a discipline, anthropology developed hand in hand with the cabinets of curiosity, with antiquarianism and with the widening of European horizons following the Enlightenment" (Morphy and Perkins 2006: 3).

In trying to render a “history of vision”, Crary (1992) investigates the role of the observer as well as technological developments in optical devices (such as moving cameras, microscopes, stereoscopes etc.) that influenced the production of knowledge during the past two centuries. His very interesting study however also tries to relate how the study of the development of mechanical devices cannot only be reduced to studying the technical and mechanical practices. The role of the observer and how the notion of “subject vision”, which he explains as “the role played by the mind” (1992: 9), influences what we see, and should also be analysed. The notion that there is a dialectical relationship between seeing and knowing “pervaded not only areas of art and literature, but (is) present in philosophical, scientific, and technological discourses” (Crary 1992: 9).

The implication such developments have for knowledge production within the sciences and elsewhere is stressed when Crary (1992: 9) remarks that “rather than stressing the separation between art and science ... it is important to see how they were both part of a single interlocking field of knowledge and practice”. When looking back at the history of ideas that led to the Enlightenment, Crary (1992: 9) argues that “(t)he same knowledge that allowed the increasing rationalization and control of the human subject in terms of new institutional and economic requirements was also a condition for new experiments in visual representation”. The very important conclusion Crary makes on this point (which is also of importance for establishing a relationship between artistic and anthropological representational practices), is the fact that he suggests that “an observing subject ... was both a product of and at the same time constitutive of modernity in the nineteenth century” (Crary 1992: 9).

In its quest to generate order and categorise what humans know about nature, positivism created subjects that also wanted to categorise their own kind. Crary remarks that “(v)ision, rather than a privileged form of knowing, becomes itself an object of knowledge, of observation. From the beginning of the nineteenth century a science of vision will tend to mean increasingly an interrogation of the physiological makeup of the human subject, rather than the mechanics of light transmission” (Crary 1990: 70). The science of vision thus becomes anthropological – knowledge of humankind.

More than what meets the eye

As the eye, such the object (Crary 1992: 70)

The dialectical relationship between seeing and knowing can thus be traced back to the roots of anthropology. How humankind has observed (and developed techniques and devices to see better) and consequently asked different questions about what was seen, has had a direct influence on the generation of knowledge. Anthropology has always been sensitive to developments and changes in terms of the status of knowledge, due to the fact that anthropology is based on a practice that has to stand its ground amidst the messiness of real life. Anthropological theory underwent many changes since the “crisis of representation” in the 1980s as asserted by Marcus and Fischer (1986), which followed the “interpretative turn” introduced by Geertz (1973). Having survived the representative and interpretative “turns”, anthropology also had to withstand the onslaught of post-structuralist and postmodernist theory on anthropological thinking and practice. Climo and Cattell (2002: 10) discuss how “ethnography has endured these – and many other – transformations because ethnographers are open to ‘the surprise of fieldwork’, to the discovery of other cultural worlds and other perspectives that we can use in our

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comparative framework”.

Somehow, anthropology is “proof” of the fact that there is a dialectical power at work in the relationship “seeing-knowing”. Whilst observing and interpreting, not only the knowledge about the subject changes in a dynamic way, but also the understanding of the self (as scientist and the science in which it operates) changes to become aware of the politics of seeing and knowing that influence the process of knowledge production (Dewalt and Dewalt 1998: 291).

If the gaze is turned on anthropology, one recognises how changes in viewing the object of study, changed anthropology itself. By following the changes that the concept of culture underwent in the history of anthropology, one learns that “theoretical frameworks and research concerns have led to differing views on culture, research methods and ethnography” (Climo and Cattell 2002: 9).

The new perceptions (here referring to the word in its etymological depth: knowledge that arises from seeing, observation, but also the state of being aware, understanding) that developed in literature and art were translated into anthropological practice and epistemology. Climo and Cattell (2002: 8-10) give an account of how anthropology operates in “liminal spaces” which can be defined as “spaces between disciplines, and is carried out in ‘liminal practices’ or ‘hybridized’ methods”. The notion of liminality is also supported by Victor Turner who explains it as embracing “the idea that being in interstitial spaces, betwixt and between, promotes creativity” (Climo and Cattell 2002: 7). This analogy is used to describe the influence other theories from different disciplines had (and have) on anthropology.

“The basic method of participant observation ... has come to embrace a wide range of methods, many borrowed from other fields, especially history and sociology” (Climo and Cattell 2002: 7).

Complexity theory: weaving together ways of seeing

The concrete question at this stage of the paper still remains, why art and anthropology? And why complexity theory? In the next section, the connection between these three terms will be established based on what Morin (2007: 28) terms “complex thinking”. This type of thinking can be connected to what Derrida calls a “double movement” (Culler 1983: 150) which suggests that one thinks the concept and its counterpart (the yes and the no) simultaneously. Morin (2007: 20) calls this the “logical core of complexity” which is dialogical of nature: “separability-inseparability, whole-parts, effect-cause, product-producer, life-death, homo sapio-homo demens, etc”. However, the complexity lies not in thinking one in terms of the other in binary motion, but in terms of how the one is dependent and determined by the other. The art lies not in describing opposites when making knowledge claims, but in thinking both at the same time. It is in this way of thinking that “the dialogic is not the response to these paradoxes, but the means of facing them, by considering the complementarities of antagonisms and the productive play, sometimes of complementary antagonisms” (Morin 2007: 20). It challenges a type of thinking and opens up space for transdisciplinary enquiry that does not disconnect opposites, but thinks of them as part of a unity. In order to be able to reach this style of thinking, Morin calls for us to “deeply reform all our ways of knowing and thinking” (ibid.: 25).

An example of what the notion of truth would mean, when explained dialogically, is what Morin calls a “(d)ialogical truth: a truth continuously in transit that one reaches only in the sense of having to still look for it (Maldonato 2007: 282)”. Such an understanding of truth implies an understanding of knowledge as also being dialogical. By rejecting the totality of knowledge or truth or possibility to represent something fully, does not mean that one rejects knowledge or truth or the possibility to represent. It just means that even if we work as hard as we can to collect all there is to know about a system with the best possible models and methods that we have at our disposal; there will always be something that we cannot know. The dialogical nature of the complex thought allows us to have our truths, our knowledge, our way of seeing and the art of representation, but it challenges us to know the limits thereof and to re-evaluate it every time we use it and to re-invent it if necessary (cf. Cilliers 2005). In the same spirit, transdisciplinary analysis creates a space in which knowledge is generated by means of “complex thought” which allows new ideas and strategies to arise “in association and interaction” with one another (Morin 2008:115).

Thus, the challenge to reform our ways of thinking and knowing is a direct challenge to the process of engaging in transdisciplinary work. Morin (2007: 29) suggests that “complexity does not put us only in the distress of the uncertain; it allows us to see besides the probable, the possibilities of the improbable, because of those which have been in the past and those that can be found again in the future”. Lastly, “complex thought is a fundamental preparation for any truly transdisciplinary project” (Rogerro 2007: 130).

Thinking art and anthropology simultaneously

Artists and anthropologists are practitioners who appropriate form, and represent others. Although their representational practices have been different, both books and artworks are creative additions to the world; both are complex translations of other realities (Schneider and Wright 2006: 26).

Based on the connections that have been discovered up until now in the study, it can be argued that the relationship between art and anthropology should be reviewed in terms of what both fields of study can offer each other in terms of their representational and knowledge generating practices. Having situated art and anthropology on the same level of enquiry, this paper argues that the “crossing of the borders” between the two would entail more than just artists engaging in fieldwork and anthropologists discussing aesthetic interpretations of art works as objects of study.

As Marcus and Myers (1995: 35) state, “(i)n the past, the anthropological study of art has been essentially a marginal occupation. This should no longer be the case. In contemporary cultural life, art is becoming one of the main sites of cultural production for transforming difference into discourse, for making it meaningful for action and thought. Especially because anthropology has also seen this as its role in the production of cultural knowledge, we argue that critical understanding and a new relationship between art and anthropology are required”. Morphy and Perkins (2006: 11) are also convinced about the possibilities of collaboration between the two fields of study and suggest that “(t)he future of anthropology of art must re-engage with those methods and problems that led a different generation of anthropologists to reject the study of art in the first place”.

When looking at the development of anthropology and the role visual material played in it,

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Schneider and Wright (2006: 23) recall that during the early 1900s visual material used in ethnographic accounts was “cut short by anthropology’s attempts to establish itself as scientific discipline and the visual was largely abandoned because of its positivistic colonial associations”. It is only in the 1960s that the interest in using visual modes of representation got more attention. The influence that anthropologist-filmmaker Jean Rouch had on ethnographic filmmaking should not be underestimated when tracing the development of visual representations in anthropology. Together with Edgar Morin, Rouch produced the first “*cinéma vérité* film combining the ideas of Flaherty with those of Soviet film theorist and practitioner Dziga Vertov” (Ruby 2006: 395). In these films, the process of filmmaking was part of the film and the filmed subjects became collaborators in the process of deciding what will be represented and how it will be represented. “Jean Rouch wanted to produce a shared anthropology in which those in front of the camera shared power with the director” (Ruby 2006: 396). Not only had Rouch inspired artists such as French New Wave directors Chris Marker and Jean-Luc Goddard, but his work also inspired collaborators, such as Edgar Morin to develop the notion of a complex anthropology suggesting that knowledge producing activities should not be reductive of nature, but it should expand the understanding of what it is to be human.

Thinking art and anthropology simultaneously proposes that artistic visual representations should not take the place of just having “auxiliary functions to the ethnographic monograph” (Schneider and Wright 2006: 23), but that through its own inherent properties, it should be used to create “a system of meaning parallel to, but different from that of written ethnographies” (Schneider and Wright 2006: 23). Art offers anthropology its rich source of different representational practices, which means much more than just using films and photos as supportive material. McDougall argues that the substantial challenge to “anthropological thought comes not simply from broadening its purview but from its entering into communicative systems different to the ‘anthropology of words’” (McDougall quoted in Schneider and Wright 2006: 23).

When anthropologists adopt practices that allow them to use more visual strategies in their work, the visual representations should be able to speak for themselves. This could encourage anthropologists to study “ways of seeing” more closely in order to offer material that could translate finer tones and nuances in visual representations. For anthropologists who are using ethnographic film as a medium of representation, the “objective capability of the camera” (Harper 2006: 83) should be reconsidered. The use of single-device recording and projection could be supplemented by “the use of more than one camera, or multiple projection devices, such as artists use in installations” (Schneider and Wright 2006: 8).

There are a number of studies where anthropologists give cameras to, for example, street children to take pictures of their environments⁴. A more inclusive research strategy is followed and ‘informants’ or ‘research participants’ become ‘research collaborators’ rather than ‘research subjects’ (Becker 2006). The object of study then changes to how the children see and look at their environment. Projects like these could also assist anthropologists to explore a wider range of “visual strategies in gathering, producing, and exhibiting work” (Schneider and Wright 2006: 23).

4. For an example of such see: Becker, Heike. 2006. “How we see our culture”: Photographic self-representations from the Cape Flats, South Africa. Presented at *Negotiating Culture in the Context of Globalisation*. 3-7 April 2006, Saly.

Artists on the other hand who dare to learn more from the anthropological methods of systematic fieldwork and participant observation could address the context of their subjects in ways that are more authentic. After the “reflexive turn” in the art world, artists became more aware that their work should be more self-conscious and should comment on what is happening in society. Art as a form of resistance and space in which struggles could be voiced grew especially after the Second World War. Artists who are embedded in “real life” situations by means of participant observation could render stronger comment if they are more familiar with the particularities of the situation. The famous documentary photographer Robert Capa is well known for saying “if your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough”.

The closeness that ethnographic fieldwork methods offer is ideal for producing material that captures the ambivalences and private struggles people go through. As example one could use the work of the South African photographer Gideon Mendel⁵ who is now famous for his photographic exhibitions of people who are living with HIV/AIDS. When he started this project, he was commissioned by his agency, Network Photographers, to photograph people living with HIV/AIDS in England. After the success of the exhibition in the United Kingdom, the exhibition was moved to South Africa with the condition that a section of photographs taken of the African HIV/AIDS epidemic should be added (Godby 2003: 17). As he started spending more time with people, it became clear that he had to change the ways in which he would photograph his subjects. Mendel became aware of the fact that he was a first world photographer “with the power to represent his Third World subjects in any way that he chooses, and the subjects have little control over the creation of their images” (Godby 2003: 17). In the exhibition that became known as *A Broken Landscape: HIV and AIDS in Africa* (Carballeira and Mendel 2003), the relationship between photographer and the photographed is also presented. The images do not stand for themselves, but with text added next to them, the context was made explicit. Even Mendel's relationship to the funding agencies was revealed in the exhibition. “True to this spirit, Mendel's photographs are arranged in short essays that represent the same people – the patient and his or her family – over a period of time, thereby showing the people involved in different situations and relationships that obviously suggest more complex identities that single photographs could ever show” (Godby 2003: 18). The complexities of the lived experiences of the people involved are depicted in Mendel's work.

The depth and sophistication with which he depicts the devastation of AIDS also contain activist impulses that call on the viewers to start acting and become involved in the struggle against HIV/Aids. Mendel's closeness to his subjects is the ingredient for the success of his powerful and striking photos, of which one picture truly says more than the proverbial thousand words. Mendel was criticised by art critics (Godby 2003:20) for adding the context in which the subjects were photographed and by revealing his relationship to the subjects (as sponsored photographer). Godby (2003: 20), however argues that the critics were short sighted “not to recognise, for example, that the images and the texts are in fact part of the same project, and that the photographer, in radically changing his methods of photography, is actively engaging with both his medium of representation and the institutional frameworks within which he is working: at the same time, he may be seen to be actually transforming the institutional space of the gallery or museum from a repository of ‘relics’ to an active political platform”.

5 . For more information on Gideon Mendel's work see: <http://www.gideonmendel.com/>

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Conclusion: Gazing into the future of art and anthropology

This paper attempted to destabilise traditional notions of knowledge and representational practices as found in both fields of art and anthropology, and argued that by learning from each other, their own methodologies can be enriched and rethought in order to engage in representational practices that offer a more authentic picture of the world. By having explored the relationship between art and anthropology based on the perspective from complexity theory, the paper argues that there is a direct and dialectical relationship between knowledge generating practices and observational and representational practices. The dialectical relationship between seeing and knowing can be traced back to the roots of anthropology. How mankind observed and developed techniques and devices to see better and consequently asked different questions about what was seen, has had a direct influence on the generation of knowledge.

Artists and anthropologists who are entering into the space where their representational practices keep up with the complex world in which we live, are encouraged “to learn to go beyond disciplinary frameworks whenever necessary and to “re-link” different types of knowledge” (Roggero 2007: 130). The artist and scientist should never lose sight of what it is to be human. The work we produce should reflect our humanity more than the politically correct ways of being self-reflexive about objects and subjects. Our representational practices should expand the notion of what it is to be human and not reduce it.

Both anthropologists and artists have a shared task in re-thinking their representational practices. Each are encouraged to delve deep into the resources that they have in order to achieve the task. By combining efforts and by exchanging knowledge producing practices, our lived experiences could stand a chance of being represented in ways that do not reduce our humanity to scientific formulas and mediocre documentaries. For anthropology this implies that anthropologists “need to develop an approach to images that is aware of what they want, that acknowledges and productively makes use of their affective powers, and develops new ways of using them” (Schneider and Wright 2006: 8). For artists this imply that they should be able to leave the safe space of their studios and to get closer to their objects of study so that the distance between them can be breached with intimacy – this intimacy which “is the currency of fieldwork” (Schneider and Wright 2006: 8).

The weaving together of art and anthropology leads to the position where both art and anthropology can operate from a common ground. This common ground is found in the way in which human beings as complex systems in themselves operate and how their ways of making meaning will never be predictable and fully knowable for scientists or artists. The claim that our understanding of complex systems cannot be reduced to calculation means that there will always be some form of creativity involved when dealing with complexity. By thinking art and anthropology simultaneously, the “deep reform of our mental functioning, of our being” (Morin 2007: 29) is put into action which offers both artists and anthropologists the potential to renew and revitalise petrified ways of knowing and representing the world.

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