Ethnographica Moralia
Panourgia, Neni, Anstett, Élisabeth

Published by Fordham University Press

Panourgia, Neni and Élisabeth Anstett.
Ethnographica Moralia: Experiments in Interpretive Anthropology.

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Contemporary Fieldwork Aesthetics in Art and Anthropology: Experiments in Collaboration and Intervention

George E. Marcus

In recent years, Douglas Holmes and I have been working toward an articulation, and a refunctioning even, of ethnographic research practices so basic to the identity of anthropology. It is remarkable to reflect on how much research in social and cultural anthropology, especially in the United States, has consisted of variations on a particular aesthetic of practice that can be condensed to a near-mythic scene of encounter—a Malinowskian one, or latterly, a Geertzian one (e.g., the famous opening of Geertz’s “Deep Play” essay). Recall, for instance, these oft-quoted lines from the beginning of the Argonauts of the Western Pacific, in which fieldwork is evoked and its practices are inculcated: as Malinowski intones, “Imagine yourself, suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight.” However much this reminds one of the set directions for a classic Hollywood B-movie, Malinowski’s evocations of fieldwork most of all established a powerful modality of method for anthropology, highly visual, if not cinematic in character, that has served to the present as the medium of regulative ideals in the doing of fieldwork and the production of ethnography. There is an entire genre of fieldwork literature, of memoirs, still vigorous, that supports it. Yet just about everything that defines this scene of encounter has changed dramatically over the past thirty years, and this is amply reflected in what passes for ethnography today. Nonetheless, both the inculcation of method in the professional culture of anthropology, especially in the training of apprentice anthropologists in the making, and the writing of ethnographic texts themselves remain remarkably committed to the mise-en-scène of the lone fieldworker crossing a marked boundary of cultural difference to
temporary life in a community of subjects. Even in works that are far afield from the Trobriands or the Amazon, and even in these places as well in their transformed circumstances today with active indigenous movements, the classic version of writing the Malinowskian scene remains nonetheless de rigueur. Doug Holmes and I are compiling a montage of latter-day Malinowskian scenes of encounter from a wide range of contemporary ethnographies, hoping for an effect similar to the last scene of the film *Cinema Paradiso*. Here, as just one example to measure the change that has taken place in such stories, is an excerpt from Kim Fortun’s arrival story, in the mythic Malinowskian scene of encounter, from her remarkable ethnography *Advocacy after Bhopal*, published in 2001 and produced as a first work from her dissertation:

The timing of my work in Bhopal was out of joint in more ways than one. I arrived in Bhopal in February 1990, one year after the out-of-court settlement of the Bhopal case by the Indian Supreme Court. I did not plan to stay. I had come to India to do anthropological research on environmental politics in Madras. I traveled to Bhopal to collect material illustrative of the background from which concern about chemical pollution had emerged. Immediately, it was clear that Bhopal could not be conceived as a “case study,” a bounded unit of analysis easily organized for comparative ends. To the contrary, Bhopal showed no evidence of boundaries in time, space, or concept, the historic and the future, continuity and dramatic change. Only later would I begin to understand the deeply normative implications of how Bhopal is encased in writing by management experts in particular. In 1990, newly arrived in Bhopal, I knew only that I was, indeed, at the scene of disaster, where injustice was complicated by grossly inadequate modes of conception and description, where everyday life screamed for rectitude, without prescriptions for anything more than symptomatic relief.4

This montage of what the scene of encounter was then and what it is now that Holmes and I are preparing is more than a homage or tribute to the persistence and regulative power of the Malinowskian imaginary; it is intended as a document that provides a means to probe both stability and significant change in the ethnographic project, as well as what constitutes fieldwork particularly, at least since the moment of the *Writing Culture* critique of the 1980s.5 And it is a stratagem that we are using to articulate a redesign of the entire ethnographic project on its most sacred and enduring grounds, so to speak. Now, in this sense, and in retrospect, what the *Writing Culture* critique did was to revise and recondition the genres of
writing ethnography from fieldwork in light of the mounting critiques through the 1960s and 1970s of the research practices and resulting claims to knowledge of modern anthropology, as an exemplar of a discipline that studied culture as ordinary forms of life. The power of this specific critique was that it partook of and exemplified the vibrant body of theoretical work then being produced that was challenging traditional forms and assumptions of representation generally in Western intellectual life. In retrospect, although powerful enough to signal a profound rupture in the modern tradition of anthropological research from which it is still recovering, or rather, from which it continues to benefit in my view, the *Writing Culture* critique, because it was devoted largely to the preexisting traditional literature of ethnography, actually adapted and more powerfully reinstated the Malinowskian scene of encounter by making it more theoretically sophisticated, politically sensitive, and ethically accountable. What it did not do was to anticipate the radically changed present circumstances of anthropological fieldwork, the diverse topical and interdisciplinary environments in which ethnographic projects are conceived, and the altered functions of basic ethnographic knowledge from its classic archival ones.

Nor, more importantly, did the *Writing Culture* critique develop what its own implications were for the conduct of fieldwork, deeply embedded in the norms and practices of the informal disciplinary culture of anthropology. In short, it did not undertake its own “ethnography” of how anthropology mundanely, or as a matter of its ordinary professional culture, distinctively produces ethnographic knowledge, and if it had, it might have seen then the intimate and crucial role of the writing of ethnography within the deeper and more ideological consequential professional culture of “doing fieldwork.” Indeed, I would argue that this crucial limit of the 1980s critique was responsible for what success the *Writing Culture* critique had within anthropology.

The critique of outmoded aspects of the anthropological production of knowledge, clearly felt and widely understood among anthropologists in light of critical culture theories circulating in the 1980s, and expressed as a near-literary critical examination of the rhetoric and tropes of anthropological authority, was widely received, especially among younger anthropologists, as both needed and therapeutic. Had the relationship between the tropes of ethnographic writing and the conduct and teaching of fieldwork as a method and expectation of professional culture also been examined, there might have been considerably more resistance to this critique in the 1980s as well as a deeper exploration of research practices, focused
on the regulative ideals, or rather an aesthetic of what fieldwork is supposed to be, communicated in the powerful, imagistic, even filmic Malinowskian mise-en-scène that the *Writing Culture* critique reconstructed and reinforced through a particular kind for reflexive writing that it encouraged. This mise-en-scène persists in practice and in writing, especially for every apprentice anthropologist, despite the fact that every actual condition on which it was traditionally founded has disintegrated, fragmented, or morphed.

Anthropology can continue to impose its ideal conditions upon reality with certain results that may or may not be useful for certain traditional knowledge projects that continue on the margins of the field. But in my view, the core research program of social and cultural anthropology, given how it has been reconstructed by present circumstances of trying to do fieldwork anywhere, especially on the part of the discipline’s apprentices, requires an explicit rearticulation of its aesthetic of method. In this, the way that contemporary ethnographic works, like Fortun’s from which I quoted, are wrestling with the very powerful norms and forms of knowledge making that they have been bequeathed since the *Writing Culture* critiques focused on a very powerful set of expectations of what fieldwork should be is diagnostic, symptomatic, and a way into rethinking the design of research practices themselves.

So although it might appear that our interest in the scene of encounter in contemporary published ethnographies returns us to the primarily textual concerns of the 1980s *Writing Culture* critique, this interest instead is a strategic choice to finally address the operative aesthetic of fieldwork as method and practice at the heart of anthropological research design in an era when what fieldwork is, what it can be, what it might produce—still shaped by the expectations of the Malinowskian scene of encounter—is being addressed with often interesting, but uncertain, results in contemporary ethnographic writing. Our warrant for beginning with the scene of encounter as written is based on our insight, itself ethnographic, regarding the way that method has manifested itself in the professional culture of anthropology. This is a disciplinary culture in which there has been a certain indifference or even antipathy to method as formal procedures, something that can really be taught as such. Indeed, fieldwork as method is most powerfully inculcated as a kind of lore—tales, corridor talk, and anecdotal evaluation among peers, in the pressure of expectation between student and teacher—but if there is a formal instrument in the teaching of method in anthropology, I would say that it is in the reading of ethnography itself. Why read ethnographies if not to gain a semblance of models
of practice in this otherwise very informal culture by which method is instilled? Whatever ethnographic texts are as reports and the material form of knowledge claims that anthropology offers the library, the archive, and the world, they are foremost the most effective medium of thought experiments by which apprentice anthropologists conceive of fieldwork before they do it. Built around the Malinowskian encounter, the ethnographic text still evokes, and very visually so, scenarios of practice for apprentice ethnographers, who, if they ever do ethnographic research again in their careers, must at least do so canonically at the very beginning. The first books, writings, that come from these projects that are built around rewriting the scene of Malinowskian encounter are key and strategic materials to work with in coming to a new articulation, a reimagining, of fieldwork itself. This, I argue, is a matter of aesthetics, rather than methods, as traditionally conceived.

I should say before proceeding that this exercise in which we are engaged, of reimagining the scene of encounter of fieldwork in anthropology as it is being experienced—especially by apprentice researchers in launching their career-making projects—is one among a whole range of strategies being tried by other heirs to and makers of the 1980s ruptures that have both signaled and carried out what it is to do anthropological research now in the contemporary world. To me and to others, the most interesting and urgent theoretical questions in anthropology today are precisely about its distinctive technology or aesthetics of form-giving to knowledge; its historic culture of distinctive method; and how it shapes, inhibits, and encourages what the nature of anthropological knowledge is for its publics, for its interdisciplinary partners, and perhaps most importantly, for its own disciplinary community, which is perhaps most perplexed about what “the ethnography” as the major knowledge form of anthropology is becoming and how it might still be the grounds for constituting a distinctive collective discourse that reflects anthropology as a vital intellectual project.

There are some—Paul Rabinow, for example—who clearly reflect the intellectual style and concerns of the tradition of ethnographic research, but who see no need to preserve its precise terms, like fieldwork, participant observation, or the term ethnography itself. Inspired by a range of theoretical resources and pursuing anthropology in new domains such as the arena of biotechnology, Rabinow has offered a bold reconception of the terms of anthropological research in Anthropos Today: Reflections on Modern Equipment. Instead of fieldwork, culture, and ethnography, he deals in terms (culled eclectically from French theory) like problematization, apparatus,
and assemblage with a wry, half-serious title for this project of research—Wissenarbeitsforschung. Of course, he presumes that such a term would never catch on, but he means what it says, as a way of defamiliarizing the ethnographic process from its traditional terms. The aesthetic is very much preserved, but without the powerful strictures of the Malinowskian scene of encounter.

On the other side, Marilyn Strathern, for instance, remains implicitly true to the traditional terms of ethnography in anthropology, but without being literal about it. She appeals to that tradition explicitly by using with great agility materials from the classic settings and tasks of anthropological research, such as exchange systems in New Guinea, as comparative probes into novel settings of knowledge formation and doing science in labs, in hospitals, in her own university. But the essential scene of fieldwork in these settings remains the Malinowskian one, although Strathern (and her many students) have been very adept at making these settings of fieldwork within the machineries of bureaucracies seem very exotic indeed.

And in distinction to these approaches, our strategy in this rethinking of the historic research paradigm of anthropology is quite literally to work with its classic expression focused on the scene of encounter and to morph it or reconfigure it from within its own terms. In a sense, this is a task of translation. So, at least for now, we are rethinking fieldwork and ethnography from within their current expression in professional culture and especially as they operate in the production of apprentice ethnographers who come up with expressions in their first works of what the changing intensities of the de rigueur classic Malinowskian scene of encounter, and thus fieldwork, is becoming in new terrains and circumstances of research. Although some may say that this play of traditional constraints and tropes in new work is merely vestigial, and that it is already too late to save fieldwork as we have known it, I disagree and see such play as the means to articulate a reinvention from the tradition within its own terms. In terms of the politics of knowledge, this strategy of reform is also likely to be more effective, just as the Writing Culture critique was during the 1980s and 1990s in reworking the tropes of ethnographic description and analysis in the face of mounting critiques, because it in itself is grounded in ethnographic-like observations of anthropology as an institution and takes fully into account the nature of a distinctive practice of research within it as a technology, an aesthetic, and a power-knowledge.

What is it, then, in the Malinowskian scene of encounter revised today in ethnography that most signals a direction of change in fieldwork? To get a sense of this, we can briefly return to Kim Fortun’s writing the scene
of encounter into her *Advocacy after Bhopal*, which I quoted earlier. She arrives at the scene of Bhopal in 1990 and immediately realizes that her fieldwork is not literally site specific. This reflects the emergence of multi-sited fieldwork about which I have written, but it does not mean the literal multiplication of successive Malinowskian periods of fieldwork at related sites, which many have viewed as impractical as well as diluting the standard of fieldwork. Rather, it entails constructing fieldwork as a social symbolic imaginary with certain posited relations between things, people, events, places, and cultural artifacts, and a literally multi-sited itinerary as a field of movement emerges in the construction of such an imaginary. Literal fieldwork operates within this imaginary, bringing into juxtaposition sites that demonstrate certain connections or relations and the cultural significance that they carry about a world, or worlds, in change.9

This imaginary is locally constructed at the scene of fieldwork through ethnographic participation in advocacy, in Fortun’s case, which defines relations of collaboration, and both the boundaries of fieldwork and its subject are found in these relations. In addition, the fieldwork is defined and bounded by siting itself in a distinctive concept of present or emergent time as well as place. It is the return of Johannes Fabian’s recognition of coevalness with an emphasis.10 Fortun’s understanding of the temporality of being in Bhopal in relation to an event or set of events is as important as being “there,” so to speak, as a dimension of her setting the scene of fieldwork. Bhopal was already something more than the literal site when she arrived there in 1990. As a place of disaster, it had symbolic value beyond mere location and site of fieldwork observation. Timing and temporality created a difficult challenge for ethnography.

Many projects today, like Fortun’s, find their questions and frames of analysis only by relating the “here and now” of the traditional mise-en-scène of fieldwork to the “elsewheres” in which they are caught up. How to define and work within the imaginary of the “here and now” and the “elsewhere” is what makes contemporary fieldwork multi-sited and redefines the intensities of the scenes of encounter where fieldwork begins these days. One gets caught up in the events of ordinary local life, as always, but one finds there reflexive subjects who stimulate a politics of collaboration necessary for ethnography to proceed in a way quite different from the way anthropologists have enrolled subjects in their projects in the past. The subject and scale of fieldwork are negotiated in a found imaginary out of such collaborations. So for me, the scene of fieldwork today has two key features—working, committed collaborations, and the understanding of imaginaries and their consequences as both the major
impetus by which ethnography becomes multi-sited and the medium by
which ethnography defines its conceptual and empirical object. Now, what
sorts of investigations, researches, have already been operating in terms of
such reconfigured scenes of encounter? Where can anthropological
fieldworkers find examples and resources to articulate changes that they
are half making circumstantially these days in their professional culture of
method, what it requires of them, and what they are able to produce as
knowledge anyhow? I have sought to find such inspirations in my long-
standing interest in the processes of research, with resemblances to eth-
nography, as they have been practiced and conceived by artists, film-
makers, and theatrical producers, to which I now turn.

If anthropological fieldwork as a method is, as I have argued thus far,
both realized and accountable within a distinctive professional culture as
the performance of a highly valued aesthetic of inquiry, the material ex-
pression of which is the written ethnography—currently at odds, so to
speak, with its historic disciplinary exemplars—then practices in the arts,
film, and theater are an obvious place to look for affinity and kinship.
Quite explicitly, certain practices of “research” resembling ethnographic
fieldwork have long been embedded aspects of the complex collective
processes that produce film (here I have especially been interested in creat-
ing locations for certain films and in the imaginary of the craft of film
editing) and drama (here I have interacted with scenographers as kinds of
ethnographers as well as specialists in dramaturgy), but there is even a
more relevant parallel world of endeavor in the arts with which the field-
work tradition in anthropology might connect and compare itself. This is
the modernist line of installation performance, event-based conceptual art
movements with roots in Dada and surrealism, as well as situationism and
Fluxus, among others. The scene of spectacle in such artwork, created in
the context of real-life situations, is what is imagined rather than the scene
of encounter of anthropology, but the two are not unrelated, and it would
be interesting to use this affinity to think through what anthropology
might learn from such art projects, which I will in fact attempt in a
moment.

Indeed, in the same period that anthropology was critiquing its historic
method and its performative expression as ethnographic texts, during the
1980s and 1990s, there was a parallel interest in socially conscious artwork
in the installation, performance, happenings mode, but influenced heavily
by the enthusiasm for culture theory during this period. Nicolas Bourriaud
has famously written about this art of the 1990s (into the present) as “rela-
tional aesthetics”11—the orchestration of sites, settings, social actors, and
processes for certain effects that have complex social topologies investigated through background research (like fieldwork) but are realized in a scene of spectacle, where spectacle is conceived as symbolic act, stimulating a critical reflexivity on the part of participants and observers. For example, Rirkrit Tiravanija organizes a dinner in a collector’s home and leaves him all the ingredients required to make a Thai soup; Philippe Parreno invites a few people to pursue their favorite hobbies on May Day on a factory assembly line; Maurizio Cattelan feeds rats Bel Paese cheese and sells them as pets, or he exhibits recently robbed safes. In the mid-1990s, Hal Foster, a historian of art and especially of postmodernism, produced an important essay, “The Artist as Ethnographer?” (published in a book that Fred Myers and I edited on the recent traffic between art and anthropology, and its potentialities), which explicitly addressed the pretension to ethnography, to research as fieldwork, in this array of art projects, and he did so with an informed skepticism and acute cynicism.12 But the limitation in Foster’s assessment is that he was measuring the ethnographic pretense and prowess of the artist in terms of the uncritiqued, relatively unproblematic pre-1980s condition of anthropological ethnography—how anthropology is stereotypically known to its publics. Ethnography in its post-1980s and continuing challenges is very different and needs very much, I would argue, the sort of play with its practices that artists have been doing and about which Foster was skeptical. As I will explore a bit more fully, the kinds of research that some artists do are models that anthropologists can think with in articulating manifest changes in their own traditions of fieldwork.

I have found that many of these art projects are concerned either with questions of collective trauma and suffering as a challenge to a smug humanitarianism; with identity and difference among peoples and places in a globalizing world (e.g., the scenes orchestrated by the artistic collective Stalker in various places of a demographically changing European landscape, discussed by the sociologist of art Nikos Papastergiadis as probings into the situated practices and potentials of cosmopolitanism in ethnically diverse situations);13 or with the material processes responsible for globalizing process: systems of value, exchange, markets, rethinking capitalism in the cultural sphere (e.g., the projects of Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska that deal with art institutions, value, and capitalism, to which I will return in a moment). These are of course the core generic topics and preoccupations of anthropological research as well, making the affinity with the general form of these projects even more suggestive for ethnographers, who, everywhere today it seems, are confronted with a
negotiation about reflexivity in order to materialize both an object and a space-time of research. The openness and experimental nature with which artists in the movement that I have been describing are doing fieldwork, so to speak, to occupy the scene of spectacle that art produces are valuable exemplars for articulating systemic changes in the mythic scene of encounter in contemporary anthropological research. In the remainder of this essay, I want to assess the potential of just one example of an art project, that of the “Capital” project of Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska, for articulating emergent changes in fieldwork practices in anthropology.

In September 2003, I attended a large, diverse, and ambitious conference at Tate Modern entitled “Fieldworks: Dialogues between Art and Anthropology.” My talk there shared concerns with this one; I was in conversation with Hal Foster’s critique of the effort of artists to do something like “ethnography,” and I reflected on my collaborative participation with artists from Cuba and Venezuela in the production of a series of installations and performances. Among the supermarket variety of projects and approaches, I was riveted by a thirty-six-minute account by Cummings and Lewandowska of the process by which they had produced an event, an intervention, for Tate Modern in 2001. I thought what I was hearing at the time was an account of the alternative model of fieldwork that I had been conjuring for anthropology. Such a behind-the-scenes account is very valuable, since it rarely appears amid the genres by which artists make their work public or do advertisements for themselves (what stands for this project, for example, besides Web site material, is an attractive and glossy Tate catalog entitled simply Capital; there was also a series of Tate-sponsored seminars, plus an intervention in the scene of the museum itself). Fortunately, the conference was Webcast, and I have been able to listen to their presentation several times. I indeed heard what I thought I had, but there were several other nuances in the presentation that made me appreciate how the construction of their project differs from ethnography as well.

Cummings and Lewandowska, who have been working together since 1995, have done numerous projects that required research to create the space for those projects. Most importantly, this research replaces the site specificity of art. Any project of course involves physical locations, but more importantly, the project’s site is a social imagination that is conceptually invented and materialized in the practices of research or investigation based on a deeply reflexive motivation. The scene and bounds of fieldwork or of a project emerge through following a set of relations across
a social landscape that it is both material and imaginary. Research is a
design of collaborations and other sorts of engagements of varying inten-
sity. Regardless of how, and to what critical response, they finally filled in
the scene of spectacle as art in the Tate project that they undertook, their
conduct of research in this project is immensely important, I believe, as an
achieved exemplar for ongoing transformations of the Malinowskian scene
of encounter in anthropology.

Cummings and Lewandowska have a Web site where they list and de-
scribe their various commissions, and they introduce this list with this
manifesto-like statement:

We recognize that it’s no longer helpful to pretend that artists originate
the products they make, or more importantly, have control over the values
or meanings attributed to their practice: interpretation has superseded in-
tention. It’s clear that artworks and artists exist in a larger economy of art;
built from an interrelated web of curatorship, exhibitions, galleries, muse-
ums, archives, places of education, various forms of funding, dealers, collec-
tors, catalogues, books, theorists, critics, reviewers, advertising, and so on.

In the light of the above, we have evolved a way of working over the last
few years which requires an intense period of research with the various
institutions of art. We have initiated projects with museums, retail stores,
commercial and public galleries, as well as places of education. These col-
laborations have resulted in a number of different outcomes appropriate to
the nature of each project; exhibitions, collections, books, guided tours,
lectures, videos, internet browser and a range of promotional or educa-
tional material. We are interested in working alongside all of the institu-
tions that choreograph the exchange of people and things.16

Cummings and Lewandowska were given free rein to develop a reflex-
ive installation or intervention at Tate Modern. They were very much
influenced by the sort of theoretical writings that motivate anthropological
research on exchange, value, and material culture, including those of Nigel
Thrift (and his important emphasis that the experience of the modern
world is increasingly insubstantial, meaning that ethnography about any
local condition is always pulled “elsewhere,” and that this requires strate-
gies of creating in inquiry social imaginaries that are at least multi-sited)
and most interestingly Marilyn Strathern (Cummings and Lewandowska
favor and work brilliantly with some of Strathern’s New Guinea analo-
gies). They created an imaginary for their project that turned on the anal-
ogy and homology between the massive and powerful Tate Modern as the
central arbiter of value in the symbolic economy of art and the Bank of
England just across the Thames as the central arbiter of the secular money economy, the lender of last resort, managing the price of debt and the cost of borrowing. Based on their Tate connections, Cummings and Lewandowska were able to conduct interviews in the Bank of England and gain the cooperation of some of its officials. The intensity of their project became centered in this juxtaposition, this back and forth symbolically, conceptually, and literally between the two institutions. The critical probe and resolution of this juxtaposition was resolved in using ideas of “the gift”—a classic foundational theory in the anthropology of exchange, which permeates the work of Strathern, for instance. Cummings and Lewandowska wanted to create an intervention in the museum that would make the otherwise invisible gifting relationships that sustain major cultural institutions visible to museum visitors; they wanted to suggest the symbolic relation between Tate and the Bank of England as well. While the research process itself became the most important part of the research, Cummings and Lewandowska finally did create something, a gesture to fill the scene of spectacle, instead of an art object. At selected times, arbitrarily chosen visitors to Tate Modern were given a limited-edition print, issued by the artists, through a gallery official. This unexpected gesture was meant to act like a detonator, raising many questions about the nature of the gift.

There are many ways in which this project can be questioned. Did its intervention really work as critique on any level? The research was not engaged enough, did not really respect its collaborations perhaps and their generative capacity to generate insight and self-critique. Although the project was very ethnographic at its heart, its thinking was ironically distanced and highly theoretical. It did not take the politics of research that it created far enough. But then why should it? The purposes of art should not be mistaken for the purposes of ethnographic research. Indeed, there was one really strange moment in Neil Cummings’s presentation where, in referring to my own prior discussion of Hal Foster’s essay in my conference talk, he said that the artist’s use of something like fieldwork should not be associated with participant observation (and presumably the Malinowskian model) in anthropology—he presumed that reflexivity in anthropological ethnography is about ethical discipline (actually he is not wrong about this) but that artists are not capable of this function. They are interested in something else, he says.

Indeed, there is something ruthless and manipulative in the management of relations in Cummings and Lewandowska’s Tate project—they do
not work in the ethics that hovers over and shapes the implicit moral discourse of the Malinowskian scene of encounter. They are after an insight and the production of an effect, an effect of critical reflexive insight, which is its own virtue of doing good. For the sake of this, their research relations are rather instrumental and businesslike. I think this orientation would be both disconcerting and liberating to anthropologists. Finally, then, their research, although set up in ways from which anthropological ethnography could learn much, does not care enough about the politics of the process of inquiry that they set in motion and what kind of unique knowledge it could produce. Instead, they pretty much relied on “theory,” and the authority of academics. This is fair enough given their purposes and the real differences of these from those of anthropology, but they have given an achieved and developed sample of what fieldwork is in fact becoming in anthropology.

Let’s consider some of the important lessons that they do develop for the refectoing of the ethnographic project in anthropology. In so doing, one might recall that the anthropological practice of fieldwork is not just a technology of method but an aesthetic of method as well that is powerfully inculcated by professional culture and identity. Accordingly, in reinventing fieldwork for its present conditions, these aesthetics will not be denied, or at least they won’t be changed without compensation in whatever idioms. In short, in reinventing fieldwork, it is a certain powerful and established aesthetics that is being addressed in offering a new design, and this is at least as important as the appeal of the techniques themselves. So what is the aesthetic appeal, or rather compensations, of the moves that Cummings and Lewandowska have made?

First, the scene of encounter in contemporary ethnography leads away from a literal site-specificity to fieldwork. The Tate project of Cummings and Lewandowska shows convincingly how this might happen or evolve as a practice of research. Cummings and Lewandowska have a generative sense of the use of reflexivity to generate a field of relations that is more sophisticated than anything in the habit of anthropological fieldwork. Cummings is correct that reflexivity in the classic scene of encounter has been developed in the interest of ethical discipline or moral correctness. For Cummings and Lewandowska, reflexivity is a strategy to generate a space of social imagination that connects an artistic or intellectual discipline to its contexts as its major means and ends of inquiry. The situated collaborative work that is required to generate a social imaginary for fieldwork in which the researchers literally move and operate is the aesthetic compensation for the loss of the Malinowskian scene of encounter.
The encounter here is with a found intellectual partner, a friend, in the face of a more abstract unknown than a literal place—a relation, a system, what Hans-Jörg Rheinberger calls an epistemic thing.\textsuperscript{17} Actually, Cummings and Lewandowska operate in the historic mode of modernist artistic practice—the space of the experiment—and to some degree their research is encompassed by this idea, investigation materially in an imaginary of a trial, trying something out for a result—here, a performance and intervention as occupying the artistic scene of spectacle. The 1980s critique of the anthropological scene of encounter also introduced something of this artistic idea of the experiment to anthropology—the idea that ethnography is an experiment and that there was even something of this in the originary projects of Malinowski, Raymond Firth, Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, and others. The critique of the tropes of ethnography would not have been possible without this evocation of fieldwork as experimental in the artistic sense.

In recent years, experiment in its natural-sciences sense has been rethought in ways that overlap closely with these art practices and the overlapping sense of experiment in ethnography, especially through the writing of the historian of science Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, who has been very influential among anthropologists working in science and technology studies, a burgeoning arena in which the sort of refunctioning that I have been articulating here has most manifested itself in practice. The account that Rheinberger gives of scientific practice in pursuit of epistemic things resonates with ethnographic inquiry, revised from the regime of conventional empiricism that was its originary model.\textsuperscript{18} This overlap of an artistic and scientific aesthetic of practice around the notion of experiment has been one of the more promising background conceptual environments for carrying out the refunctioning of ethnography at the intersection of art and anthropology that I have been trying here. So, then, experiment is the ground of a compensating aesthetic for the refunctioning of the Malinowskian scene of encounter toward a viable idea of multi-sitedness or non-site-specific fieldwork.

Second, within this reflexively evolved terrain of inquiry, the focus or object of study emerges through the intensity of an operation-like juxtaposition as a probe of inquiry and mediation within an imagined and literal space. The intellectual work that led to the connection between Tate Modern and the Bank of England in Cummings and Lewandowska’s project suggests the sort of conceptual labor or intensities focused on relations at the heart of ethnographic knowing in contemporary fieldwork. Cummings and Lewandowska give up, they go only so far, they let theory do
the work, they impose insights rather than develop sustained collabora-
tions with found counterparts, but they do demonstrate how a different
sort of object emerges from fieldwork that is in terms of a multi-sited
space or imaginary.

Frankly, the intensity of juxtaposition is about a relation that generates
the aesthetic of working in an environment of difference so essential to
fieldwork in the anthropological tradition. It is a remnant or residue of
the liking for the exotic, where the literal exotic no longer exists and, what’s
more, has been critiqued to the extent of being unclaimable. In the revised
terms of the experiment that I have just discussed, the juxtaposition is the
operation that creates the epistemic thing—in Cummings and Lewandow-
ska’s project, it is thinking of Tate as an economy in which its relation to
the Bank of England is not simply metaphorical but manifest and material
in relations of the gift, so to speak, and in the relations that their research
produced, made possible pragmatically by the found connections between
Tate and the Bank of England, both imaginary and real.

Third, the aesthetic compensation for life in a situated community of
the classic scene of ethnography is the partnerships of intellectual collabo-
rations found in fieldwork—mutual aid in pursuit of a common object.
Refunctioned ethnography indeed depends on the development of this
aesthetic long submerged in traditional ethnography, but now takes to
different levels of expression of complexity and expectations of practice. I
will have more to say on this dimension in my final comments of this essay.

Fourth, and perhaps most consequentially, what Cummings and Lew-
andowska’s Tate project suggests for the refunctioning of ethnographic
research in anthropology is a different modality of purpose and result for
ethnography. Mediation or intervention replaces or pushes from primacy
the production of conventional description, analysis leading to an ethnog-
ographic text of the usual purposes, as a contribution to theory, or as an
archive of knowledge accumulated by a collective of disciplinary scholars.
Indeed, in this sense, the ethnography may very well be outmoded. Other
genres serve these functions better. Others now do the kind of description
that ethnography used to do of its old objects just as well, if not more
cogently in its new terrains of interests. In any case, there is no representa-
tion that is unique to anthropology, and, especially for its new objects of
research, there is no collective or specialized disciplinary guild or commu-
nity for it. It is already the case that ethnography is most important to
constituencies that are already found in fieldwork. Yet anthropology does
not exactly know yet how to conceive such a function. In the United States
at least, there is talk of a public anthropology, and there are claims to
activism and activist purpose in its intellectual work. To me, neither of these is convincing; they are symptoms of the uncertainty of purpose of a research practice that once justified itself as part documentation, as part analysis in relation to a growing edifice of general, theoretical knowing about a circumscribed subject matter. The results of ethnographic research today are less clear, certainly more specific, and indeed more ethnographic in quality. This means that ethnographic knowledge creates itself in parallel with and relation to similar functions in the very communities that it makes it subjects. This leads to the more urgent need for modalities of collaboration as method, already mentioned, but also to mediation and intervention as being the primary form and function of the knowledge that ethnography produces. This is similar to what Cummings and Lewandowska attempted in their intervention at Tate, but in a more limited and frankly more superficial way than the more patient, sustained, and ethical relations of ethnographic research in anthropology—something that they rejected as ethical discipline obstructive to their purposes as artists. The clichéd participant observation of traditional ethnography for the archive here is replaced by an aesthetic of collaborative knowledge projects of uncertain closure.

This essay has been an effort to give a sense of what there might be in the research practices of Cummings and Lewandowska’s Tate project for the refuconing of anthropological ethnography, imagined through the systematic redesign of its mythic mise-en-scène—a rethinking of its intensities and its aesthetics through assessing the efforts in contemporary fieldwork projects to morph the Malinowskian scene of encounter and its received norms.19