

Art, Anthropology and the Gift

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B L O O M S B U R Y

I INTRODUCTION: AFTER THE ETHNOGRAPHIC TURN

More than a decade ago, a friend invited me to a gallery opening in Barcelona, Spain. This wasn't exactly a conventional "opening": it didn't consist of a display of artworks. It was a proper, total opening: the storage of the gallery, which is normally closed, was opened for visitors to see and exchange the stored artworks. The gallerist was offering to give away all the art in the storage in exchange for *anything*: t-shirts, toys, purses ... This was not exactly barter, but rather a massive act of gift-giving, since there was no apparent equivalence in value between the artworks and the things given in return. The objective of the gallerist was to question public policy on the arts, and this event gave him the opportunity to appear in the media to make his point. I remember I used the term *potlatch*: it seemed to me that the very act of giving everything away was a form of acquiring a public notoriety (a "face," a "name"), which the gallerist could then use to make his voice heard in public. My artist friends who participated in this event immediately recognized the idea of the potlatch: many of them had read Mauss's *The Gift*, and were explicitly influenced by his ideas.

In the years after this event, I started to follow the work of these artists. Many of them worked on site-specific projects that involved something similar to fieldwork, an investigation of a specific place and its social issues, from immigration to urban gentrification, intellectual property rights, labor conditions ... For example, in the project *Insideout: Jardí del Cambalache* "Garden of Barter" (2001),¹ artist Federico Guzmán and curator Rosa Pera built a whole network of reciprocity in the patio of the Fundació Tàpies, a contemporary art museum in a historical building at the very center of Barcelona. The project was the result of an ethnographic research on the *colonos* ("colonists")—people who occupy abandoned plots of land on the periphery of the city and turn them into gardens. Most of these *colonos* are old rural immigrants who came to Barcelona to work in factories. Many of these gardens were threatened by real estate development. One of the *colonos* was invited to transform the patio of Fundació Tàpies into a garden. The vegetables he cultivated were then offered to the public in exchange for some object—whatever they wanted. The project

also included an exhibit on the use of plants, workshops on how to create urban gardens, and an international conference entitled "Revolutionary Plants—Who Owns Plants?," on the illegal trade in plants used as "drugs," with anthropologist Michael Taussig among its participants. The project ended—it couldn't have been otherwise—with a picnic.

THE SOCIAL TURN

By that time I had started to see that the interest of artists in the social sciences, and anthropology in particular, was something more than keen curiosity. I was witnessing the emergence of a generation of artists who defined their work as "social practice": they were less interested in art as a form of self-expression than in working in public spaces and on specific sites, developing research with social groups, and addressing questions of immediate political relevance. In other words, they were almost like anthropologists; some of them even had a university degree in Anthropology! Many of them said that they were not actually interested in "art" itself, but in the things one can do with art. Their frame of reference was not just art history, but also social and cultural theory, and anthropology in particular; they didn't understand their work only in dialogue with other works of art, either following them or reacting against them, proposing "new" art forms and objects, but in dialogue with the world around them.

Often their work took an explicitly political angle. But it wasn't political just in the sense of "denouncing" or "representing" social and political issues through visual media, film or photography; the objective was to produce events with the participation of people from different backgrounds, who may have a stake or something to say about these very issues, from immigrants to elderly people to international scholars. These events took many different forms, from conferences to picnics, and they would be site-specific, sometimes subverting the use of particular spaces, such as turning art museums into community gardens. The objective of these events was not necessarily to generate "Change" with a capital C, but to create unexpected situations, building unforeseen relations, unconventional and unprecedented associations and communities in a particular location—local, specific changes.

From the mid-1990s, many authors have discussed the affinity between art and anthropology. Hal Foster's article "The artist as ethnographer" (1995) was one of the first to address the increasing interest of artists in anthropology and ethnography. Also around that period, some art historians argued for a paradigm shift: W. J. T. Mitchell described the new field of visual studies as fundamentally grounded on anthropology (1996), and Hans Belting proposed an anthropology of

images (2011). Moreover, from the turn of the twenty-first century, there has been a growing literature on the possibilities of cross-fertilization between art and anthropology, essentially discussing the use of ethnographic methods in art (Coles 2000; Schneider and Wright 2006, 2010, 2013).

Fifteen or so years after that gallery opening in Barcelona, the “social turn” in contemporary art doesn’t seem to have come to an end (Bang Larsen 2012; Thomson 2012). A recent *New York Times* article argues that social practice art is living a boom, as a reaction not just to commercial art but also to wider political transformations like the debt crisis and the emergence of political movements such as Occupy, in which many of these artists are deeply involved (Kennedy 2013).

Just to give an example: in April 2013, I attended the presentation of the “exhibition” *Todas las plantas del Barrio* (“All the plants in the neighborhood”).² The project was based at an autonomous art center in a working-class neighborhood of Barcelona, Poble Sec, called the CCCB (“Centro de Cultivos Contemporáneos de Barrio,” Center for Contemporary Cultivations in the Neighborhood). It shouldn’t be confused with the other local CCCB, the Center for Contemporary Culture in Barcelona, a sleek building downtown, internationally famous for its festivals and exhibits. This second CCCB chose its name partially in ironic reference to the first one. This CCCB is not a big, central public building, but an old house, the last one standing in a scantily illuminated cul-de-sac. Most of the buildings surrounding it have been demolished to make room for the complex of theaters and museums right behind it, “the City of Theater.” This art center has a “showroom” called M2, a square meter of wall, on which the artist has to present a project related to the area surrounding the center—one square kilometer around it. This project in particular proposed a documentation of “all the plants in the neighborhood,” interviewing local people and asking them about their relationship with their plants. In the presentation event, people were asked to bring their plants together and build an ephemeral garden. In exchange, the artist would give drawings, portraits of the people and their plants. The artist is then also an ethnographer, working in fact on a very popular topic in anthropology these days: human/non-human relations. His intention is not just to build an ethnography or archive, but also to contribute to the construction or “mending” of social relations in the neighborhood—in this case, through plants (Figure 1).

There is a clear continuity between *Jardí del Cambalache* and *Todas las plantas del Barrio*, even if they are separated by more than a decade. And yet, through the years, the vicissitudes of the “social turn” have been many. One of them is the ambivalent relation between contemporary art and anthropology. Some anthropologists feel that the opening of anthropologists towards art has not been fully acknowledged by artists (Schneider 2012: 56). On the other hand, in my discussions with art



Figure 1 *All the Plants in the Neighborhood*, Zander Januta (CCCB 2013).

practitioners I often found an interest in anthropology, if perhaps not exactly in the ways predicted by most anthropologists. Although the use of ethnography is a very fruitful common ground, art practitioners seem to like anthropology not just because of its methods, but also because they are interested in anthropological theories of exchange, personhood, and the body, to name a few. Further than that, they understand their engagement with anthropology not just as a new form of producing art, but as a form of social and political engagement.

At this point, it may be time to face the reasons for the gap in this dialogue. We could start by clarifying the concerns that anthropology and art are supposed to share. In this introduction I will identify some possible answers to this question: ethnography, the visual, the politics of representation, participation, social practice, and work.

ETHNOGRAPHY

Most of the literature on the relationship between art and anthropology (Coles 2000; Schneider and Wright 2006, 2010, 2013) has discussed the use of ethnographic methods, and how both disciplines could learn and exchange ideas about the uses of ethnography. Schneider and Wright's groundbreaking volume, *Contemporary Art and Anthropology* (2005) focused on the collaboration between artists and anthropologists at the level of "practice," confronting artistic and anthropological methodologies in representing others. One of the main objectives of these authors was to encourage experimentation and creativity in anthropology itself. Practice, for Schneider and Wright, is understood mainly but not exclusively as visual practice—the use of visual and other media in anthropology:

For anthropologists to engage with art practices means embracing new ways of seeing and new ways of working with visual materials. This implies taking contemporary art seriously on a practical level and being receptive to its idiosyncratic processes of producing works and representing other realities. (Schneider and Wright 2005: 25)

These edited volumes are made of contributions that take two forms: either anthropologists or art critics addressing the work of particular artists and looking at the ethnographic and anthropological themes in them, or artists describing their own practice and/or the outcomes of interdisciplinary collaborations. Many interesting themes emerged in these contributions, from Schneider's complex understanding of "appropriation" (in Schneider and Wright 2005) to Kuchler's subtle reflections on how the theme of the gift informs Sophie Calle's work (Coles 2000). And yet, perhaps because of its fragmented form, these edited volumes can't fully develop an argument on what Schneider and Wright have called the "deeper affinities" (Schneider and Wright 2005: 2) between contemporary art and anthropology at full length, beyond the common use of ethnographic methods. In fact, there are a number of notions—from "practice" and "method" to "experimentation," "expertise," or "skill"—that may need to be discussed further, addressing not just fieldwork, but also what is the "work" that contemporary artists and anthropologists do: it may be necessary to discuss their "practice" beyond the strict framework of art and anthropology as academic disciplines, to understand it in wider terms, as social practice. But before that, we should start by acknowledging that the use of fieldwork by artists and anthropologists alike is just one aspect of their commonality, and that we should discuss a bit further these "deeper affinities," which may not just be methodological.

THE VISUAL

Could these deeper affinities reside not only in the *use* of visual media as a method, but also in the common theoretical concern with “the visual” and “images”? Or even in a wider sense, the media and the senses? In the last decades, the fields of visual anthropology, the anthropology of media, the anthropology of the senses, and visual cultures have been blooming. Approximately at the same time that the “ethnographic turn” emerged, “visual culture” studies started to challenge the autonomy of “Art” as a specific field of study, proposing to expand from art to the totality of the visual. Beyond the elite culture of “Fine Art,” Visual Cultures studies proposed a non-hierarchical approach to visual production, founded on a more anthropological notion of “culture” (Mitchell 1996) as the totality of human practice. The growth of this new paradigm also resulted in an expansion of the theoretical discussion on media and mediation (Mitchell 2005; Belting 2011; Pinney 2011).

And yet, can we subsume contemporary art practice under a general rubric of the visual, the media, or the sensual? A lot of artistic production in the last decades resists the frame of reference of “visual art” or “media art.” The curator of a recent show defined the very notion of “video art” as “totally obsolete” (Fontdevila 2012). This was said in reference to a group show in which he had asked a number of artists to produce a video answering two interrelated issues: the exponential growth of “domestic video” production in the last years, and to what extent video-making has become more associated with “leisure” than “work.” Most of these artists had no specific training in video-making; in fact many contemporary artists do use video, but they don’t define themselves as video artists—they would not accept to be defined by the use or the theory of certain media (visual, related to any other senses, or digital), first of all because most of them are not professionally trained in these media. Many artists may relate to the medium as “users” or “amateurs”—as most people in our society use different forms of media without being professionally trained. One of the key aspects of contemporary art is the simultaneous use of multiple media, as one can often read in galleries’ “mixed media.” But more than the “mixture” of media, these processes show that many artists are not necessarily constrained by the use of a specific medium to produce their work, because they don’t define themselves by their professional training in this or that medium: sculpture, painting, photography, or video. Some artists not only use multiple media, but also multiple “hands”: they often produce their work with the help of skilled, professional workers who are actually able to materialize their projects, or they sample, or re-make. Rather than being professional practitioners of visual media, they often use ready-made objects, images, or techniques, or use the skills of others to make their work.

In many cases, the use of media is not an end in itself, but a means to an end: “art” is not just in the medium. Beyond the use of different visual or sensual “media,” a lot of contemporary art isn’t defined or particularly constrained by the senses. About a hundred years ago, Marcel Duchamp explicitly proposed a “non-retinal” art (Tomkins 1997: 158), in reaction to the formal experimentation that preceded him, from impressionism to cubism. This “non-retinal” art would not be directed just to the senses, but aimed to produce a critical reaction and a response beyond immediate sensory experience. Following Duchamp, in the second half of the twentieth century conceptual art was defined precisely by a “withdrawal from visibility” (Crow 1998: 213). Many contemporary art practices—“conceptual,” “relational,” “contextual,” “situational,” etc.—cannot be characterized mainly, or essentially, as practices of image or sound production, or seeking a visual or sensual engagement from the public, even if they may use visual or other media.

From this perspective, it would be misleading to collapse “art” and “the visual,” “art” and “the senses,” or “art” and “media.” This is not to deny that these are areas of great interest where extraordinary work is being produced, and with direct relevance to the themes we discuss in this book; but many questions being asked in contemporary art practice and in anthropology today escape from this framework.

THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Perhaps these “deeper affinities” of art and anthropology, beyond methods and media, are more “conceptual” than “sensual”? For art scholars like Hal Foster (1995) and Miwon Kwon (in Coles 2000), anthropology and art shared a common theoretical and political concern: the politics of representation. Foster coined the expression “the ethnographic turn,” pointing to the growing interests of artists in issues of identity and its representation in the 1990s. For Foster, ethnography and anthropology are essentially “the science of alterity” (Schneider and Wright 2006: 19). He described the relationship between artist and anthropologist as a kind of mirroring, in which both look at each other as an image of what they would want to be—an “envy”: anthropologists want to be artists, they envy their freedom and openness; while artists want to be anthropologists, they envy their critical perspective, and direct access to cultural alterity. And yet the fact that these images are constructed out of desire prevents each from seeing what the “other” really is. The mutual attraction of artists and anthropologists from the sixties onwards was born out of institutional critique in both disciplines. Institutional critique—the questioning of art as an institution—was paralleled in anthropology by the “crisis of representation” in the eighties (Marcus and Fischer 1986); anthropologists were

becoming increasingly aware of the controversial nature of their own methods, and started to wonder how much the “cultures” they were studying were not the result of their own construction, and/or if it was really possible to reach the real cultural “other” in its own terms. As Foster pointed out, one of the initial reactions of a generation of anthropologists in the eighties was to seek for new, more creative, experimental forms of writing ethnography, partially inspired by the idealized figure of the artist (Marcus and Fischer 1986; Clifford 1988).

The “ethnographic turn” in art was the mirror image of the “literary turn” (Scholte 1987) in anthropology. As a generation of artists reacted against the autonomy of art and its institutions, Foster argued, they started to seek inspiration in anthropology because it was perceived as self-critical, counter-hegemonic, and based in cultural alterity. And yet, Foster also argued, by disguising themselves as anthropologists, artists often take for granted what anthropologists had been questioning for decades: their own authority. From the perspective of artists, it seems that becoming an anthropologist is critical enough; the artist does not take a critical approach to her or his position as an anthropologist—the relation with the “other.” Thus artists may end up projecting their own vision on the community “other,” building a representation that appears as authentic and politically engaged, without ever having had a critical understanding of who this “other” really is.

It is difficult to assess the extent of Foster’s criticism, since he didn’t make specific reference to projects that involved fieldwork. In fact, for Foster, the “ethnographic” question was one of representation: he was making reference to ethnography as text. This was indeed the central contention of the “literary turn” in anthropology. The paradox of this move, as some of its own proponents later observed (Marcus 2010), was that the “experimental” moment in anthropology focused on writing the ethnography, rather than in fieldwork itself.

Foster’s article was also published as a part of an influential edited volume by anthropologists Fred Myers and George Marcus, *The Traffic in Culture* (1995), which addressed contemporary art as “one of the main sites for tracking, representing, and performing the effects of difference in contemporary life” (Marcus and Myers 1995: 1). This drift of art towards cultural critique paradoxically implied, according to these authors, the need for art to accept its loss of autonomy, and its progressive merge with anthropology and other forms of cultural critique (Marcus and Myers 1995: 24).

The appeal of anthropology in the mid-nineties was based on the hope that it would provide a critical approach to the politics of representation, proposing a more democratic, transnational approach to “culture” against the autonomy of hierarchy of “Art” as a Western construct, even in spite of Foster’s skepticism of the ethnographer’s envy in art. Yet this new announcement of the death of “Art,” as a Western

institution, seems to have fallen short of what actually happened in the following years: rather than imploding, "Contemporary Art" has flourished. Art centers, festivals, events, and practitioners have multiplied around the globe on an unprecedented scale (Gielen 2010), engaging new publics. Beyond the reflection on identity and representation that was at the center of Foster's "ethnographic turn," many art projects from the turn of the twenty-first century engage with social practice at large, experimenting with participative methods (Bishop 2012). Rather than showing works that discuss identity politics, they enact specific social events and situations; from art practices that talked about stuff to people, to art that actually does stuff together with people.

RELATIONS

The work of Félix González-Torres can exemplify the beginnings of this shift. Being gay, and classified by US ethnic categories as Latino, he nonetheless resisted being identified as a token or representative of any community. "Who is going to define my culture?" González-Torres asked once; "it is not just Borges and García Márquez, but also Gertrude Stein and Freud and Guy Debord" (Rollins 1996: 90). The politics of culture and gender were unquestionably important for González-Torres, and they were an integral part of his work. But his work also had a strong focus on what he called "everyday life": "It is very exciting to take something that is there in everyday life and create from it something out of the ordinary, to give that ordinary object or situation a new meaning with a great economy of means" (Rollins 1996: 92). Some of González-Torres's more emblematic works are piles of candy in geometrical shapes, rectangular carpets or pyramids leaning against a wall, all "Untitled." They were left "in process": the aim of González-Torres was that the audience took the candy, and then the pile has to be filled up again by the gallery or the museum. These pieces were made as "portraits" of people he loved and who had died (including his partner, and his father), but two are also a double portrait of him and his lover. This work is often read as a reflection on death, and more specifically in relation to AIDS; both González-Torres and his partner died of AIDS. But together with what his work represents, the very process they enact seems to be central to the "portraits"—the process by which they are constantly being deconstructed and reconstructed back to their original weight³ in an endless act of gift-giving.

Rirkrit Tiravanija's work has raised similar questions. An artist of Thai origin, Tiravanija was born in Argentina, lives in New York, Berlin, and Thailand, and has no specific claims to represent a "subaltern" or non-Western culture. Tiravanija's first shows basically consisted in cooking meals for the people who visited the gallery.

The aim was to bring people together, participating in a meal. For Tiravanija, “It is not what you see that is important but what takes place between people.”⁴ Or in other words, his aim is to *do* something with art beyond the art object itself.⁵ For example, in the workshop “Disruption” at the art production center Can Xalant, on the outskirts of Barcelona, he spent a week with young artists, who shared their work, hung out and cooked together with Tiravanija. The outcome of the workshop was meager in material terms: some pictures of the event, at most. One of them shows the group of young artists wearing masks with Tiravanija’s face next to Tiravanija himself (Figure 2). The main objective of the workshop was not to produce an exhibit, but precisely to generate an ephemeral community.

More than what they *represent*, what is interesting about González-Torres’s and Tiravanija’s work is what they make happen: a situation of encounter, a social relation. Both Tiravanija and González-Torres were central to Nicolas Bourriaud’s arguments in *Relational Esthetics* (2002). Bourriaud described the “relational art” of these artists as “taking as its theoretical horizon the whole of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space” (2002: 14). The real object of González-Torres’s or Tiravanija’s work is to invite people to eat and talk to each other, to construct a (perhaps ephemeral) social relation. For Bourriaud, relational art is a situation of encounter (Bourriaud 2002: 18): “All works of art produce a model of sociability, which transposes reality or



Figure 2 *Disruption*, workshop with Rirkrit Tiravanija, Can Xalant (Can Xalant 2009).

might be conveyed by it" (2002: 18). The form of the artwork is in the relations it establishes: to produce a form is to create the conditions for an exchange. In other words, the form of the artwork is in the exchange with the audience. In these terms, the artist becomes more a mediator, a person who fosters and provides situations of exchange, than a creator of objects. For Bourriaud, these art practices establish particular social relations for particular people; the artist tries to keep a personal contact with the public that participates in the exchange, fostering what he calls a "friendship culture" (Bourriaud 2002: 32), in contraposition to the impersonal, mass production of the culture industries.

The relational aesthetics that Bourriaud describes is in many ways familiar to anthropologists. From Marilyn Strathern's work in *The Gender of the Gift*, anthropologists have been discussing ontologies in which relations take precedence over entities: "it is at the point of interaction that a singular identity is established" (Strathern 1988: 128). From this perspective, people are constantly being made and re-made through relations, and things are constantly being created not in contradistinction to persons but "out of persons" (Strathern 1988: 172). Through gifts, people give a part of themselves. They are not something that stands for them, a representation, but they are "extracted from one and absorbed by another" (Strathern 1988: 178). This continuity between people and things is what she called a "mediated exchange," as opposed to the unmediated exchange of commodities, which is based on a fundamental discontinuity between people and things (Strathern 1988: 192).

In this book we will question to what extent the concepts of "relation" used by Bourriaud and Strathern are really the same. But at this point, it is interesting to note how the gift, a central concept in anthropology, is also very important in contemporary art. In his seminal essay *The Gift*, Mauss famously said that "*On se donne en donnant*" (Mauss 2003: 227), "one gives one's self while giving." With that expression, Mauss implied that social persons may not be just single minds in single bodies, but they can be constituted by an assemblage of elements, including bodies, things, names, that may be physically detached from one another while remaining the same.

Strathern's notion of the "partible person" is partially grounded on the work of Mauss in *The Gift*. Alfred Gell developed further this idea of the "partible" or "distributed person" in *Art and Agency* (1998). There, Gell argued that works of art can be seen as persons "because as social persons, we are present not just in our singular bodies, but in everything in our surroundings which bears witness to our existence, our attributes, and our agency" (Gell 1998: 103). For Gell this is not an exotic belief of Hindu priests and voodoo sorcerers—on the contrary, he affirms that works of art are some of the more accomplished objectifications of human agency.

Gell was not looking at art as a social text; he was looking at works of art as actors, as participants in social action. He didn't think that the task of anthropology was just to decode what objects represent, how they can be read to understand a social "context," but their effects; not what they stand for, but what they do. In this sense, he was not simply saying that the artwork is a "distributed person" of the artist. He went further than that: artworks can contain several different agencies, from the artist, to the person represented or the person who commissioned it, to the person who bought it, to the curator who is displaying it. An artwork can be a "trap of agencies," sometimes contradictory, sometimes complementary (Gell 1999).

The examples used by Bourriaud could be easily applied to Gell's arguments. González-Torres's candy pieces are candid traps, part of the "distributed person" of the artist, but also "portraits" of other people—and sometimes of other people and himself: double portraits of the artist and the person "portrayed." They are also engaging the public, by making them contribute to the work; the audience becomes a part of the work—"portrayed" by their very act of taking candy, "extracted from one and absorbed by another," as Marilyn Strathern would say. Rirkrit Tiravanija's events are equally textbook examples of the theory of the "distributed person"; the in-joke of the young artist residents wearing Tiravanija's masks next to Tiravanija is a direct example of the very notion of the "distributed person." It looks like Gell elaborated his theory in perfect synchrony with the art of the time, to a greater extent that he may have actually imagined.

But at this point one could ask, whose "distributed person" is this? Tiravanija and González-Torres include audiences and workshop participants into their work, but it is still their work: they have the power to decide what constitutes art, they are the authors, while the participants seem to be a part of the process of production. It looks like the "friendship culture" of these artworks is not necessarily based on a premise of absolute equality between artist and public, and even less the cancellation of the distinction of one and the other, art and everyday life, but rather a play between them. Still, as we will see, this does not necessarily question the utility of notions of the gift and the distributed person to describe these practices; anthropological theories of the gift are not a celebration of egalitarianism and community-building, but they also underscore the aspects of hierarchy and the relations of power that these practices may entail. On the other hand, what may be interesting about these forms of art from an anthropological perspective is how they propose a kind of experimental laboratory of the minimal elements of everyday life, the basic forms of social relation, like an act of gift-giving, with all its ambiguity, by putting them into play in unexpected ways.

SOCIAL PRACTICE

“Relational aesthetics” has been questioned from different perspectives. One of the more immediate criticisms was that it enclosed “social relations” in the sphere of art spaces, galleries, and museums, where these ephemeral events took place; its criticism of mass culture appeared as an elitist reaction (Thomson 2012; Kester 2011). As opposed to the enclosure in the art space, many art collectives and activist groups in the last decades have been working in specific sites: a neighborhood, a town, a “field.” Stepping outside the gallery space, these artists have proposed explicitly social and political forms of work. The aim of their projects is not just to enact social relations, but to intervene in actually existing contexts—to have a social and political effect.

These practices have been described in different terms: contextual (Ardenne 2002), dialogical or collaborative (Kester 2011), socially engaged (Thomson 2012), social practice (Jackson 2011), situational practice (Oliver and Badham 2013)—different denominations that are not exactly synonymous. As I mentioned before, these forms of practice have often adopted a rather instrumental approach to the institution of “Art,” using it for other ends; “Art” can be a particularly well-suited means to actually do things other than artworks, including many other kinds of exchanges and social events from conferences or workshops to parties and demonstrations, refurbishing parks and schools, or providing legal documents to illegalized immigrants. Moving further than relational aesthetics, one could say that in these practices, artists are not just generic mediators in an art event, but they are proposing an actual intervention in the thread of social life.

Anthropology can be important for these practices not just because it provides a method, ethnography, that can help to establish these relations of participation, but also important in relation to their ends. The objectives of these projects are often explicitly political, not just in the sense of representing a particular community, but also in order to challenge the existing forms of the social in a particular site. The problems addressed can be of many kinds: from labor, to the commodification of social relations, to citizenship and immigration, real-estate speculation and gentrification, ecology, gender roles, etc.—all issues that constitute the fabric of everyday life in the context in which they are working. These projects can question or unveil the hidden reality of these existing relations, but they may also propose unprecedented relations between different actors, generating new alliances and communities—in other words, help re-imagine and rebuild the social at a local level. The function of anthropology in these projects would go beyond giving the tools to represent “the other” through ethnography, but it could also provide conceptual tools to question existing relations and imagine other possibilities. This interest in questioning and

re-imagining the social may take artists to anthropological theories of exchange and the gift, for example, as forms of relation based in participation and collaboration, in opposition to commodity exchange and the alienation of labor.

But of course, these projects can also raise many questions, just like the “relational aesthetics” that sometimes they criticize. What is the agency of the artist in these processes? What does local participation or collaboration entail? To what extent are the artists imposing their program on the participants? Why would artists have the privilege to help, or inform, others? What are the effects of these practices? What “changes” are being brought about? These are not just practical, but also conceptual questions: ultimately, what do terms like “social practice,” “exchange,” “participation,” “relation,” and, finally, “gift” really mean in these situations?

Indeed art as social practice is a contentious issue. In their last volume, Schneider and Wright (2013) explicitly question the use of terms like “participation” and “collaboration,” which have been subject to much critical scrutiny in anthropology (Schneider and Wright 2013: 11). But precisely, this explicit engagement with questions that were traditionally the domain of the social sciences is what makes these practices interesting for anthropology—not just because anthropologists can teach art practitioners to be more reflexive on their own practices, but also in the opposite sense: the expanded field of art as social practice appears as a field of experimentation, where all these concepts, from practice itself to participation, collaboration, work, relation, gift ... are put into play. Social practice art is interesting for anthropologists not just as a field of study, an object of fieldwork, but also a form of work that can help anthropologists think about, or perhaps better tinker with, these issues from a different perspective; perhaps it can even help anthropology play with its own work from a different point of view. The objective of this book is precisely to explore these possibilities of play.

WORK

This last point on work is related to an argument recently proposed by Tim Ingold. His book, *Making: Anthropology, Archeology, Art and Architecture* (2013) starts with the provocative statement that what renders art practice compatible with anthropology is precisely what makes it incompatible with ethnography. For Ingold, art practice is speculative, experimental and open-ended. Ethnography, on the other hand, is committed to “descriptive accuracy” (Ingold 2013: 8). In other words, Ingold understands ethnography as a text, a document, rather than a process; ethnography should be compared to art history, as a retrospective objectification of art, rather than art practice. But anthropology cannot be reduced to ethnography.

Anthropological fieldwork—what Ingold calls simply “anthropology”—is a kind of learning whose aim is not so much to provide us with facts *about* the world as to enable us to be taught *by* it (2013: 3). Anthropology is a studying *with* and learning *from*, as a living process that transforms the researcher (ibid.). As opposed to anthropology, ethnography would be a study *of* and learning *about*, as a document separated from the researcher.

Art practice, as a living, on-going engagement with the world, letting oneself be affected by this world, would be more akin to anthropology than ethnography. In these terms, Ingold thinks that art practice could help anthropology in rethinking its practice in different ways from ethnography—in doing anthropology differently. For Ingold, the results of anthropological research could include drawings, paintings, works of craft, musical compositions, perhaps even buildings ... (Ingold 2013: 8).

It is clear that Ingold’s understanding of “art” is a bit different from what we have been discussing: art projects that involve social processes rather than the production of objects—either paintings, crafts, or buildings. But on the other hand, it could be said that engaging with art as social practice could only contribute to Ingold’s ideas; these are speculative and experimental art processes, which result in a direct involvement with a world of life, have transformative effects, and often remain open-ended, “in process,” without any final, definitive outcomes. In fact, Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov (2013) has recently asked very similar questions, if starting from a very different place: conceptual art. Ssorin-Chaikov proposes an “ethnographic conceptualism” that explicitly constructs the reality it studies, as opposed to claiming to represent an already existing reality. In this sense, ethnographic conceptualism takes a performative and transformative approach to the social field, like conceptual and social art practice.

Ssorin-Chaikov’s proposal parallels George Marcus’s recent interest in rethinking experimental forms of ethnography beyond the textual emphasis of the “literary turn” in anthropology in the eighties. For Marcus, experimentation has shifted from the textual outcomes to fieldwork practices themselves; these practices today are not only multi-sited, but participative and collaborative, and their outcome may not be the traditional ethnographic monograph, but it may take many other, more ephemeral and indeterminate forms (Marcus 2010).

Ingold, Ssorin-Chaikov and Marcus start from very different approaches to art and ethnography—in fact they don’t seem to use the terms in the same way. But still, the three of them are interested in how experimental and performative forms of work in art can inform anthropology. Paradoxically, these proposals could be read as going back to where we started: one could say that they are not so far away from earlier discussions on the relation of art and ethnography as experimental practice. Perhaps the difference is mainly of degree: these last authors are asking similar

questions, but more widely, not just in terms of proposing an interdisciplinary engagement, but questioning what constitutes the practice of anthropology, in general—what constitutes the work of anthropologists.

But on the other hand, most of these authors haven't engaged with the discussions on the very question of "work" in art practice and theory in the last few years, in the context of a wider intellectual and political debate on the new forms of labor at the beginning of the twenty-first century, from discourses of the "creative economy" to theories of "immaterial labor." The interest of some contemporary art practitioners in intangible social relations and open processes, as opposed to the production of finished objects, can be seen as the result of a conscious critical approach to the division of labor and commodification in the modern world, the separation of work and play, commodities and social relations. If anthropologists want to engage with artistic forms of work, they can't step aside this critique, and the wider political discussions on the changing conditions of labor in general. The last chapters of this book will focus on these issues.

AN ANTI-DISCIPLINARY APPROACH

Perhaps at this point one could ask, to what extent are all these really *new* issues? Participation, the fusion of art and everyday life, the division of work and play, have been long-standing questions in art for most of the twentieth century, even if in the last decades they have taken a particular shape (Bishop 2012). In the same way, the relationship of art and anthropology has been intense and contentious for a long time. The concept of the "gift," in particular, as we will see in this book, has a long history of exchanges and misunderstandings between both fields. For Marcus and Myers, "Art and Anthropology are rooted in a common tradition, both situated in a critical stance toward the 'modernity' of which we are both a part" (Marcus and Myers 1995: 6). Both emerged not just as academic disciplines but as critical forms of knowledge that challenged classical Western notions of exchange, personhood, production, and the relation of people and things. The gift, as a concept, a practice, a prototype, is at the center of this challenge.

Anthropology and art have a very specific common historicity, which at many points has exceeded the framework of the institutions that contained them. This introduction has started from the immediate past, the last couple of decades, but in the next chapters we will take a larger historical perspective, behind the "ethnographic turn," taking us back to the origins of both modern anthropology and avant-garde art at the beginning of the twentieth century, and at some points even to the origins of what Rancière (2004) has called "The Aesthetic Regime."

In this sense, this book has no particular claim at proposing what is “new” in the relationship of art and anthropology, as opposed to the past; it is true that in the last years, after the so-called “ethnographic turn,” this relationship has become more intense and has been the object of more close attention than before. But many of the core features of this relationship should be described in their long historical trajectories.

Having said this, it is inevitable that such an approach across the borders of art and anthropology may seem to address some questions superficially from a disciplinary perspective. This book has been designed as an attempt to build a bridge between different publics, with different traditions of thought which often use different terms, or use similar terms in different ways. One of the common problems of the dialogue gap between artists and anthropologists is the use of misnomers: sometimes when referring to “aesthetics” or the “gift,” we are not exactly talking about the same things, or at the same level of engagement. Sometimes we can’t take things for granted, and because of that, in this book I will have to spend some time addressing notions that may look obvious to some, but less clear to others.

To illustrate these topics, I will use different cases, ranging from well-known examples of contemporary international art to projects from my own research in Barcelona. But this is not an ethnography; my objective is not to describe a particular field site. Neither is it to write an art history or geography of art, or to propose a genealogy or cartography of Art–Anthropology exchanges through its more representative artworks and/or ethnographies. Even further from my intention is the idea of giving a critical assessment of what would be “good” and “bad” examples of these exchanges. My objective is more specific: to look at this relationship from the particular perspective of questions like participation, the relation of art and life, work ... and in particular, the gift, with all its ambiguities.

The task of writing this book, trying to maintain its intellectual rigor while keeping the argument open to different publics, has not been easy, but I hope it achieves its objective: to propose a common ground from which the dialogue between art and anthropology can be brought forward. One of the main things I have learned, while doing research for this book, is that interdisciplinarity should not necessarily start from defining one’s own field of expertise, but by questioning the very notion of expertise and the “ownership” of certain ideas, and daring to think from scratch—starting from our ignorance, rather than from our expert knowledge. Perhaps better than an “interdisciplinary” approach we should start from an anti-disciplinary approach.

THE BOOK

The chapters of the book are organized around questions rather than case studies. After this introduction, Chapter 2, "Art as Anthropology," offers a very general introduction to how artistic practice has dealt with anthropological questions, and conversely, how it has been influential in anthropology. The chapter is not an exhaustive history, but rather it concentrates on three periods or cases: Dadaism and surrealism, situationism and performativity, and the "ethnographic turn" at the turn of the twenty-first century. This chapter will frame many of the issues that the next chapters will address: representation, aesthetics and politics, the gift and participation, work and life, fieldwork and everyday life.

Chapter 3, "Traps and Devices," starts with the claim formulated in this introduction, that art and anthropology have moved beyond the "politics of representation." It starts by discussing the anthropological approaches to art in the last decades, culminating in the work of Alfred Gell, who proposed a way out of the framework of "representation," looking at what art does, rather than what it stands for. But as we will see, his approach has some drawbacks. The second part of the chapter looks at how Gell's approach can be complemented by theories of the device in contemporary art.

Chapter 4 discusses the contentious question of "Aesthetics." Since the nineties several anthropologists (starting with Gell) proposed to go "beyond aesthetics" in the study of art. Western aesthetics was subject to different criticisms: too culturally specific, elitist, and intellectualist. Gell proposed a "methodological philistinism": to study art beyond aesthetics. On the other hand, art theory and practice by the nineties was also very critical of aesthetics: "institutional critique" was the dominant paradigm. In the last decades, all these criticisms of aesthetics, both from art and anthropology, have been partially re-evaluated through the work of Rancière, who postulates that aesthetics is always political, and that politics always implies a particular distribution of the sensible. This chapter emphasizes how Rancière's argument is grounded on the very origins of modern aesthetics. But it also points out the limitation of Rancière's vision of politics, which essentially maintains a division between people and things as subjects and objects of political action that contemporary anthropology and artistic practice may bring into question.

This argument will lead to Chapter 5, "Participation and the Gift." This chapter compares anthropological and artistic approaches to the question of the gift, in particular in relation to contemporary practices of participation in art. In most cases art practice sees the gift as an expression of individual freedom, while the anthropological literature has often underscored the agonistic aspects of the gift, as a form of building hierarchy, fame, people, and things. And yet beyond these contrasting

perspectives, there is a third, critical understanding of the gift as a form of transgression. These multiple understandings of the gift as a social relation can offer a wider perspective on contemporary debates on participation in art.

The question of the "gift" in anthropology is inextricably linked to the discussion of the notion of the person. One of the central points of gift theory in anthropology is, precisely, the reversibility of people and things as objects and subjects of exchange. In the following Chapter 6, "Work and Life," I propose to address the notion of the distributed person in relation to theories of artistic production in contemporary art, including recent discussions on immaterial labor, and the bio-politics of the "project" in the "new spirit of capitalism." From there, the chapter will move to more general considerations on work, expertise, improvisation, and skill both in art and anthropology.

Chapter 7, "Fields and Labs," brings the discussion back to anthropology, starting with the question: what can participative and experimental art practices teach anthropologists about their own work? This question will be addressed within the larger framework of collective experimentation, and the questioning of traditional divisions between experts and lay people, laboratories and everyday life.

The final chapter of the book, "Ethnography and Utopia," brings together the themes discussed in the previous chapters, in the context of the economic and political "crisis" of the Western world in the last years, and the intense political and cultural mobilization around movements like 15-M or Occupy, which not only respond to this crisis, but also propose alternatives to the society that generated it. The question of "utopia" will have appeared previously in the book in a more anecdotal form, but in this chapter it will be central.