Participatory Art and Participant Observation
Exploring Social Relationships through Interdisciplinary Practices

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Abstract
This paper concerns participative practices that draw from both art and anthropology. Through an interdisciplinary perspective, it presents creative overlaps and possible exchanges between the respective knowledge fields. The particular setting is an intervention in a suburban London shopping centre that was part of an exploration of migration and diasporic existence. The event was organised by the author in collaboration with an artist and a refugee centre who have a background in the Tamil regions of Sri Lanka. It investigated Tamil relationships with the British environment, and challenged the lack of Tamil visibility. While this kind of interdisciplinary methods provide inviting challenges, the researcher often has to adapt to institutional claims of particular expertise at the stage of research disseminating. However, this paper suggests that maintained interactions between two disciplines, which both are directed towards qualitative social encounters and their performative effects, constitute a strong foundation for counteracting the current audit culture in academia.

Keywords: participation, anthropology, art, methodology, research dissemination, diaspora.

Introduction
The atmosphere was infused with excitement when Riita finally announced that it was time to begin to draw. After hours of preparations in a London suburb; putting up the two party tents facing the lane between the main shopping street and the mall; hanging the pictures inside the tents drawn during the preparatory workshop at the local Tamil refugee centre; cleaning the ground with brooms aided by heavy rain; allocating the white rice flour to draw with into small bowls and mixing some portions with coloured powder; around nine women and girls took up a bowl in their left hand, filled the space between their thumb and first fingers on their right hand with rice flour, and started to draw dots
and lines on the ground. Their rhythmical movements of drawing a small section, filling up with more flour, drawing the next section, slowly evolved into symmetrical designs. These designs, kolam, are made by Tamil women in front of their houses in India and Sri Lanka to increase the well-being of the family and the surrounding community, as well as to create femininity in its maker. Riita, considered to be the local expert, took the lead under one tent and soon her guidance and the joint activities made white structures and coloured fields float out across the lane. The actions under the other tent was initiated by the artist Hari and his interest in challenging the boundaries of the kolam practice, particularly its gendered aspects, spurred various explorative forms that also incorporated memories of violence and the civil war left behind in Sri Lanka. People passing by on their way to shopping errands were invited to participate in the drawing. Some took the time to look, others started dialogues, but soon the number of drawing participants also increased. Way into the afternoon, the participants transformed the commercially driven environment into a playful collaborative investigation.

This paper will look further into the above event ‘Making kolams in London’ and critically reflect on its aims and effects. The event took place in southeast London during 2012. Embedded in a research project on Tamil migrants in the UK, it explored relationships between people and their changing environments. Kolam making, a practice performed as part of everyday life in the Tamil regions in South Asia but rarely seen in the British setting, provided a collective tool directed towards an expansion of Tamil public presence and visibility. It challenged British aesthetics which had made women refrain from making kolam in their new neighbourhoods. The event was co-organised by a refugee centre in the area, the artist Hari Rajaledchumy, and myself, who is both an artist and an anthropologist. The kolam action can be described as an intervention positioned in the intersection between artistic and anthropological practices. It performed two kinds of interventions; in the public environment informed by notions of ethnic boundaries and in the academic setting informed by ideas
of autonomous disciplines. The interdisciplinary approach investigates what participation might be in this kind of social action. Does the sense of shared authorship associated with the term participation emerge in this setting? Can the participants be understood as co-producers or are they mainly manufacturers of the artist’s/researcher’s ideas and fame? The first section of the paper will analyse the kolam event as a participatory practice and an experimental method of qualitative research. In the second section, the attention shifts towards research outputs. How can the transgressive approach be maintained through the dissemination when academia’s audit culture fosters singularity in terms of authorship and discipline? This paper suggests that cross-overs between artistic and anthropological practices, as exemplified by the kolam event, can provide alternatives to the increasing focus on efficiency-standards within academic assessment regimes without loosing sight of the need for accountability.

**Participation and social exchange**

From an anthropological perspective, the kolam event can be incorporated into the broad term participant observation which defines the qualitative methods of ethnographic fieldwork. Within the framework of art practice, the same action can be defined as participatory art. Both disciplines attend to relationships and circumstances that cannot be predicted in advance; improvisation and openness to chance are often central to their methods of investigation. Both knowledge fields also incorporate certain aims to improve political issues for subaltern groups and have used provocative methods of participatory actions to challenge hegemonic structures, as discussed within anthropology by Sarah Pink (2004), Arnd Schneider and Chris Wright (2006, 2009, 2013) and within art practice by Grant Kester (2004) and Clare Bishop (2012). But it has been pointed out from the respective fields that these social interventions also entail the risk of reproducing the relations they aim to challenge (Bishop 2012; Kwon 2002; Schneider and Wright 2013). In a recent work that brings art and anthropology into theoretical dialogue, Roger Sansi investigates this risk (2015). He shows that the notion of participation in socially engaged practices rests on different grounds in art and anthropology and suggests that both practices might improve by connecting their frameworks. The differences are outlined through theories of social exchange and the gift within the respective knowledge fields. Sansi’s suggestion will here be used to elucidate different aspects of the kolam event and its relation to participation.

After the kolam intervention, the collaboration between Hari and myself transposed as my research increasingly focused on Tamil diaspora artists, of whom he is one. But we continued to discuss the event. Had the performance actually had any effects? On what terms did people participate? We talked about my whiteness in this suburban ‘ethnic ghetto’ (Hari’s expression) and his transsexuality within a specifically feminine practice. A main concern was thus our positions in relation to intersecting hierarchies: between the environment and the event, between researcher and researched, and also within the Tamil group. Our way of thinking was informed by theories in anthropology and sociology that analyses power relations, and, particularly in Hari’s case, by experiences of struggling with hierarchical boundaries around us.

Sansi has developed the notion of participation in relation to socially engaged art practices through theories of the gift in art and anthropology (2015). He illuminates how differentiating points of entry in the respective disciplines direct the artist’s/researcher’s work, and he proposes a transgressive middle ground that might open new possibilities. In art theory, Lewis Hyde has developed the notion of the free and spontaneous gift (Sansi 2015: 94). It is a friendly exchange performed between equals. This notion of the free personal gift is linked to the development of modern aesthetics, and both concepts were established in relation to utilitarianism and the ideology of equality, freedom and individuality (ibid: 96). As a friendly exchange, the participatory project can
develop new collectives that work together for the common good. But what about the risk of reproducing existing hierarchies? Anthropological theories on the gift are based on the work of Marcel Mauss, who stressed the notion of obligation linked to the reproduction of hierarchies in gift giving (1990 [1925]). From this perspective, every exchange entails the requirement to give, receive, and reciprocate. Mauss’s theory is founded on the idea of the distributed person where subjects and subjects, as well as subjects and objects, are closely linked. To give away an object is thus also to give away part of oneself, and of one’s community. Sansi suggests that art theory would benefit from the analytical tools anthropological theories of the gift, further developed by Marilyn Strathern (1988), provide. They make it possible to discuss if the artist or anthropologist, as the organiser of an event that aims for a certain outcome, re-establishes an order where s/he is in control and can increase their individual reputation rather than allow for co-production and improvisation (Sansi ibid: 102).

Ethnographic fieldwork aims for shared authority and the kolam event was planned through this perspective. The first initiative was voiced by the coordinator at the refugee centre, Rani Nagulendran, who during my pre-study a year earlier suggested that we should organise a kolam competition when I came back. My interest in kolam making¹ had become an incentive to reconnect with the practice (Laine 2012) and Rani saw an opportunity to create an auspicious and joyful event. Hari was keen on co-organising, and like myself, he argued for an experimental and improvisational rather than competitive approach. As Riita Gnaniah was considered the expert, she took on the leading role in the actual drawing and aimed to share the knowledge she embodies since childhood in India. My main aim was to investigate the participants’ relationship with the kolam practice, and with their uncertain position in the British environment. Different points of views were negotiated into a joint aim to perform an intervention that claimed an expansion of Tamil public space and invited passers-by to engage in a creative action.

The effect of the event was a momentary transformation of a space dominated by whiteness and an increase of both racism and ethnic boundaries. It was taken over by Tamil femininity and the possibility to make things together with people of various backgrounds in the area. Among the Tamils, it further created a shared pleasure in the capacity to collectively reconnect with a familiar practice and the memories it embodies. It is also important to acknowledge that the event incorporated elements of reproduced hierarchies. But instead of focusing on a dichotomy between migrants and locals, I would like to point out that the Tamil as a collective also embodies power relations which make the connections to the British surroundings more complex. In South Asia, it is the prerogative of women to make kolams and the designs have to be made in a certain way to have the right effect. This idea was embodied in the event where Riita held authority and together with the other adult women made sure that the girls followed. Hari’s experimental attitude was on the other hand allowed, perceived as a young man he was not expected to do it right and it did not matter if he ‘failed’. In this sense, gender and age hierarchies we reproduced. During this stage of conducting research that traverses art and anthropology, its interdisciplinarity was an inviting challenge.

**Representation and performatve effects**

Participatory practices like the kolam event, emerge as social encounters in the messy ambiguities and intimacies of everyday life. Knowledge is produced and embodied through experiments and experiences during collective acts. The anthropological standard procedure of transforming the performative encounters of fieldwork into research output has been the process of writing up and delivering a logical and conclusive representation. The academic text, and later the documentary film, with their coherent linear structures of introduction, description and inference, constitute the ideal

¹ Based on my PhD research in South India 2005-6 (Laine 2009).
formats. But there is also internal criticism within anthropological practice regarding this closure, and an increasing number of scholars look at possible experiments with research presentation.

Tim Ingold argues that art practice can help anthropologists rethink their way of working into a more processual form (2011, 2013). He further suggests that the larger attention to openness and experiments in art can provide tools to avoid presentations where the experiential knowledge produced during fieldwork become bound by a finished text or document, a closed retrospective lacking future (Ingold 2013). For example, we could incorporate drawing as a means to overcome the gap between moving observation during fieldwork and the final written description.

Ingold shows how an abstract gestural open line drawing, rather than the expected informative detailed kind, can express an observation as ongoing. The beholder has to look with it, instead of at it, in order to grasp the movement and continuity it aims to convey (Ingold 2011). This phenomenological approach is related to a trajectory within visual and sensuous anthropology that argues for the capacity of visual media to evoke tactile experiences and sensory details in ways that are difficult to accomplish through descriptive and detached texts (MacDoughall 1997, Pink 2006). It is further emphasized that the difficulties to uphold a distinction between fieldwork and its outcome is connected to shifting contexts where the scholar and the informant often share practices and discourses. Simultaneously, the geographical distance between fieldwork and the academic institution no longer holds (Sansi 2015: 144).

Hari and myself discussed how the kolam event could be articulated as research output that remained an open continuity with shared authority, aims that I have tried to incorporate throughout my research (Laine 2009, 2012a, 2012b). When the University of Westminster organised a symposium on ‘South Asian floor-drawings and murals’ in 2013, we decided to make a shared presentation. We agreed on a continuation of the idea that informed the suburban event: to challenge the social relationships at the site of performance and investigate the action’s performative effects. In addition to the expected analytical paper with a power point of what already had taken place, we invited the audience to become participants in a direct continuation of the previous event. They were thus handed paper and rice flour and became immersed in experiential learning. The action addressed tactile and moving dimensions of social life, and evoked the participants close attention rather than showed a stable representation where they could remain passive.

The scholars at Westminster were specialists in social science and the humanities who gave the standard presentation, except one who was an artist and made a kolam on stage while the audience could watch. They performed what Sansi refers to as ‘legitimate forms of obtaining recognition’ within one’s field of expertise (2015: 154). He points at the problem of maintaining the politics of social experimentation in the participative process when it comes to research output framed by the politics of academia. The aim of constituting the participants as co-researchers in collaborative events is usually transformed by the disciplinary preference of a single author of a coherent thesis. In art as well as anthropology, the prestigious institutions that provide professional careers continuously claim certain autonomy in relation to other disciplines. To be included, it is necessary to enact the right kind of expertise. However, many participants at the symposium argued that the collective kolam drawing Hari and myself organised had been an excellent addition in their learning about South Asian drawing. This action (along with my video which conveys the kolam making in South India through the concept rhythm) was perceived as a creative moment within the framework of an academic institution. But aware of its limits, we did not dare to announce our intervention to the organisers on beforehand.

**Conclusion**

The kolam event benefitted from its position between art and anthropology. The improvisational aspects of participant observation were strengthened through the incorporation of experimental and
provocative approaches in participatory art practice. Simultaneously, anthropological theories that emphasize hierarchies and obligation within exchange and gift-giving provided tools for investigating how social relationships were affected in the process. In its academic continuation, the kolam action was well received as a complement to the expected conclusive representations. I suggest that methodologies and research disseminations that develop in the overlap between two disciplines which both are directed towards qualitative social encounters and their performative effects constitute a strong foundation for counteracting the current audit culture in academia. Positioned between two frameworks, this overlap provides an undefined space that can question the futures we currently are able to imagine.

Hari and myself plan to write an article on the kolam action and its continuation, but the issues of living in different places and becoming involved in other projects and processes have this far made our aim impossible. In this sense, the collaborative aspect of the event has not yet come to an endpoint. As a further extension, we hope that ideas for new forms of participatory engagements can emerge through the current paper.

References:


