Participatory Art and Participant Observation
Exploring Social Relationships through Interdisciplinary Practices

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Abstract
This paper concerns interdisciplinary participative practices in the overlap between art and anthropology. The making and disseminating of knowledge on migration and diasporic existence will be presented through an intervention in a suburban London shopping centre which the author organised in collaboration with an artist and a refugee centre who have a background in the Tamil regions of Sri Lanka. By collectively drawing a specific form of symmetrical designs, kolam, commonly used in south Asian streets but absent in diasporic neighbourhoods, the action challenged the lack of Tamil visibility in British public space.

From an anthropological perspective, the intervention can be incorporated into the broad term participant observation which defines the qualitative methods of ethnographic fieldwork. Within the framework of artistic practice and research, the same action can be defined as participatory art. The two knowledge fields share certain aims to address political issues among subaltern groups and both have used provocative methods of participatory actions to challenge hegemonic structures. At the same time, theoretical differences inform how the term participation is understood in the respective disciplines.

While interdisciplinary methods provide inviting challenges, a particular expertise is often required at the stage of disseminating research. To establish a professional career, the researcher has to be accepted on an institutional level which in turn may claim autonomy in relation to other knowledge fields. Quantifiable results become tools in ranking their respective status. However, this paper suggests that methodologies and research disseminations that develop 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 uncertain space embodies a potential to challenge the futures we currently are able to imagine.

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