Experience vs. Interpretation: Traces of Ethnography in the Works of Lan Tuazon and Nikki S. Lee
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We are all ethnographers. Or so it would seem if we adopt James Clifford’s generalised definition of it in his highly influential book *The Predicament of Culture*. According to Clifford, ethnography is simply “diverse ways of thinking and writing about culture from a standpoint of participant observation.”1 Distinguished from anthropology in its lack of aspiration to “survey the full range of human diversity and development,” ethnography seems to appropriately suit the flux and partiality of (post)modern life.

A modern ‘ethnography’ of conjectures, constantly moving between cultures... is perpetually displaced, both regionally focused and broadly comparative, a form both of dwelling and of travel in a world where the two experiences are less and less distinct.2

It may be partly for this reason – the correspondence between the pervasive conditions of cultural displacement and ethnography’s particularly displaced mode of operation – that it has resonated so strongly for artists, writers, and critics throughout the twentieth century. In recent years, ethnography has extended beyond the realm of empirical research based on fieldwork in exotic, faraway places (such as locales in Africa, South America, Far East Asia, with presumed departure points in the ‘civilised’ West). As Hal Foster has elucidated in his essay “The Artist as Ethnographer,” ethnography has become a dominant methodological model in the academy and elsewhere in the past decades, affecting the development of new historicism, cultural studies, and ‘quasi-anthropological’ art projects, among other cultural practices today.3

Why this particular ascendance of ethnography today? What are the socio-economic and political ramifications of this ascendance? How are artists enabled or disabled by the ways in which ethnographic imperatives reorganise their practice? And what is the relationship and/or difference between ethnographic authority and artistic authorship? While all these questions remain crucial for contemporary art as a whole, the present essay will focus on the last, by way of a comparative analysis of works by two young women artists – Lan Tuazon and Nikki S. Lee. Their respective photo-based projects signal, I think symptomatically, the divergent inheritance of the ethnographic question among a new generation of artists, an inheritance that seems to split the dialectical coupling of experience and interpretation, which is foundational to traditional ethnography based on participant observation. In so doing, they describe new dilemmas and problems for the ‘artist as ethnographer.’

To clarify, the concept of participant observation encompasses a relay between an empathetic engagement with a particular situation and/or event (experience) and the assessment of its meaning and significance within a broader context (interpretation).4 The history of ethnography and the methodological debates within the discipline for the past few decades could be understood in large measure as the shifting of emphasis from the former to the latter as the primary site of ethnographic interest. This shift has been forged by the growing criticism of the ways in which the rather vague and ineffable notion


1. Clifford, J. *The Predicament of Culture*.
2. Ibid. 9.
3. Foster, H. *The Artist as Ethnographer*.
4. Ibid. 9.
of ‘experience’; evoking “participatory presence, a sensitive contact with the world to be understood, a rapport with its people, a concreteness of perception,” has come to function as evidence and confirmation of ethnographic authority. The concern for a self-reflexive practice, wherein the situated and motivated position of the ethnographer him/herself is highlighted as an integral part of the production of knowledge, has been one of the central concerns of a more hermeneutically oriented group of anthropologists in recent years.

There has been, of course, an artistic parallel to this concern, not only in terms of artists taking up ethnography as an object of inquiry (such as Mark Dion, Jimmie Durham, Fred Wilson, James Luna, and most consistently Renée Green), but in more general terms of artists problematising the authority of authorship, especially their own. Critical projects through the 1980s and 1990s, which engaged the ‘politics of representation,’ self-reflexively incorporating within the work an acknowledgment of, and critique of, uneven power relations enacted by and through representations, can be seen to share ethnography’s concerns to deconstruct the production of knowledge and the constitution of the authority of that knowledge.

But whereas experience and interpretation still seem to be tied to one another in a dialectical or reciprocal loop in critical ethnographic endeavours, I’m not so sure that the same can be said of recent artistic trends involving ethnography. Apparent in much contemporary art and encouraged in the confessional mode of popular media – from television talk shows to trauma drama – we see the overvaluation of ‘personal experience’ as the basis of true and reliable knowledge about culture and the self. Understood as the source of only real and authentic knowledge, ‘experience’ validates personal opinions and subjective feelings as an inviolable, irrefutable, undeniable terrain, no matter how uninformed such opinions and feelings might be. Thus, the attraction to the signs of experience (preferably of the unusual, extreme, painful, or dangerous kind), which would seem to give evidence of and confirm the legitimacy of a subject’s authority as the unique witness/author of a certain cultural knowledge, one that belongs to no one else. This is the allure of Nikki S. Lee’s work. Unquestioned in this process are the ways in which experience itself is culturally and psychically mediated as well as historically determined.

At the same time, for those who have taken the critiques of authorship and the ‘politics of the signifier’ seriously (particularly in relation to the knowledge-power dyad), it has been problematical to assert the self as witness or author. Burdened by the need to account for the complex mediations involved in the construction of an ‘I’ who can claim an experience as one’s own, as well as the inevitable partiality, instability, and uncertainty of this ‘I,’ many artists and critics have turned away from claiming a voice to deconstructing it (one’s own, someone else’s, or an institution’s). With very few exceptions, the two processes tend to be held apart as if mutually exclusive. So that to speak authoritatively now (that is, to assert one’s knowledge and know-how) is considered an oppressive act. In some instances, efforts to assess cultural trends or problems, to conjecture on their social, political, historical meaning and significance, are held in suspicion because there is a tendency to automatically align assertions of interpretive authorship with the exercise of authoritarian power. As a result, while there remains a critical energy around the deconstruction of interpretive processes, there persists a secret interdiction on interpretation itself. It is within this framing that I wish to consider the work of Lan Tuazon.

Lan Tuazon, The Anthropologist’s Table, 1999, detail.
All Tuazon images courtesy of the artist.
The Anthropologist's Table by Tuazon is barely a table. Its legs—skimpy and thin—are more like upstanding sticks than stable table legs. The top is thin too—a sheet of plywood seemingly plopped over to serve as a tabletop, balanced on the four scrawny legs. The table's proportions are confusingly diminutive. It is not large enough to be a proper desk; not small enough to be a child's plaything. It is, in fact, more accurate to describe this table as a diagram, a schematic drawing-in-space that stands as a sign of a mythical table rather than serving as a real piece of functional furniture. Yet Tuazon's table signifies no ordinary or generic table either. The surface of the table is covered with a sheet of glass, and encased beneath it is an array of objects: an open notebook, a stained coffee cup lid, a colourful range of Post-It tags, a drinking straw, a computer diskette, several Q-tips, a few photographs, a cigar and a matchbook, a stick of gum, an empty box of map tacks, a toothpick and a toothbrush, crumpled sugar packets, a lollipop, a bunch of coins, a handful of airmail envelopes, and a stack of unused Filofax pages. It is a motley collection of things, displayed as if someone had emptied their book bag onto the table to take an inventory of the items or to look for something misplaced. The table is a highly contrived 'picture' of the moment of the spill.

It is important to note that these objects are not actually on the table but rather embedded into its wooden surface; which is to say, each object is doubly encased—collectively beneath the sheet of glass and individually within the space that has been carefully carved out on the table following the contours of each item. Like a threedimensional shadow, these contoured depressions echo and hold the shape of the objects, furthering the photographic logic of a captured frozenness of the arrangement. Set within this image-table are close-up photographs of a different arrangement of objects on yet another table (or perhaps the same table at a different time?). In addition to sundry items like an ashtray, pen and cigarette—which together would signify the privacy of a study space—these photographs reveal portions of an open book and magazine. The book is The Gentle Tasaday: A Stone Age People in the Philippine Rain Forest by journalist John Nance, a novelistic report on the "lovely and beautiful" cave dwellers who were accidentally discovered in 1971 and who apparently had had no contact with the modern world until then. The magazine by contrast shows a Newsweek story from a few years later on the scandal following the discovery and charge that the Tasaday tribe was a grand hoax with ties to the corrupt Ferdinand Marcos regime.
On the face of it, it would seem Tuazon's juxtaposition of these two archival documents is meant to provoke the awareness of ethnographic ventures as one steeped not in truth-finding but in fictional projections. The Tasaday case is an extreme example of this as it exposes the ways in which such projections come to serve ideological and political purposes most literally. But the elaboration of Tuazon's set-up, the careful art direction of the tableau, and the extent to which the two photographic images are visually marginalised in the overall table-sculpture, would indicate something a little different at work. For what the viewer is asked to contemplate is not so much the Tasaday controversy *per se* (no more information is given beyond the visible bits of the narrative in the photographs), or the various desires operating among ethnographers and the popular press for the 'primitive' other, or the questionable nature of ethnography as a quasi-scientific enterprise. Rather, even as these aspects are inflected in the work, the viewer is directed to focus on an absent, anonymous figure and his/her things as a means to access the conditions of identification, fantasy, confusion, and ambivalence that circumscribe the milieu of critical interpretation. Put a little differently, the object of the inquiry is not only the problematic construction of ethnographic authority, but, more centrally, the desire to deconstruct or disarticulate that authority.

The distinction might be better clarified if, for instance, we think of the work of Renée Green from the early 1990s as a touchstone. In several projects from this period, Green appropriated institutional presentational conventions to expose the collusion of ethnography's primitivist fantasies with the political and social realities of colonialism. In projects like *Import/Export Funk Office*, she explicitly adopted the role of the ethnographer herself and revealed that ethnography's voyeuristic 'textualising' of the other is primarily a displaced means of confirming a self-definition. Tuazon extends the lessons of an appropriational critique of ethnography to map the subjective (domestic) space of such investigational endeavours.

All Lee Images Courtesy of Leslie Tonkonow Gallery, New York.
Ostensibly at ‘home,’ temporally and spatially distanced from the fieldwork arena of participatory experience — the direct encounter or exchange between the ethnographer and the other — The Anthropologist’s Table presents a space of solitary contemplation punctuated with mediational materials: magazines, photographs, books. These materials, already the products of various fantasies, projections, displacements and desires, collectively function as a second-degree interpretive screen of fantasies, projections, displacements and desires for our phantom anthropologist (or so the viewer imagines). At the same time, the cluttered objects of habit and daily routine intermixed with the interpretive materials on the table, left for the viewer as if they were a bunch of random clues to a puzzle or pieces of evidence to a crime, defines the phantom anthropologist him/herself as a site of another set of fantasies, projections, displacements and desires for the viewer (interpreting the interpreter).  

In this matrix of multiple subject positions, the viewer circulates. The objects on the table hint to the viewer the possibilities of many narratives, but only the possibilities. The historical incident of the Tasaday case, the ethnographers who participated in the incident, the problematic construction of ethnographic authority, the artist herself as a positioned commentator on these issues... none of these aspects, while obviously present in the work, ever comes into focus as a dominant theme. The viewer continuously moves through the various interpretative paths, with possible subject positions remaining open yet veiled. But the point of the work, I think, is not to simply make available many interpretive possibilities for viewers (as reader-authors in their own right), although such inconclusiveness has come to be considered a virtue in certain contexts. More precisely, The Anthropologist’s Table’s edge comes from the fact that, caught in a web of signifiers that continuously defer the referent and resist certainty (as noted earlier, the table is not even a table but a sign of one), the viewer ends up occupying at least two interpretive positions simultaneously. For it is ultimately impossible to separate the position of the phantom anthropologist and the self/viewer as the ‘detective’ that is seeking to unmask/critique this anthropologist and his/her activities. In The Anthropologist’s Table, Tuzason makes it impossible for the viewer to objectify or other the objectifying and othering practices of the anthropologist.

If Tuzason’s effort, circling around the problem of interpretation, is a stubborn refusal of a reliable referent, signalling the impossibility of unmediated experience and knowledge, Nikki S. Lee’s project runs in the opposite direction. Since 1997, Lee has been photographing herself (or has had herself photographed by a friend) in various subcultural guises — as senior citizen, swinger, punk rocker, young Japanese tourist, Hispanic, yuppie, lesbian, among others. Insinuating herself into the life of such groups for two or more weeks at a time, she adopts their appearance — the signifiers of their identity in terms of dress, posture, attitude, activities — to such a complete extent that