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Commodity Violence

The Punctum of Data

S. LOCHLANN JAIN 

ABSTRACT

This article discusses methods for anthropologists interested in practicing visual arts as an ethnographic method of analysis and communication. Through an overview of a project I developed, I discuss my approach in relation to psychogeography and theatrical Moment Work. I suggest that these techniques can be usefully harnessed to build an ethnographic approach to image-making and develop visual vocabularies that exceed the purpose of illustrating extant ideas and concepts in the field. This is critical because such ideas and concepts operate on a different plane from those developed in the art-related disciplines that have generally adjudicated the visual field.

KEYWORDS

theater, ethnographic method, automobiles, art, pedagogy

What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to.

—Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*

Introduction

The guiding principle of academic promotion almost exclusively privileges publishing traditional anthropological monographs and journal articles. Ethnography tends to follow a narrow genre of argument style and content that relies on citing a small number of largely male scholars, who perhaps ironically also serve as gatekeepers to its membership through promotions and tenure. However, in the past decade, several notable and welcome venues have emerged to enable and showcase new methods of scholarly engagement and output. These include Ethnographic Terminalia, a series of gallery shows that took place during the annual American Anthropological Association meetings from 2009 to 2019, and the Making and Doing program at the annual Society for Social Studies of Science (4S) meetings in 2015, 2017, 2018, and 2019 that featured alternative scholarly investigations. Although the prohibitive costs of technical support and resistance to interdisciplinarity in mainstream departments militate against these new forms of knowledge-making and display, as a medical and legal anthropologist, I am inspired by the sorts of questions to which visual anthropologists have been attending. What might non-traditional communication modes hewing to an ethnographic sensibility look like? How can formats for research presentation other than the traditional essay in turn deepen or shift research questions and methods? In this article, I draw on my inquiries and engagement with my art practice, in the hope that my methods might prove useful for other nonvisual anthropologists to think with as we move beyond writing culture.

In 2016, I was invited by the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin to present work deemed “suitable for sustaining public, collaborative inquiry” on the concept of the technosphere broadly construed. Specifically, I was asked to develop my work on trauma and injury into a form other than a standard academic paper. My thirty minutes would be part of an evening soirée—part café-pub, part performance, with all the technical support we could dream of to help with the sound system and two huge screens.¹ Presenting my work, titled *DIY: Roadside Altar*, to a larger audience and away from written ethnography was one of the most invigorating events of my career.

S. LOCHLANN JAIN

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As it happened, at the time of the HKW invitation I had availed myself of new professional security by seeking new modes through which to engage my research in visual arts and theatrical methods. In this vein, I developed a graduate studio class called Empathy Lab at Stanford University with dancer and choreographer Krista DeNio (Jain and DeNio 2018). My pedagogical goal was to expand the ethnographic methodological repertoire for graduate students by exploring ways to meet and engage new people in field sites while innovating techniques to interpret and synthesize data. As a loose-knit group of scholars across the country, building on the canon of visual anthropologists, we were eager to augment possibilities for properly anthropological output not just for tenure and promotion but also as a way to increase the discipline's terms for knowledge production and reach a wider nonacademic audience. As part of this, I registered to attend an intensive summer studio art class at the Slade (University College London). With the HKW invitation in hand, I dedicated the Slade's two-week class to a visual art investigation of car crashes as a way to continue, by other means, an ethnographic study that had taken my attention for some fifteen years.²

Imaging Ethnography

Despite anthropology's reliance on textual and monographic production, a long and parallel strand of the discipline has engaged with visuality. Although much of the early ethnographic work drew on Orientalist practices, scholars have recently brought attention to the critical possibilities of photography and mark-making as methods to capture the contradictions, silences, and hesitations of ethnographic encounters.

Ethnologist Jeanne Favret-Saada (1990), for example, has suggested that participant observation requires conflicting positions. In her studies of witchcraft, she asks how we can at once fully embody and participate in local customs while at the same time observe objectively. A different kind of dissonance was noted by anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1993), who wrote about his inability to understand the grieving rituals he witnessed in the field, although he had written about them as an expert in anthropology, until he suffered the death of his wife, Michelle. These authors point to a paradox central to the ethnographic project: that the suspension of disbelief necessary to partake in fieldwork is at odds with the objectivity required of observation. For these scholars, participant observation risks misunderstandings for structural reasons and because of the limits on an anthropologist's experience or comprehension.

Medical anthropologist Lisa Stevenson tunes her book *Life Beside Itself* (2014) to the ungraspability of tragedy and the responsibility to not narratively resolve the contradictions found in the field. Opposing what she diagnoses as anthropology's "iconophobia," she argues in favor of more and better uses of images, stating, "Images ... are useful precisely because they can capture uncertainty and contradiction without having to resolve it. ... I hope that drawing our anthropological attention back to imagistic rather than discursive modes of knowing allows us to be faithful to a whole range of contradictory experiences that have often gone unthought in ethnography" (Stevenson 2014, 10). To be sure, this broad notion of the image extends far beyond the visual; yet, Stevenson's attention to building knowledge that includes the imagistic worlds of both the subjects and the scholar offers an auspicious direction for scholarship.

Medical anthropologists tend to guard our best energies for text in a double-barreled belief. On the one hand, text represents and conveys the most powerful and accessible repositories of culture (considering that our source materials—law, science, news, history, and so on—predominantly appear in written words). On the other hand, as the primary tool of our trade, the jackknife of the essay unfolds to manage several interests: (1) as a lockpick, it reveals something of the world; (2) as an ice pick, it enables us to claw our way up the discipline; and (3) as a belay device, it provides a means for guiding another generation in ways we can influence.

Textual sophistry, to the exclusion of other modes of knowledge production, has been the core practice of anthropology, for better and worse. Although I would begin Stevenson's sentence here with a hedging "Some," I largely cast my vote with her hypothesis that "Images may have a power over us that we cannot fully control: it is always difficult to translate them into the singular and incontestable facts that the social sciences seem to demand" (2014, 25).³ I am compelled by a well-crafted sentence or a sharply sculpted argument as much as the next person. But when it remains the only venue for professional (re)production in a discipline that purports to stimulate cultural understanding, one might ask about the form's downsides. Three such hazards bear noting.

First, there may be something to gain by making the messiness of the research and our responses to fieldwork, theory, and data more visible as material to think with, rather than disappearing or justifying it. If anthropologist Clifford Geertz's notion of thick description acts as a shared touchstone of anthropologists ("culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can

be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly—that is, thickly—described” [1973, 14]), I advocate for thickening the means by which we access, describe, distinguish, and render these contexts.

Visual anthropologists have engaged with these questions in critically important ways and have been thickening how we render contexts visible for decades. For example, in an extraordinary article, which includes an essay and a series of paintings, artist and anthropologist Lydia Degarrod writes about her fieldwork at a site marked by extensive and daily violence. Degarrod’s turn to life drawing as an aspect of her research strategy interrogates (among other things) the unequal social structures of much ethnographic work and the “feelings that otherwise might not be expressed in regular conversations” (1998, 702).

Second, social science forms combined with current definitions for contributing to the discipline result in a vulnerability to citational and theoretical cliché. By opening spaces for different registers of investigation and presentation, we might deepen the vocabularies and languages available and lessen our reliance on the handful of scholars in the canon. Misogyny is a shared genre and happens in art, of course. Anthropologist Hudita Nura Mustafa (2008) analyzes the overlapping concerns of art and ethnography in relation to the work of painter Anne Eisner, who worked in the Democratic Republic of Congo (1946–54, 1957–58), and scrutinizes the consistent erasure and misrepresentation of Eisner’s contribution to both. My point is that skewing the terms of the field might offer the emergence of a new set of “experts,” and, depending on how committed the field is, calls for gender and other vectors of equity might call forth a new citational canon and practices.

Third, the form of the essay, or grant proposal, runs the risk of overriding the content, which by definition remains much more difficult to verify (this is not unique to the social sciences). Indeed, anthropology’s domain relies on the reporting of local phenomena, so the content remains unverifiable. A peer reviewer can evaluate quality based only on form and a resort to common sense and personal valuations of likelihood: Does this work account seem reasonable? Are appropriate experts correctly cited? Is the argument convincing and cogent? Then, most mysterious of all to me, for reasons beyond the present essay, the review questions: How does it contribute to and push forward the discipline? This is compounded by the basic fact that mastery of this form is essential to progressing in the discipline, from the doctorate and securing a job to tenure and professorship, even though the nuts and bolts of ethnographic writing (let alone critique of the form) are not part of

most graduate training programs. Then, we witness the completion of a communication medium that is taken, with some magical thinking, as utterly transparent.

To put this another way, the ethnographic essay tends to be understood as a tool toward some other effort—namely, the collection of local events and their translation into global trends and ethnographic lingo and theory. Yet what an odd lack of reflexive thinking this requires, given the desire of anthropology to “make strange” and create critical histories of nearly everything—including other kinds of knowledge-constructing forms. As we know from literature on taxonomy, collection, museums, identity cards, and so on, certain technologies of knowledge-making direct authors and readers and enable some kinds of insights as they foreclose others. Given a certain disciplinary blindness to its own form of organization (or impotence in the face of its reach), one might ask the question posed to me by Derek Simons, my collaborator and friend for nearly three decades: What are we grasping toward through the form of the academic essay that we pretend is about the content? The danger of the question makes it worthy of seizing. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, quoting Joseph Litvak, plausibly suggests that the style performs “the very signature of smartness” (2003, 147).

If social science’s register is based on access to and representation of reality in a way that diverges from the creative arts, it is worth exploring the distinction. If we scholars were to refuse the potted coming-into-being of the discipline of anthropology and of ourselves as anthropologists in that mold, how would we construct our field sites, our objects of knowledge, and our expertise that privilege new ways of making sense of content, rather than old ways of mimicking form? We would need to find a different articulation of our roles as translators. As ethnologist Katharina Eisch-Angus suggests, by “considering art processes and collaborative artistic-ethnographic work we could learn not to reduce our potentials of perception and of anthropological interpretations because of fear of appearing unscientific” (2009, 105).

Collaborative Methods

Toward this effort, I designed and co-taught a graduate seminar with dancer and producer Krista DeNio in 2015 and 2017 at Stanford University that we called Empathy Lab. In it, we developed exercises that brought consciousness to and trained the body as a site of performance, improvisation, invitation, gesture, and movement—in short, as a device that could be tuned and attuned to the different kinds of social engagement

underpinning ethnographic fieldwork, which have traditionally been mysteriously disavowed in anthropological training. The course took seriously the fundamental reliance on ethnography of collaboration and the idea that interactions are always social, negotiated, and reliant on actual skills. These pedagogical methods, which I relied on for making *DIY: Roadside Altar*, build on psychogeography and Moment Work, which I briefly outline here.

Psychogeography

In 1955, activist and iconoclast Guy Debord laid out a program to investigate the “effects of the geographical environment... on the emotions and behavior of individuals” (2006, 23). Reacting to the capitalist homogeneity of Paris, Debord wrote, “from any standpoint other than that of police control, [French official] [Georges-Eugène] Haussmann’s Paris is a city built by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Today urbanism’s main problem is ensuring the smooth circulation of a rapidly increasing quantity of motor vehicles” (24). But urbanism’s main problem differed from the problems of its inhabitants, which were not only about their living conditions but also, he claimed, their lack of vocabulary and sophistication in their responses to urban environments (25). Debord then set about to research urban elements in “close relation with the sensations they provoke” through a new kind of cartographic practice, psychogeography (25). The revolutionary potential of this exercise was to show how individual responses to the city are not simply in obedience but can be in “complete *insubordination* to habitual influences” (26).⁴

This initiative keys ethnographic attention to the fissure between objective and subjective knowledge systems: built and lived, asserted and denied, homogeneous and complex. How can we recapture an organism’s ability to sense and comprehend (let alone resist) spaces so fully dominated by Cartesian logics, architectural/capitalist ways of knowing, and material directives for habitation? How can sensations and responses be made to matter, even fleetingly? In assigning a psychogeography project in an undergraduate class, which I co-taught with humanities scholar Maria McVarish, I was struck by the difficulty almost all of the students had in developing visual accounts of their journeys of the city that did not have a firm basis in reproduced Google Maps, even after thoroughly discussing many examples from the history and politics of mapping and several examples by artists of alternative modes and subjects of maps.⁵ The reliance on Google Maps as an instantiation of an

ever-expanding (in scale and reach) translation between body and space closes the gaps that might otherwise enable experiential responses to spaces of all kinds and thus might even be considered as part of the “built environment” that Debord abhorred as “signifying nothing” (2006, 24).

The pedagogical project of student mapping and my own mapping projects involving sensuous encounters with the materiality of the city through graphite rubbings of manhole covers, plaques and markers, and other metal surfaces I found on roads and pavements in London led me to wonder how anthropologists struggle with rawness—the unexpectedness of what we find in the field and our response to it. Artists produce work with the similar aim of anthropologists: to better understand social and material worlds. Yet, their methods rely on creating a profoundly different dynamic. Many people think that artists assemble constituent elements—a charcoal line, a piece of marble, a character in a play—until they have created the final shape of an artwork according to their vision. In fact, the process tends to happen in reverse. The artist engages sensuously with a chosen object, place, or event because it speaks to them in some way. They engage as deeply as they can with these raw materials, and the final project (the drawing, the text, the sculpture) offers a trace of that experience. Far from offering evidence of a preset vision, the work offers the result of an exploration.

In general, we are rewarded professionally for routing the unexpected through the anthropological canon, which obviously leaves enforced erasures, such as homophobia and sexual assault. But I wonder how methods of art and visual anthropology can speak to medical and legal anthropology in using “data” to hew more closely to anthropology’s central aims in insisting on the importance of being there to begin with. That is, how do we maintain our openness to real difference and accept that to a certain (large) extent, we will not be able to objectively document those differences or convert them into data? Turning to the arts could give us the tools to maintain a heterogeneity of form and content that we find—sensually—in the world and a focus on a present moment.

Moment Work

Moisés Kaufman developed Moment Work as a method of theater-making that reduces reliance on text. His goal was to build theatrical vocabulary that harnessed and brought into equal standing theatrical elements that were usually used in service of the script: blocking, lighting, acting, and music. The

Tectonic Theater Project, which he directs, has collaboratively developed material to create plays, reimagining such hierarchies as director/cast, playwright/actor, and form/content to create new kinds of collaborative worlds.⁶

Eschewing the prewritten text, the Tectonic Theater Project brings theatrical tools to bear instead on source material, which can include virtually anything. In the making of *The Laramie Project*, perhaps Tectonic Theater Project's most well-known play, source materials included text from a series of interviews with the Laramie community members following the murder of Matthew Shepard, images of the town, and news and other media from the event. Much of the development of the play focused on engaging that material through the elements of the theater and discussions on how to present the multivalent story.

The theatrical "moment" refers to a block of theatrical time; these are choreographed by the players using tools such as lighting, architecture, props, and source materials and can vary in chronological length from, say, a choreographed tableau seen from a specified perspective to a longer scene or improvisation. The moment is marked by the actor saying, "we begin" and "we end." As Kaufman describes in an interview: "You can have a Moment that deals only with lights, or a Moment that deals only with blocking or costumes, or sets, or music, or a combination of any of those. In doing that, we become very aware of the narrative potential of each theatrical element. And in doing so, reiterate their authority" (quoted in Brown 2005, 54). Bringing these elements into a horizontal (rather than hierarchical) relation and experimenting with how they can work with and against each other multiplies the tools for storytelling, since these media can move in and out of harmony toward dialogue, contradiction, and conversation and, in this multivocality, (potentially) tell a richer story. Kaufman describes how an organizing principle can emerge early on by introducing and rehearsing Moment Work:

The organizing principle which generated for Laramie was a town looking at itself in the year after Shepard's murder. From the organizing principle, formal questions arise, such as, how do you tell this story? During the early developmental workshops, Kaufman establishes through-lines for the piece from those formal questions. For Laramie three through-lines developed: the story of Laramie, Matthew Shepard's story, and the story of the company. Like the list of forms [such as motion, space, voice, lighting, music], the organizing principle and

through-lines were also posted in the workshop space as a constant reminder to the company.

(quoted in Brown 2005, 61–62)

The Laramie Project as a play, and subsequent HBO film directed by Kaufman, has been described as “an elegy, a theatre action, and a community’s communal response to tragedy” (Svich 2003, 67). Kaufman writes that he continually asks: “What constitutes a theatrical vocabulary? What constitutes a theatrical language? How can theatre speak in a way that is absolutely unique and at the same time makes full use of the medium’s strengths?” (quoted in Svich 2003, 70).

Kaufman’s work has a dual promise for anthropology. First, by opening the number of channels through which to tell a story (i.e., away from the dominance of the text), the method shows how one can develop multivocal narrations (even when singly authored). Second, he uses source materials as not just objects to be told about but as dimensions in the telling itself. He has created a method that could serve anthropologists in search of new frames for investigation and communication.

In using the frame as a device to focus attention and in bringing consideration to the frame, the method gives permission to register the minuscule details of how field experiences are created by elements that easily pass unnoticed: how a reflection plays on glass, how light falls in certain areas, the sound of an echo. This method brings awareness to what I describe above as rawness.

Together, psychogeography and Moment Work enabled me to reconsider framing, source material (environmental and found), experiential ways of knowing, and communicating by exploring how the rift between self and world can become the site of analysis and the thing that is expressively and creatively communicated. To me, these methods have the potential to shift the focus of analysis slightly from the empirical materiality of the data and the social scientist’s attachments to the reality they represent, on one hand, and the reflexive attention on the self as the situated knower, on the other. In a postsocial/material constructionist world, these methods offer possibilities toward engaging a dialogic process between sentient being and material world that sometimes results in affective or conceptual development and mutual immersion.

The Automobile and Car Crashes

My initial inquiry into the design of the automobile stemmed from my interest in injury and product design and aimed to grasp the geographic, affective, public health, and economic

environments that automobility came to determine. The automobile has been a foundational technology in the development and obstruction of product liability law, and I intended to write a companion book to *Injury* (Jain 2006) on automobile violence, titled *Commodity Violence*. Still, the complex affective dimensions of crashes and the attendant roadside disintegration of flesh, consistently erased and reinscribed in statistics, sadomasochism, and traffic reports, continually exceeded my ability to grasp it through my primary tool of investigation, analysis, and synthesis as a scholar: the academic essay. Any way I diced it, the genre of elucidation, exposure, analysis, and explanation doubled the effects of the fetishistic and active expurgation of car violence.⁷ I could never make the dense history of American automobility meaningful in a way I found satisfactory, no matter how many file cabinets and hard drives I filled with data, nor how many words I wrote. Although there were ways to work with the fetish qualities of the automobile, I found myself at a loss as to how to articulate—even in this very sentence—the inconceivably tragic elements of automobility. Any attempt to do so seemed either cheesy, melodramatic, or overwrought.

Perhaps this inability resulted in part from my own indecision, as I did not have a full account of how the wildcard of the automobile so utterly came to appropriate social life, labor, identity, and local-global ecologies in the twentieth century, despite extreme downsides. All I could do was collect more details as I bounced between two modes. At one moment, I identified and tracked multiple complex reasons for this dominance that call for careful interpretation and explanation. Those revelations, moving through law, engineering, advertising, urban planning, nuclear families, and so on, filled some forty hours of lectures in my class *Car Cultures*.

From another mindset, a different account suffices; that is, capitalism finds ways to offer real and rhetorical salves to the insecurities and needs it produces in individuals. The commodity of the car, as a total social fact, came to satisfy vast swaths of need for producers, consumers, and thousands of allied industries and interests.⁸ Those who bought neither car nor the logic were simply omitted from social, political, economic, gender, environmental, and other equations.

Some readers will recognize my epistemological quandaries as inflected by gender studies scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's suspicion of the value of knowledge in its use in the scholarly essay as a form of exposure. In "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" (2003), she suggests that the traditional academic formula for presenting information and theory misreads and overestimates the power of knowledge and exposure.

“The paranoid trust in exposure seemingly depends... on an infinite reservoir of naïveté in those who make up the audience for these unveilings. What is the basis for assuming that it will surprise or disturb, never mind motivate, anyone to learn that a given social manifestation is artificial, self-contradictory, imitative, phantasmatic, or even violent?” (Sedgwick 2003, 141). Her insight is in equal measure disheartening (she pinpoints and dismisses precisely what we are trained to do) and invigorating (she locates the obstacles to progress and bears witness to a node of professional frustration). Her diagnosis is an inspiring jumping-off point for imagining uses of theory and knowledge other than exposure.

As such, automobility presented the perfect project for trying something new, undertaking “a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks” in what Sedgwick has called the reparative reading position (2003, 150). She writes: “What we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them” (150–51). Sedgwick understood reparative positions in relation to camp and queer practices, but the idea is also provocative more broadly. My stake in this project was primarily to unearth the punctum of the data I encountered—data that ranged across statistics to crash investigation images to early airbag design patents to Firestone tire company quarterly reports and the history of lead.

HKW Berlin Installation

Over several months of working out these questions, materials, and processes and workshopping the components with like-minded colleagues Krista DeNio, Maria McVarish, and Cristiana Giordano, the final presentation in Berlin consisted of three parts: (1) a looped slideshow with a set of eighty images (original photographs, prints, drawings, and some work by other artists) curated to fit a do-it-yourself (DIY) narrative that I wrote and recorded on “how to build a roadside altar”; (2) a poem I had written, which I read over the backdrop of a moving image I had recorded, altered, and looped; and (3) a live dissection of a stuffed animal performed as part of building an altar.

In the course of preparing the work, my attention turned away from the car and toward the ruins it (“it” as a conglomeration of interests) produces. John Berger writes that animals at the zoo “constitute the living monument to their own disappearance” (2009, 24); in his view, zoos maintain a version of the animal for spectators to enjoy while the environments in

which animals can flourish are destroyed.⁹ The analogy is not exact, but at some point my investigation settled on the roadside as a more and less organized monument to destruction: the debris, the ghost bike, and the altar, all of which act as fleeting testaments to ideologies of speed, capital, and destruction. This detritus of the roadside and of history—the annual 400 million or so animals in the United States dispatched in parts to this nether space (Bekoff 2010), as well as the 40,000 or so people smashed to death by automobiles (Insurance Institute for Highway Safety 2018)—offers lives beyond our cherished accounting systems. Yet, these systems cannot entirely scrub automobility clean, as there are little forms of resistance: feathers on the road's shoulder, ghost bikes, and roadside altars that spring forth like pus from a picked scab (Figure 1).

All that and more filled my mind and my studio in an exploration of pigment, color, linseed oil, acrylic, papers, metal, and canvas. Artists speak of the expressive potential of media, and I set out to see how and what I could get these media to express about these spillages and vestiges of resilience.

Source Materials and Process

I had a space, a venue for presentation, a subject, and some methodological routes forward. My years of research and teaching had imprinted an archive on car design, law, patent images, and crash test data in my brain. I set up my temporary art space in London by pinning source material on the walls—images by Andy Warhol, John Chamberlain, and Weegee; bits of fur; news clippings; and, gradually, the work I was producing by using these items as the touchstone for our assignments. Themes of repetition and the aesthetics of bent metal emerged with my exploration of the materiality of pigment, oil, and other media (Figure 2). I signed up for a taxidermy class at the Dickens Museum. The result was an ethically sourced stuffed mole, which I photographed with the resulting shattered glass (Figure 3).

I was interested in the liminal space between value and garbage: the lost feathers, the bent frame of a bicycle—how we understand and mourn (or not) the passing of embodied meaning. As such, eggs became a key site of investigation for me, serving as an example of the process. The semiotically rich egg became a synecdoche for nourishment, for fertility, and for the spectacle of mass production.

In a parody of the reproductive capacity of the egg, its numerous applications include not only Easter but vaccines, soaps, and cosmetics and as symbols of mourning and fertility. Yolks have been used as a paint binding for centuries (combined

FIG. 1 Lochlann Jain, *Wet Wing*, London, 2015. Photo by Lochlann Jain. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]



FIG. 1

with vinegar, wine, or other household ingredients) and were replaced in Italy by oil only in the 1500s. They also serve as the classic way to demonstrate the physics of seat belts and the concept of packaging that emerged in the 1960s as shorthand for the importance of the car's interior for imprinting injuries in crashes. An egg without a seat belt flips crown over base in a low-resolution analogy for a skull-brain implosion.

The egg is at once a fable, a demonstration, and a public service announcement. It inhabits a temporal register as well, for as it floats toward the ground, we know what will happen as we are suspended between the impending and the prior experience. The most insistent temporal register is that of the circuit of repetition: Eggs, like humans, will keep crashing in the thousands no matter how many are sacrificed. That is the built-in danger not just of the car, as U.S. political activist Ralph Nader (1965) told us, but of the whole system, including the versatile fragility of the always replaceable human mind packaged within it.

Taking eggs as an epitome of excess in my experiments included such efforts as drawing crash test symbols on them, blowing them out, and filling them with gelatin, rice, and anything I could stuff into the pinhole and then throwing, cracking, and using them in various ways. I painted big and small bull's-eyes and crash symbols (Figure 4). I invited my friends and students to partake in structured egg improvisations. I threw eggs at my parked car and filmed and photographed it.

Through the creation of these happenings, I was developing a vocabulary that was specific to this particular study of automobile violence. If the usual expectation of ethnography

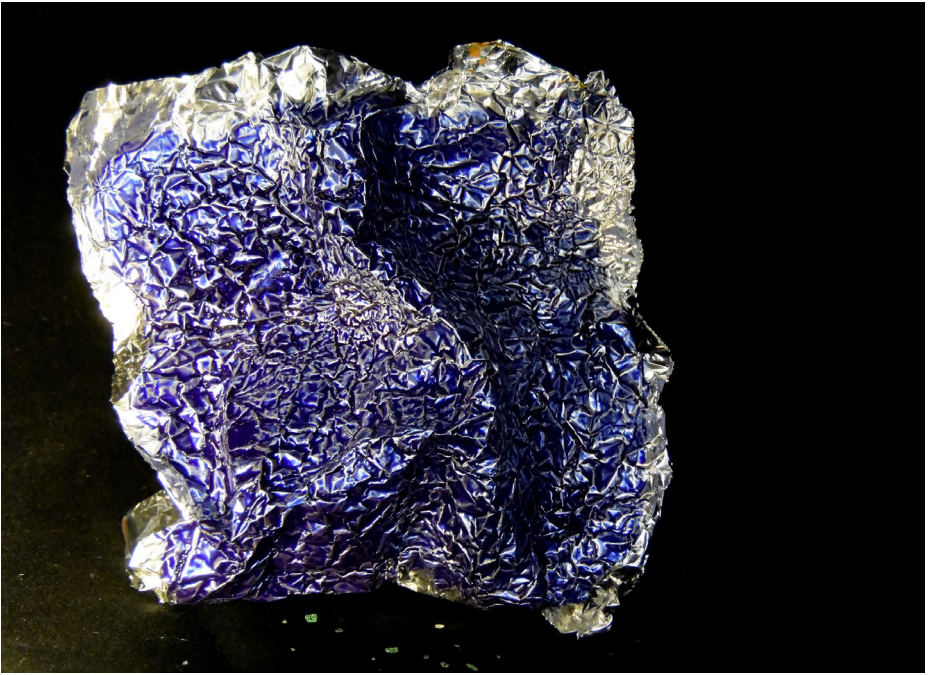


FIG. 2



FIG. 3

is to translate local details and bring them into a larger global conversation with anthropological questions relying on a shared canon and set of values, I aimed to do the opposite. The



FIG. 4

vocabulary I reached for was one to be gained through reflexive engagement with my research questions and source materials. I wanted to figure out how these material experiments could create a conversation among themselves and then be expressed using not specialist terms but media such as photography, demonstration, and prints.

In their intensely revealing and absorbing conversation, *That Which Is Not Drawn*, artist William Kentridge and anthropologist Rosalind Morris discuss “messiness as a medium for addressing the non-linear or inchoate dimensions of social and psychic life” (2017, 3). They raise many issues in relation specifically to Kentridge’s art that can be extended to consider the practice and potential of art more generally, specifically “the limits of the visible at the point where it cannot be simply taken over by the sayable” (2017, 2). That is, how can we develop a liminal language that can still bring ideas and affects into presence with communicative potential? We might come back to that nagging (for me, anyway) question: How can anthropology speak in a way that is absolutely unique—or at least true to its/our aims—and at the same time makes full use of the discipline’s strengths?

DIY: A Genre for Commodity Violence and a Roadside Altar

A challenge for me was telling the story, one that is nearly impossible to fathom, of the everyday violence of automobility without the sort of earnest righteousness of the “should be different” sentiment. I am not sure when I settled on DIY as an organizing foil for the image display, but when I did, it seemed to allow the implicit paradoxes I was playing with to emerge from the material.

FIG. 2 Lochlann Jain, *Crumpled*, London, 2015. Photo by Lochlann Jain.

FIG. 3 Lochlann Jain, *Mole with Glass*, London, 2015. Photo by Lochlann Jain.

FIG. 4 Lochlann Jain, *Experiments in Crash Testing Eggs*, San Francisco, 2015. Photo by Lochlann Jain.

Dominating the how-to genre, an instructional video narratively dispenses with the who-what-where-when-why of road violence I had been working with in my scholarly research. The how seems implausibly banal in the face of a sudden crash death's surplus meaning. The act of building a roadside altar is exquisitely meaningful because of its specificity, because of the related "w" questions, and it is by design a small cry for those details to be noted and recognized.

As a genre that is "characterized by similarities in form, style, or subject matter,"¹⁰ a successful DIY project must clearly lay out easy-to-follow directions bearing in mind pacing and materials, as anyone who has returned home with a box from IKEA will recognize. In fact, DIY and mass production go hand in hand as makers and producers rely on the commonality of available ingredients and products. Thus, in its banal instructional mode, the DIY genre equally serves a baker who makes banana bread, a potential suicide, and a medical student, and thus offers the perfect medium through which to explore the sort of rote instruction one depends on in times of grief and the rote production of such injuries and deaths in automobile culture that make up commodity violence.

Because it serves the how-to mandate without question or judgment, the DIY roadside altar acknowledges commodity violence through a sort of affective analogy, thus domesticating the unimaginably inhumane killings and recalibrating the beheadings, blunt injuries, and splayed viscera. This was the crack I wanted to pry open in the temporal register and dual channel (image and narration) between the instructions and their illustration, between monotone delivery and multifaceted subject matter. The turn to an aesthetic of a first-generation (now awkward) show-and-tell digital slideshow version of DIY seemed to suit that goal. Like the DIY narration, the altar emerged through various theatrical experiments. Similarly, eggs turned up in *DIY: Roadside Altar* as part of a still-life photography series with equally and differently mysteriously propertied materials: animal and human teeth. At once dead, signifiers of class, identifiers of the violently killed, and eminently useful to the living, teeth are still impossible to reproduce entirely by technology alone. Unlike flesh, which serves as carrion or soon dissipates, bones and teeth last in a trace of debris.

I pulled these experiments together relying on the traditions and materials of art practice—photography, print-making, and so on—in a way that might be called intuitive.¹¹ A more accurate description would be that it was improvised based on my previous historical and theoretical research, relying on a mode of citation that aimed to, as a psychogeographer, inhabit the space between the sensorial (by which I mean how one senses systematic knowledge forms, and here I differ

from psychogeographers because I want to see the egg as much a constructed object as the city is) and one's ability and tools to express or communicate on the sensorial register. In that sense, the methods and the output were utterly different from my academic work, but the basic impulse behind it was in alignment.

In attempting to develop a visual language around the technosphere and automobility that captures an ethnography of commodity violence beyond the written essay and for a diverse in-person audience at HKW, I aimed to articulate and amplify the detritus of the gutter, or the statistic, rumor, smudge mark: those subsemiotic marks of automobility that are monuments to the sacrifices of the system. Where one looks carefully, these traces are part of the city's lexicon and can become part of the shared experience of survivorship and vulnerability. I put them in a narrative form that also undercut the possibility of telling a unified story, using series, repetition, and images that conveyed semiotic density.

Conclusion

The pivotal reliance on the essay has led to a mysterious black-boxing of the relations between the form and content of ethnographic knowledge-making practices. Unpacking the box opens a possibility: How else might we employ ethnographic processes and deploy resulting insights?

DIY: Roadside Altar did not intend to present the problem of car crashes as one to be solved but tried to understand such crashes as events that generate new forms of social mediation and meaning. It also sought to understand the work of other genres (such as photography, DIY, PowerPoint, prints) as meaningful ways of meditating on and with the texture of commodity violence.

If anthropology is to survive as a discipline (and I do not take for granted that it should), we senior scholars might be able to bring our experience to the question of how we define the unique strengths of the field. Does anthropology rest on the exposure of injustice and analysis/regurgitation of how things might be otherwise? Or does perhaps its strength lie in an ability to link local practices to global phenomena? If so, the question remains of how to do this without attenuating the richness of local phenomena to the terms of a handful of widely cited and broadly read theorists. What kinds of data are overlooked in this process? Also crucially, to what extent is the form of the academic essay—by virtually all measures a dying form—central to the project? Might other media enable new kinds of insight? Anthropological sensibilities have something to contribute to

how we make meaning in a world filled with violence. Let us move toward a trust of that basic fact into new forms and venues.

Notes

1. The other participants were Rana Dasgupta, Clapperton C. Mavhunga, Matteo Pasquinelli, and Lucy A. Suchman.
2. The published articles that came out of this work include Jain (2002, 2004, 2005, 2007).
3. See also Society for Visual Anthropology's 2001 "Guidelines for the Evaluation of Ethnographic Visual Media," <http://societyforvisualanthropology.org/guidelines-for-the-evaluation-of-ethnographic-visual-media/>.
4. In developing this idea into a theory in 1956, Debord introduced the notion of *happening*, or *derive*—the creation of an event to bring awareness to the space and potential of urban environments and from which new kinds of mapping could ensue.
5. My point is not that the students should have done better, but rather to point out that even for fifteen highly motivated, instructed, and brilliant students, the exercise proved to be much more difficult than it sounded.
6. In *The Open Door* (2015), Peter Brook offers a similar model of theater-making through his identification of each element as a theatrical language itself. He writes, "In the theatre, there are infinitely more languages, beyond words, through which communication is established and maintained with the audience. There is body language, sound language, rhythm language, color language, costume language, scenery language, lighting language—all to be added to those 25,000 words available" (113).
7. While there is no question that *Unsafe at Any Speed* (1965) is one of the great nonfiction books of the twentieth century in terms of insight and influence, the fetishism of automobility evades Ralph Nader's earnest and justly outraged approach.
8. Unlike other arenas of social justice, automobile culture has only sporadically become an arena of activism. As I found in my detailed archival research on automobility over the twentieth century, in the early twentieth century, farmers and urban dwellers reacted against their spaces becoming simply routes for the rich. In the mid-1930s, attention was given to the automobile itself as a source of danger through its designs that enabled horrors such as the "glass guillotine," the colloquialism that described people's heads going through the glass windshield and stopping at the shoulders in low-speed crashes. WWII led attention away from automobile violence, and not until the 1960s did attention return to the criminal negligence of manufacturers in their refusal to make cars safer. The 1970s brought attention to pollution and the oil trade, and the late twentieth century brought some attention to the ongoing health consequences of driving cultures.
9. Perhaps the new monuments to animals are the cars: cougar, jaguar, Mustang, stingray, viper, wasp. Even the beetle.
10. www.lexico.com/en/definition/genre
11. *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *intuitive* as "a thing that one knows or considers likely from instinctive feeling rather than conscious reasoning."

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to the students who took Empathy Lab and Experiments in Ethnographic Writing; colleagues at Duke University and the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, who invited me to present this work; Maria McVarish, Cristiana Giordano, and Krista DeNio for workshoping the DIY performance; Maria McVarish for reading this article with her exacting and insightful eye and pen; and Caroline de Lannoy, who taught the course at the Slade and describes the artist as a "DJ, mixing color." Thank you to Krista DeNio for the collaborations and for mentoring me in somatic pedagogy. The two *Visual Anthropology Review* reviewers were extraordinarily generous and generative. Thank you to the reviewers and editors. This essay is dedicated to my friend in arms and collaborator for nearly three decades, Derek Simons, who is always available with a warming word of encouragement and then the piercing, unexpected, sideways questions that change everything in exactly the right way.

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