



I Do It for Artistic Reasons

A group consisting of five artists met with social and visual anthropologist Alyssa Grossman to discuss the relationship between art, anthropology and ethnography - specifically, the inherently anthropological methods and desires within art practice, and the artistic qualities of anthropology.

As a springboard for this discussion, the group read Grossman's text¹ on the artist Sophie Calle - an artist employing methods that could be viewed as anthropological. Over the past few months, the group has been meeting regularly, recording their ongoing conversations outside the studios. In listening back to these recordings from when they have met, the group has decided to foreground the background (Noises) in the transcribed texts. Incorporating these noises into the written texts is a method of capturing the interruptions of the broader environment in our conversations. This situates our conversation, with the audio recording recognising more voices and sounds than our own - and acknowledging this in the transcription shows the recorder working independently from the human ear. Upon re-listening to the audio recording, references to the wider context became magnified.

(A door slams)

Group: How is the process of collecting, recording and documenting things turned into art? Is it that you are considering the data that you collect through aesthetic means, and that makes it art?

Alyssa: What makes it art and no longer data?

Group: Yes.

Alyssa: That's a question I have too! Because you could say it's art just because an artist does it, you know.

Group: Exactly!

Alyssa: But then does that mean that anthropologists can't do art?

Group: Yeah, is it just the intention or the education you have...?

Alyssa: Yeah, and I don't agree with that. I don't think that an artist can't process data simply because they are an artist and not an anthropologist. But then I guess the question is, what are your priorities? Because when I read about this artist Rirkrit Tiravanija who cooked meals, (for people who visited the gallery with the aim of bringing people together)² I could say okay, could I do that with my background and credentials and be considered an artist? Because if I did the same exact thing that he did... I don't know. I have no idea.

Group: This is the thing. And I would say, of course you could, and if you then label yourself an artist, be my guest. But then again I don't think it works the other way

around. I don't think I can call myself an anthropologist just because I wanted to. I need the education.

Alyssa: I don't think anybody can be an artist just because they want to be an artist.

Group: I think so. You're an artist if you do art. I think it's that simple. But then if we come down to who gets money, grants, then you have to have a title, an education.

Alyssa: But it's the same with anthropology. If you do anthropology but you are not supported by anybody or backed by any institution... You know, it's a good question. I don't have any answers. (Laughter) But it's interesting to think about the definitions, where the lines are drawn and who's drawing them. Where do we come up with these definitions and boundaries, pigeonholing people?

Group: Often when I start a new project I meet people, I'm collecting information from different sources. And then I'm like okay, well this is interesting, what to do with all of this? What makes documentation into art? It is the aesthetic considerations, I am framing the world in a specific way.

Alyssa: That's why I'm always super curious when I talk to you guys. You are starting with ideas, you do research, you gather knowledge, you go to different places. I can't even imagine, I can't even picture what that would turn into as art projects. But somehow it turns into these concrete things. In my field that wouldn't happen. You would write about it basically, and it's pretty straightforward. Or if you do visual anthropology you would do a film or a photo-essay. There are different ways of shaping the text, but for me the really interesting thing is how do you go from all this stuff you're thinking about to the thing that comes out of it. It's fascinating to me. And, that happens to each of you in very different ways. You all have your own process of how that works. But, I'm always really curious about what makes you take a certain step into that direction or work with certain materials as opposed to others. Because in a way we are dealing with the same original substances: life and

people, connections and interactions and relationships. All of these are shared concerns.

Group: But, they are framed differently and for different purposes.

Alyssa: Yeah.

(Somebody coughs in the background)

Alyssa: Anthropologists ask questions, they listen to stories, they watch what people do, they join in what people are doing. That's the idea of participant observation. You're participating in activities and also writing down notes, recording, documenting. You could do anthropology in familiar contexts, like at home, or you could do something that is unfamiliar to you, in a different cultural context. Just today I was reading a text by Arnd Schneider and Chris Wright³ who've written several books together about art and anthropology, and a quote from them is, 'Both art and anthropology have practitioners who appropriate from and represent others.' There's this fundamental idea of working with others, around others, in relation to others.

Group: Then what is ethnography?

Alyssa: Ethnography is often used in relation to any kind of qualitative research project. A lot of other disciplines have borrowed the term whenever it involves describing everyday life or people or traditions. Something that's not quantitative, not just measurements and statistics, but about people's interactions, engaging with them... This anthropological encounter is about trying to witness events while simultaneously being part of them, usually a long term engagement, not just a reportage - going in and going out - but an in-depth interaction. There can be surveys and interviews, but also everyday conversations, questions, discussions. Sometimes they emerge spontaneously; sometimes they are planned. And then as

an anthropologist you're expected to process this material, think about it in relation to wider theories, or conceptual frameworks in the discipline of anthropology, and then write up your findings as an ethnographic text. Technically the ethnography is the written outcome of the research process; 'graphy' is writing, 'ethno' means people and is referring to culture, so 'writing about culture'.

(Somebody walks by)

Group: In your article you talk about a workshop you organised with the artist Selena Kimball. The aim of the workshop was to find different ways of looking at artefacts in museum archives. Could you talk more about that project?

Alyssa: Yeah, Selena - who's an artist based in New York - and I had been planning a workshop called *Seeing Through Objects* at the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg⁴, to experiment with looking at artefacts of ethnographic archives in new ways. She suggested the artist Sophie Calle's installation, *Take Care of Yourself* (2007), as a model. *Take Care of Yourself* was developed in the wake of a break-up, when Calle received an email from her partner telling her that their relationship was over. Calle then asked 107 women, chosen for their profession or skills, to interpret this letter, and then made a project compiling all the different forms of interpretation and response.

Selena and I worked with an archivist from the Museum of World Culture to select several artefacts from the collection, and in a similar way to Calle, we invited different researchers from the fields of psychology, archaeology, earth and space sciences, microbiology, poetry, conservation, and photography to our workshop. At the workshop, everyone was asked to conduct a literal observation of these artefacts according to their own disciplinary traditions, reflecting upon the materials, tools, and bodily practices involved, and the various apparatuses of categorisation at work.

The idea was originally to look at how we see. How different frameworks of vision shape how we observe and how we look at things. What was hard about this workshop was that people took for granted what they do in their own field. One day for the workshop wasn't enough... People thought it was so obvious how you would look at an object, you know? But then when you get everybody in the same room together and everybody's approaching and reading objects in very different ways, then it's like oh, okay, yeah. Some people would want to understand an object's history and research archival facts about it, other people would want to touch it and feel it and try and engage with it.

I was going around talking to people, interviewing people about what they thought about the objects, because that was how I immediately thought about how I as an anthropologist would find out about the objects: what people say and think about them. And my friend Selena who was co-organising the workshop, she came up to me after about ten minutes and was like - Alyssa, you're supposed to be working with the object! And I was like I am! And even she didn't realise, and she was like oh yeah... of course, you're an anthropologist! And she's an artist, so of course, she was busy making this tissue-paper relief sculpture modelled on one of the artefacts... It was funny, because until that moment of seeing what other people are doing, you just kind of assume that observing means what it means in the way that *you* do it.

(Phone ringing)

Group: Would you say that the idea of truth is something that separates art and anthropology? Going into this idea of the aesthetics, and how it's used, because the artist doesn't always need to verify things or prove them or back them up?

Alyssa: Yeah, I mean you can't narrow it down to one difference between them; I think there are many nuanced differences between them. Artists might have a tendency to complicate or obscure things, instead of wanting to clarify and explain everything, whereas an anthropologist would be more likely to be criticised for

making something more complicated or ambiguous. On the other hand, I don't know, I think that raises important questions about what could be gained through making something more ambiguous and complicated. Maybe that's not actually the opposite of anthropological knowledge and maybe we need to open up what anthropology means and could be seen to do, and maybe it could incorporate those kinds of practices. That's where I'm coming from. I guess it's my own personal take on anthropology, because I know that there are so many different kinds of anthropologists and anthropological work. But, I feel like if I'm going to stand my ground or identify as an anthropologist, I also want to somehow claim that I can incorporate an artistic perspective into my work that's not outside of my own discipline - it's part of how I do anthropology. It's not that I am just going to 'oh, borrow a method here', or you know, take somebody else's example who does something - no. It's part of my anthropological practice to do it in an artistic way, whatever that means. And, I'm trying to make a claim for how anthropology inherently has that potential in it, so you don't have to go outside of anthropology to do something in an artistic way.

Group: There is a quote from Calle: 'I don't do any of my work for sociological reasons, I do it for artistic reasons.'⁵ It sounds so abstract. Artistic reasons? What does that mean?

Alyssa: Yeah, I guess that's the big question. For me she's kind of disavowing any attempts to put her into an academic category, sociological category. Because that's not her intention. But then the question is what does that mean, what *is* an artistic reason?

Group: When I was reading your text about Calle, it made me google the term 'art'. What does Wikipedia say about art? And it says it's a diverse range of human activities, blablabla, visual, auditory, performing... Intended to be appreciated for their beauty or emotional power. So, maybe that's the artistic reason.

(Someone on the street outside shouts 'Min mamma, min mamma!')

Alyssa: Yeah. Not for scientific analysis but for some bodily perception. But this quote from Calle made me think about this in terms of my experience doing research. Doing my textual work and then doing film work. And maybe this is going to sound really reductive and kind of simplistic but when I'm working on a film, my main goal is to get people to feel something. It's not about information, or processing data or explaining things. I'm happy if my film makes people feel something. And to some extent when I'm writing, I want people to feel but that's not the overarching priority for me. Writing can definitely be about conveying sensory and visceral impressions. It is also about information, explaining, contextualising and framing. But, I'm not an artist with a capital A so my perception of what I think I want to convey artistically would be very different from all of you. I don't want to say that art is about feeling and anthropology is about knowledge. That's bullshit. To me a successful anthropological film has a visceral impact on you rather than being solely concerned with what kind of facts you come away with.

Group: Should we turn off the recorder?

Alyssa: But all the interesting stuff comes when you stop recording, right?

(Long silence)

(Laughter)

Alyssa Grossman is a social and visual anthropologist, with a PhD from the University of Manchester (2010). Her research explores the intersections between artistic and anthropological approaches and forms, using visual and sensory methods to investigate sites and practices of memorialisation in everyday life. She is currently an Associated Researcher at Valand Academy, University of Gothenburg.

The Group consists of five artists (Gabriel Nils Edvinsson, Theodora Ekholm, Riikka Gröndahl, Johan Rikenberg, and Lucy Wilson) studying on the MFA: Fine Art programme at Valand Academy who have been researching the relationship between art, anthropology, ethnography, the limitations of language, and corporeal responses.



1. Grossman. *Stealing Sophie Calle*.
2. Sansi and Strathern. *Art and anthropology after relations*, 426.
3. Schneider and Wright. *Anthropology and Art Practice*, 26.
4. *Seeing Through Objects*, organised by Alyssa Grossman, Selena Kimball and Adriana Muñoz at the Museum of World Culture archives, Gothenburg. 2017.
5. Shaw. *A Conversation with Sophie Calle*.

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