

REVIEW: TRADING ZONES: CAMERA WORK IN ARTISTIC AND ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

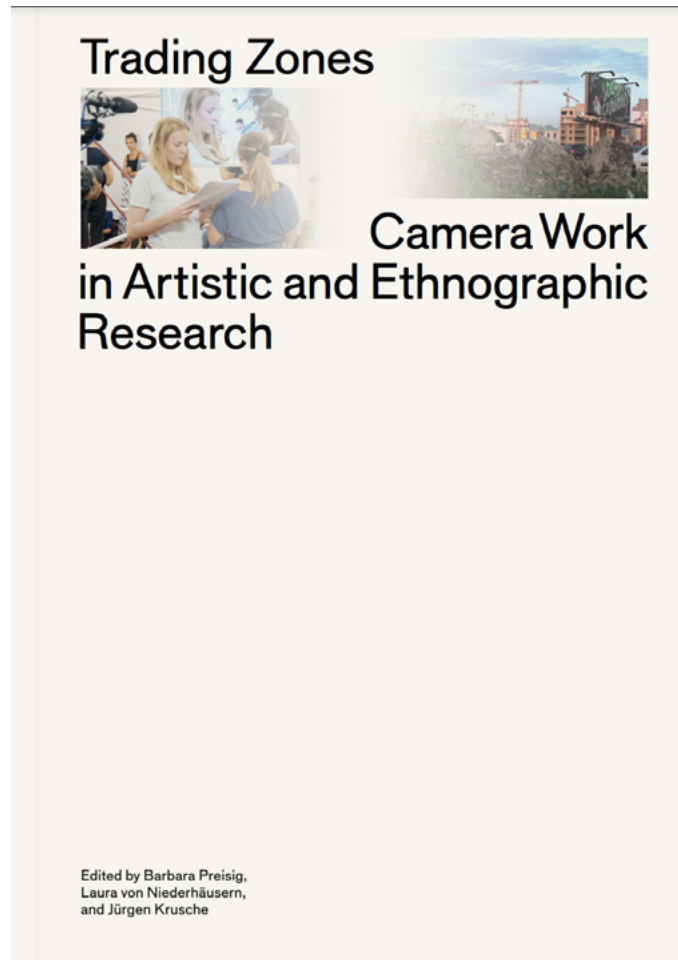
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ABSTRACT

This review of *Trading Zones: Camera Work in Artistic and Ethnographic Research* edited by a number of researchers who also contribute presents the book in its methodological and artistic variety and in relation to other fields. While firmly situating itself in human-centered anthropological practice, at the edges it brushes against media theoretical frameworks it hardly engages. Contributions explore the possibilities, limitations and challenges the presence of the camera offers for research and creation, all the while focusing on topics such as ethics and human action. The book is an important contribution to visual ethnography and points toward ways anthropology can be used creatively in the arts. It also offers an impressive intersection of possibilities through the many examples described, illustrated and hyperlinked. It will be especially useful for those that seek immediate applicability.

Keywords: Visual ethnography; Multimodal anthropology; Art; Practice; Education.



The following question is said to be at the heart of the varied contributions by dominantly German based artists and researchers: “How do audiovisual practices enable reflexive, participatory, embodied forms of knowledge and perception about social contexts that might otherwise be difficult to access or remain invisible?” (Preisig et al., 2022, p. 11) Research in visual anthropology and related practice-based fields has made it increasingly evident that firm boundaries between ethnography, art and documentary are an impossibility. It is these significant overlaps that the editors call *trading zones*. These enable negotiations “about common issues of artistic and ethnographic research; about the interests and expectations of filmmakers, filmees, viewers; about different speaker positions; and about translocal entanglements.” (Preisig et al., 2022, p. 10) Two things are evident from this definition: first, that the reader finds themselves in a world of pragmatic ethics, not so much concerned with what things and fields are, but how they interact in messy worlds and how such interactions can be fruitfully drawn on in research and arts contexts. Second, we find ourselves in a distinctly anthropocentric approach, one that recognizes that a camera is not a neutral entity and shapes all aspects of research, and yet one that defiantly focuses on human activity. While the contributions do engage with different media and ways of using the camera, the methods are distinctly not media-specific, because they

ignore media-philosophy in favor of descriptions that leave room for the camera but in general follow human agency or human-centered ethics. At most, the camera figures as a McLuhanian extension of the body and the human sensory make-up in a sort of one-way street non-relation that makes it possible for the project to engage technology without having to forgo humanism with some contributions going further than others. This gives the book a methodological coherence, while offering alternative readings for those experienced in alternative approaches. The book is lavishly illustrated with images of the contributors' projects as well as the occasional hyperlink to take us outside of the book to where audiovisuals can be reproduced.

The introductory chapter *Camera Practices of Doing* by Barbara Preisig and Laura von Niederhäusern lays the theoretical groundwork. The following part *Observe and Show* contains three contributions concerned with how “the camera reaches far beyond its function as a recording device in the field.” (Preisig et al., 2022, p. 10) Laura Coppens in *The Aesthetics of Accountability* offers a summary of discussions within anthropology on the merits and limits of visibility, and moves to affirming the camera as actively co-constitutive of the field. She writes, “[in] my project, I was interested precisely in those more-than-representational possibilities of ethnographic inquiry.” (Coppens in Preisig et al., 2022, p. 25) In other words, the interest here and throughout the book lies in the classic anthropological problematic of ‘how to show the invisible.’ Readers follow the creation of her documentary *Taste of Hope* about a self-managed plant in France and the creative and ethical challenges faced. How filmmaking can contribute to the goals of the community is emphasized, as it is a delicate matter as to which processes, scenes, frames, hopes and dreams, come to be stabilized into the final film. In *Camera Ethnography* Bina Elisabeth Mohn also takes apart her process of creation for a couple of her audio-visual pieces and her theoretical background in so-called *camera ethnography*, “an independent strand of performative ethnography.” (Mohn in Preisig et al., 2022, p. 34) It focuses on the before and after of taking images, framing and montage, and how they “bring forth, shape, and communicate processes of ethnographic experience and knowledge about situated practices.” (Mohn in Preisig et al., 2022, p. 34) A text attuned to how research comes about through small steps decided on and paths not taken. It is also an argument for expanding what counts as research output in order to move away from discursivity toward i.e. a ‘short form’ audio-visual outputs. Next, *Capture, Record, Play*, is a conversation between Christoph Schenker and Anette Rose about the latter’s long-term project called the *Encyclopaedia of Manual Operations*. Concerned with hands and technologies that interface hands with production, it stands close to some of Harun Farocki’s work which are duly referenced. The camera here is germane because it makes accessible operations otherwise embedded only in the bodies of the manual operators. Such tacit knowledge emergent from interaction with machines “is acquired intuition, the result of work and increasing precision,

of the interaction of brain, hands, and eyes.” (Schenker & Rose in Preisig et al., 2022, p. 61)

The second part *Witness and Tell* again consists of three contributions — two conversations and a sort of montage of images and text. The title already points toward the increased role of speech, in general at the expense of the camera. *A Polyphonic Walk through Beirut's Outer Spaces* by Daniel Kötter and Jürgen Krusche, and additions by Rani al Raji and Amira Solh, opens the city of its title along its various cultural and political fault lines, through time, and demonstrates the very physical fragmentation resulting from the war. It reads more as ethical reflections by filmmakers based in theater, and offers little in terms of camera specific thoughts. *On Longing, Belonging, and a Poetry of Resistance*, a discussion among female Iranian documentarists Shirin Barghnavard, Sepideh Abtahi, Mina Keshavarz, Sahar Salahshoori, and Nahid Rezaei opens the field of resonances between poetry, democracy and activism in specifically Persian worlds. Apart from some straightforward comments on the therapeutic effects of working as documentarists, there is perhaps the least overlap with the main topic out of all contributions. It is doubtlessly the most defiantly humanist piece and offers a counterpoint to other chapters. In *The 49th Year* Heidrun Holzfeind composes a piece from letters by the “Japanese intellectual and anarchist Toshihiko Kamata” (Holzfeind in Preisig et al., 2022, p. 93) who has been imprisoned for decades, juxtaposed with images the author took in Tokyo and the Fukushima prefecture. “Both are linked to the prisoner’s story, as well as to protest and resistance movements in Japan from the 1960s through today.” (Holzfeind in Preisig et al., 2022, p. 93) While the anarchists’ thoughts are poignant, insightful and poetic, and would certainly make a great read with Gramsci and Foucault, the connection with the striking images remained somewhat a black box to this reviewer. The editors characterized this part as about “the public and political spaces in and from which these projects emerge are shaped by a conflict-ridden past and state control. The camera seeks out these contested and sometimes inaccessible places to gather evidence, layers, and voices.” (Preisig et al., 2022, p. 10) A fitting description, but also an antiquated approach, where it was enough to show something left out by hegemony and as such hardly making innovative use of the camera.

The following chapter *Stage and Perform* includes two projects both attentive but not limited to the classic issue of who speaks for whom. *Future Me — Memory, Narration, Fiction*, a conversation between Lena Maria Thüring and Barbara Preisig that touches on how Thüring works with students to stage various activities that continue in the editing rooms, in diverse manners of collaboration, to create polyphonic works woven out of students’ stories and bodies. Special focus is given on how different aspects of the social world articulate themselves in spoken language. It is very much about combining reality and fiction, and how different media can be used to enter collaborative processes of creation and the new possibilities that come from it. As the artist-ethnographer states, the idea is to make exercises “in ‘world making’ that could be shared and

experienced on, perhaps, a slightly more democratic relation between author, subject, and audience is possible.” (Thüring & Preisig in Preisig et al., 2022, p. 127) In *From Ethnographic to Virtual World Making*, Zheng Mahler (the artist Royce Ng and anthropologist Daisy Bisenieks) explore above all how the conceptual instability of ethnographic film opens it toward other possibilities, opens up toward a “third ‘virtual’ space, where meanings and conventions can be co-constructed through multiple subjective representations and shared experiences.” (Mahler in Preisig et al., p. 120) Their exhibition *Season of the Shell* in trying to render experiential intangible trade networks, sensory aspects of trade and the experience of research itself aims to compose a multisensory world that “might offer new possibilities for articulating, representing, and inhabiting the spaces we operate in between art and anthropology.” (Mahler in Preisig et al., p. 122) Importantly, the installation is not representational and wants the visitor to experience a general instability of subjective and inter-subjective experience. The duo’s description is a welcome and playful intervention pointing toward post-visual research in sensory ethnography.

The final chapter *Hand Over* contains two artist contributions whose practices make use of the camera to critically negotiate authorship and create new forms of collective production. In *Camera Dialogues* Uriel Orlow, Bärbel Küster, and Barbara Preisig converse on Orlow’s *The Visitor* where his visit to the former King of Benin in relation to looted Benin Bronzes, now globally scattered, is filmed. The issue of who is filming and which codes are to be followed becomes central, especially once the camera is handed over to local camerapeople out of necessity. The contribution then is very much about the multifarious position of the author in a filmic text made under post-colonial relations. In *Notes towards a Free Improvisational Cinema* the British artist Louis Henderson discusses his film that interrogates landscape and memory through the figure of Toussaint Louverture whose remains were scattered in the French Jura, with the film gesturing toward his gradual loss of single authorship toward co-authoring with people from Haiti. Henderson shares his thoughts and different practices that came to be surrounding the film, and the problematic of “how to make films as workshops, as conversations, collectively and as group work.” (Henderson in Preisig et al., p. 143) This, in a decolonial move, includes the dead as much as the living, as well as other elements beyond the human. In terms of which parts of the world are taken as co-compositing reality, as performative, this is the most radical contribution and a fitting non-conclusion.

The book offers thoughtful and playful explorations of the role of a camera in human-centered fieldwork approached experimentally and relating to arts-based practice. The contributions in general act as both more classical descriptions of worlds engaged and as texts that open up the world and foster inspiration for specialized researchers and casual readers, especially when it comes to immediate applicability.

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