

Graphic Anthropology Field School Report of a First Edition

By Kim Tondeur

S U M M A R Y

This short report aims to introduce the reader to the project of the Graphic Anthropology Field School (GrAFs), held in Gozo (Malta) and hosted By Expeditions, Research in Applied Anthropology, as to discuss some of the observations and reflections made during the first edition of the program.

The Graphic Anthropology Field School (GrAFs) is a project by Expeditions, an independent network of scholars in the social sciences. For 11 years, Expeditions has organized a summer school for anthropologists and social scientists in Gozo (Malta), focused on the practice of fieldwork. Breaking away from theoretical lectures in gloomy classrooms, its aim has always been to keep scientists' feet on the ground and experiment with tools and tricks for fieldwork practice.

The idea of offering a separated program dedicated to graphic anthropology grew over the past two years. The project started as a colleague saw me sketching a scenery. His interest was piqued and he proposed to invite some students to grab a coffee and sketch at a terrace as a group. Of course, the ulterior motive was to figure out what drawing could do for observation and analysis in the field. We however quickly acknowledged it was more than that: drawings present numerous advantages at different stages of the research process. More importantly, sketching appeared as a handy activity to access the field more easily for our - mostly young and sometimes inexperienced - researchers. Moreover, the experiment did not require any expensive gear nor specific skill: everyone can trace meaningful lines on paper. Some participants also used sketching in ways that did not originally occur to us. For example, in studying migration, one student turned drawing into a tool for icebreaking and reciprocal observation by having her and her informants sketch each other. Thus, this activity helped to balance the ethnographic relation in a more equal way. Another student found reflexive sketches useful for getting rid of fieldwork's anxi-

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Self-portrait, By Emma Anderson

eties and traumatic experiences. Finally, a staff member let the process of drawing carry her through a music played in a Gozitan village festa, experiencing sketching as a way to record sounds and senses.

Along the way, we eventually developed a more grounded view on drawing as a practice of “making” more than “taking” (Taussig 2011). We learned how drawings are far less intrusive than photography, and encourage the necessity to take time, observe, wait, and get lost within fieldwork. In the field, the utility of sketches appears from a low-brow but most useful kind: sketching a scene gives one “a reason to be there” in situations where even senior researchers might struggle with a feeling of being “out of place.” It also helps to fight boredom in the field, serves as an opportunity to take the notebook out of your pocket

and often provokes new and unexpected interactions. Something intriguing about sketches, especially when compared to standard field notes, is indeed their capacity to amuse people and arouse curiosity: sketches truly have the ability to get conversations flowing. As an observation tool, graphics may also help to explore different and perhaps more relaxed mindsets, push to look at things from multiple angles and help researchers to realize – more than textual notes do – how subjective and biased their perceptions are. As one among many other projects (<http://www.anthropologyfieldschool.org/>), our experiment with graphics quickly turned into a full-grown graphic anthropology workshop

Boosted by these results, developing GrAFs was a way to give us more time to explore the potential and limits of graphic anthropology, something our academic lives do not always leave room for. The program, which took place in March and April 2016, was set up as a mixture of collective field trips, individual research and technical exercises (such as live model, portraying or perspective sessions). It was tailored to give us a grasp on the uses of graphics for both doing fieldwork and communicating results, as well as to confront us with artistic drawing techniques from an anthropological point of view. Among other themes, we explored the practicalities and ethics of drawing and, for example, its potential to record social memories, gestures and techniques. In order to train in keeping visual field notes and organizing graphic narratives, some specific assignments included the production of « ethnographic postcards », a daily comic report and a



The Nadur Band Plays Beatles Medley, By Abby Golub

collective storyboarding session of a paper on Gozitan food culture. Most importantly however, participants were asked to draw all the time and never erase their lines. After a few days, drawing really became addictive for most of us.



A daily comic report, by Josefine Kroll

In the next paragraphs, I will try to sketch out two personal observations which, I hope, will be of interest for other graphic anthropologists (you can find another report of the school here : http://www.antro.uu.se/grafisk_antropologi/).

The first observation I want to bring in this discussion is about the possibility of using drawings as a form of per-

formance in the field. What I am personally more enthusiastic about here is the transformative effect ethnographic drawings can have on the notebook itself and, accordingly, on the people who come to handle it. While writing always feels somewhat secretive, public drawing sessions are “an invitation to watch and ask questions” (Hendrickson 2010: 34) as well as to make comments and edits. Because of their accessible nature, drawings have the potential to demystify the notebook by making its content public and consequently open to discussion and negotiation. Passing from hand to hand, the notebook becomes a mobile and participative museum which allows space for dialogue, collaboration and the expression of multiple levels of reflexivity. In the field, “one is constantly testing one’s interpretations and understanding by finding ways to play them back to informants”, Calzadilla and Marcus (2006: 98) write; and this is exactly one of the reasons why drawings are useful.

Being comfortable enough to ostentatiously draw in public is not natural but learned by practice. It asks for willingness, try-outs and also mistakes from the part of the ethnographer. And mistakes do happen. For example, one of the preoccupations that arose during the program concerned the iconicity of our drawings: what if we make a drawing of someone which looks negatively different from the way this person perceives herself? Drawings are not innocent. Sometimes, they can even be deadly serious. Nevertheless, consciously or not, some of us developed



Visual postcards from the field, by Kim Tondeur

clear techniques to foster people's curiosity and comments. Echoing Ballard's (2013: 139) depiction of portraiture as a "powerful plastic form of social interaction", one participant made a point in using sketches of storefronts to trigger dialogue with bartenders and shop owners. As for myself, drawing with two hands or with watercolours proved being a solid trick to raise other people's interest. In the same vein, I have progressively abandoned inconspicuous notebooks over the past two years. If one's goal is to attract attention and trigger interaction, draw bigger.



Drawing storefronts, by Erika Hoffmann-Dilloway

In this sense, drawing in ethnographic notebooks may best be described as an act of performance. A "theater anthropology" (Calzadilla and Marcus 2006: 99), where the notebook itself becomes the stage, a sort of portative art gallery where the ethnographer and the interlocutors meet, discuss and debate both the script and the decor. In this *mise-en-scène*, the distinction between ethnographic drawings, participative drawings and what I would call "exposition drawings" (i.e. drawings that are intentionally made to communicate research results, i.e. for ethnographic expositions or anthropological comics) often tends to get blurry. Thereof, even though it is more likely possible for anthropologists to circumscribe to each of these three modes of drawing a specific history, methodology and epistemology, such as to link each of these

modes to specific moments in the qualitative research process (roughly: participant observation, interviews and result communications), the distinction might not be heuristically fruitful. From an empiric and heuristic point of view indeed, it seems that a broad approach to drawings could be privileged as moments of the research process tend to overlap through graphic practice in the field.

My second observation concerns drawing style. As days passed, intimacy and trust grew among participants of the program and I felt the need to move away from a realistic style to more sketchy, conceptual and overtly subjective drawings. Drawings which, thanks to obvious distortions of apparent reality allowed me to stick closer to my own, lived experience of the moment. "In pointing away from the real, they [these drawings] capture something invisible and auratic that makes the thing depicted worth depicting" (Taussig 2011: 14-15).

Somehow, this process recapitulates the evolution of visuals in the history of anthropology itself. As David Macdougall (2004) points out, anthropologists slowly neglected realistic drawing, photography and film as they moved away from an ethnology mainly based on visually apparent aspects of human societies (dimensions of the body, skin color, masks and haircuts, material culture, architecture, formal rituals, etc.); to later rediscover film, but also a more figurative and conceptual form of drawing as an alternative to the limits of text in research topics such as, among others, memory, emotions, senses, sexuality, time or space.



Stepping away from realistic drawing, by Kim Tondeur

Moving away from superficial observation was, for me, a slow process. This difficulty might reflect a limit posed by a mode of inscription which does not automatically step away from the visual paradigm which dominates in Western societies and academia (Ong in Clifford 1986: 11). Some refer to 'seeing through drawing' as a haptic practice (see Ingold 2013: 139, Taussig 2011) and a tool to depict the invisible; and in many ways they are right to do so. But we do need to stay aware of the following pitfall in graphic anthropology, especially for untrained artist-anthropologists: the eye first leads to what is visible, and drawing pushes to look before anything else. Thereof, the lack of training anthropologists show in both the history, the making and the interpretation of visuals is a risk at stake. It did take Kandinsky his whole life to find his way into – and out of – figurative painting, did it not?

In my experience, it is mainly the fact of drawing continuously - while talking, eating, walking or even standing in the middle of a busy bakery - that helped growing confidence in our practice, developing a deeper intimacy with it and, in return, with the field. I believe such an intimacy is crucial as it helps breaking the distance between the artist and his/her subject, thus facilitating a move away from realistic depictions of the field. If they want to avoid rigidifying cultures through technical or organic drawings, artists-anthropologists really need to grasp lines of emotions, movements and actions; lines of life (Ingold 2011: 1-21). To do so, they need to be part of the flow, to move in it and, why not, to sketch with it.

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