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Making Sensory Ethnography and Sensorial Formats in Re-View

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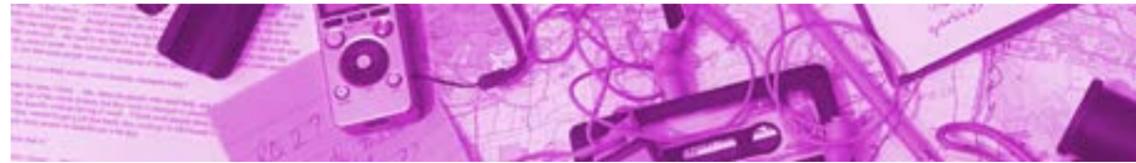
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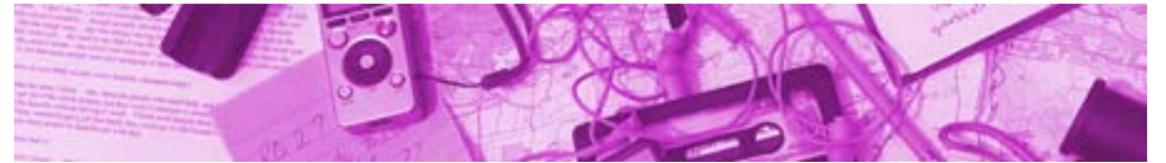


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Figure 1: Bookmaking Praxis and Poetics Workshop, Fall 2017. Courtesy of Making Sensory Ethnography.



Introduction

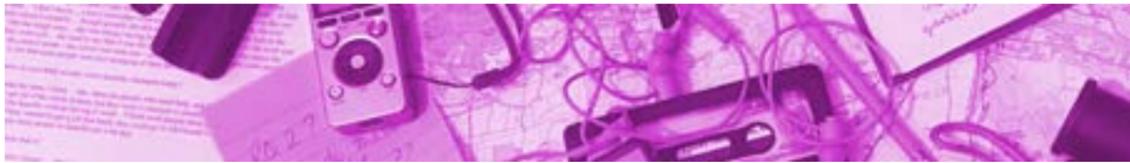
Researchers performing ethnography have long reflected on the use of various sensory media as ways to document their work and interpret everyday occurrences. From audio-visual technologies to more recent digital platforms and algorithmic techniques, media offer tools through which researchers come to understand concrete and embodied engagements with interlocutors and their relationships with the world. Contemporary shifts across disciplines, not least in anthropology, have broadened a researcher's toolset to encompass media practices not limited to familiar forms. More crucially, technical and conceptual experimentations with media open opportunities for collaborating across disciplines, outlining new ways of understanding, making, and performing multidisciplinary work. Together, sensory media serves not only as tools of inquiry, but also as viable forms to co-generate theoretical reflections and present ethnographic research across disciplinary bounds.

Though ethnography is a hallmark of the discipline of anthropology, ethnographic methods have increasingly been incorporated into a wide variety of disciplines and fields of practice. This article is a reflection of such multidisciplinary commitments to collaborate and experiment with sensory media and ethnography; anthropologists, filmmakers, photographers, curators, interaction designers, and information scientists gathered to ask how the senses might help craft fuller stories and make better media.

Making Sensory Ethnography: A Workshop Series

In 2017, the interdisciplinary workshop *Making Sensory Ethnography*¹ (MSE) commenced as a graduate student-led space of inquiry under the guidance of Dr. Jason de León and supported by Rackham Graduate School at the University of Michigan. We convened to explore media-based methodologies and multimodal forms of research presentation. Central to our efforts in fostering cross-field discussions about research practices and productions are the prefixes "making" and "sensory" that encapsulate a focus on process. Specifically, we pursue an ongoing experimentation with media that engages multi-sensorial modalities and affords varied forms of theoretical and aesthetic expression.

Throughout the academic year, we held research presentations along with hands-on, technical exercises led by interdisciplinary practitioners. While these meetings lent focus to the research projects of contributors, the engaged workshop component of our series emphasized the knowledge engendered in the process of production. Although the workshop began with a moderately defined orientation, we did not anticipate the direction that ultimately guided the majority of our meetings: we probed the materiality of paper, mapping olfactory pollution, participatory instant photography, culturally-specific music genres, and a silent "one-shot" film technique. This year-long array of media explorations culminated with an open format collaboratively curated exhibition.



Sensorial Formats in Re-View

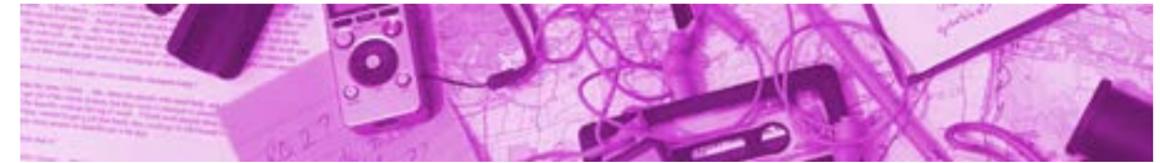
Our exhibition, *Sensorial Formats*, was held in Hatcher Graduate Library at the University of Michigan from April 16, 2018 to April 23, 2018. Fortuitously, this event coincided with *Displacements*², the inaugural virtual conference of the Society for Cultural Anthropology (SCA). We participated in the virtual conference as a local “node” by circulating posters, photographs, videos, live updates, and social media posts designed to communicate the theme of the exhibition and the monthly MSE sessions that led to it. We encouraged visitors to participate using the hashtag #displace18, which served as a cross-platform channel for experiencing the global conference in real time.

The works offered a wide range of methodologies, epistemologies, mediums, cultural contexts and critical skill sets. These included a hand crafted book of translated Jewish Cuban poetry made through collaboration between Cuban artist Rolando Estévez and Professor of Anthropology Ruth Behar; A set of hand built scrapbooks curated from snippets of field experiences in China and Mexico by Will Thomson, a postdoctoral fellow in the Center for Chinese Studies; A short essay film titled “How to Rust” that explores mythologies of Diaspora and Detroit through materiality and metaphor by Julia Yezbick, a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of History of Art; A sound recording from an ethnomusicological project on “aural borders” and immigration by Alex E. Chávez, Professor of Anthropology at Notre Dame; and a series of instant film photographs documented and circulated by migrants along the US-Mexico border, curated by John Doering-White, PhD Candidate in Anthropology and Social Work, and Jason De León, Professor of Anthropology. All together, these works offered a kaleidoscopic lens on the expansive possibilities of multimodal ethnographic practice.

While these works spoke for themselves, the panel, which included five out of the seven featured presenters, gave richer insight to the collection. The discussion shed light not only on the exhibited works but on their unique contribution to the ‘envelope-pushing’ nature of sensorial practices. We examined questions at the intersections of sensory modalities including: how does touch interact with sound and smell; how might visual modalities invoke spatial, aural, olfactory, and tactile dimensions of sensory experience? How does genre become a function of audience; how do boundaries between process and product collapse in the pursuit of sensorial ethnography; how can the political conventions of scholarly research presentation be leveraged and subverted through unconventional aesthetic choices? While we reached no final conclusions regarding these discursive and exploratory queries, we succeeded in opening a dynamic space to explore these questions, which is our ultimate goal for the workshop and the exhibition.

Beyond the Re-View

We end this Re-View by offering an opening to the notion of *Making Sensory Ethnography*, in particular two core themes that emerged through our workshops, discussions, and virtual conference: 1) Commitment to process, and 2) Knowledge in making. First, we were all deeply committed to the *process* of sensory ethnography.



Through MSE, we explored the acts of gathering diverse sensory perceptions from workshop conveners and participants. Our attention to process also influenced the Re-View written here: each of the workshop conveners wrote and edited this piece on Google Docs while conducting fieldwork from across seven different countries. We collectively and equitably contributed to the legibility of this document, promoting internet-driven ecologies of knowledge production. In exploring our second theme of “knowledge in making,” our commitment to “process” revealed to us the expansive set of relations involved in this kind of knowledge production. We recognized early on that there are as many ways of inhabiting a body of knowledge as there are of making sensory ethnography. Embarking on a project of this scope proved fruitful in practicing multiple and concurrent forms of collaboration among exhibition coordinators, contributors, and audiences. This workshop series and exhibition invigorated our collaborative efforts and opened possibilities for further engagements across physical and virtual spaces. We hope this Re-View invites others to do the same.



Figure 2 Scrapbook by William Thomson. Courtesy of Roxana Aras and Johan Spanner.

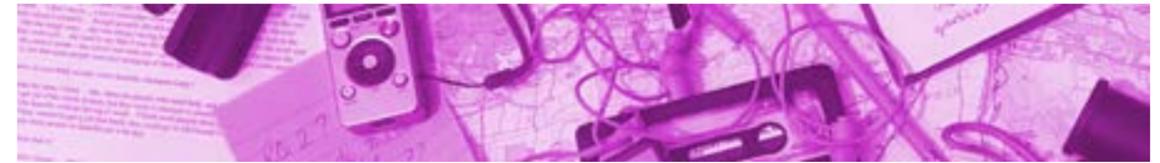
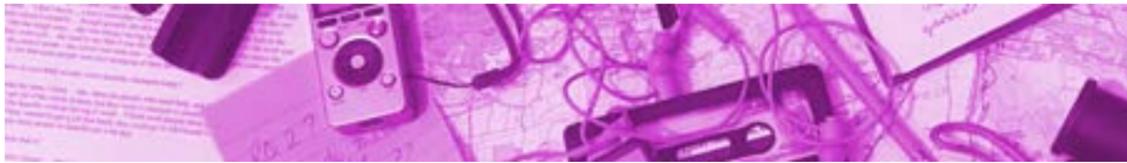


Figure 3 Sound Ethnography by Alex E. Chávez. Courtesy of Roxana Aras and Johan Spanner.



Figure 5: Instant Photography Workshop, Winter 2018. Courtesy of Making Sensory Ethnography.



Figure 4 Sensorial Encounter at Hatcher Graduate Library. Courtesy of Roxana Aras and Johan Spanner.

Notes

[1] Click here for more on the [Making Sensory Ethnography](#) workshop series, or email MakingSensoryEthnography@umich.edu

[2] see: <https://displacements.jhu.edu/>

Acknowledgements:

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