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[Review] Alternative Art and Anthropology: Global Encounters

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Abstract

This review examines *Alternative Art and Anthropology: Global Encounters*, edited by Arnd Schneider. This book offers a chance to engage with artistic and anthropological thinking practised beyond the confines of Euro-American part of the world. The potential of translation is emphasised and realised in various ways by each contributors.
To understand another culture was, as claimed by Shinichi Nakazawa, one of the contributors of *Alternative Art and Anthropology: Global Encounters*, the original self-assigned mission of Anthropology when it emerged as a discipline. In the case of art—as practice as well as product—in another culture, the task could be especially challenging. The idea of art is itself elusive and, arguably, has provoked in Anthropology as well as in general more debates and disagreements than most other concepts. However, it seems texts presented in this book, edited by Arnd Schneider, point to a possibility grown out of ambiguity: exactly because both art and anthropology attempt to explore and shape is ambivalent and cannot be clearly, linguistically defined, the latter might serve as appropriate processes through which art in an unfamiliar culture can be approached. More, the challenge this book sets up for itself is not limited to understanding art in foreign societies but anthropological thinking practiced in lesser known cultures. In other words, it strikes to enter other kinds of anthropological relations to the world which have been largely ignored by English-dominated and West-centred scholarly circles.

The book presents a set of key tasks and endeavours to undertake. First of all, there is the question of how to understand differences which sit outside the cultural and academic frameworks with which one employs to comprehend both art and anthropology. Specifically, how is it possible to overcome, as pointed out by Martin Heidegger (p.29), Europeanisation, which structures more known anthropological and artists practices and understanding? This problem is further complicated by the issue that if we acknowledge the fact that in our contemporary Westernised world, spaces in which we dwell respectively, are not yet synchronised - and possibly never will: how can we thus possibly understand ideas and practices realised through languages or forms to which we have no previous access? This also leads to the question of what contemporary and thus, contemporary art mean?

For me, a reader who was raised in Taiwan where American, Japanese, and often Japanised-European concepts mingles with traditions inherited from a distant—historically, geographically, and politically—China, who constantly feels confounded by artworks formed outside Euro-American modes, the challenge this book presents from the beginning is if I can understand the ideas proposed by each of its contributors.
Schneider argues that the idea of translation is a significant act through which cross-cultural understanding, though never complete, can be reached. He emphasises that from the start, this collection of essays assume a position different from what previous attempts at anthropology of contemporary art often take: that is, while before some Euro-American developed notions of contemporary art and anthropology are shared among participating scholars, this book brings together ‘other’ traditions of contemporary art and anthropology (p.1). That variations exist is highlighted and, instead of being treated as gaps to be dissolved, those variations are given their own rights to exist. This could be seen as a response to what Schneider observes as a current trend in Anthropology: ‘It is the recent turn…where…fundamental differences in knowledge acquisition and representation are proposed between Western modes and certain other forms of thoughts’ (p.2).

Each contributor’s work is framed within this wish for acknowledging and knowing the differences. The valued idea of decentred, diverse practice of anthropology and art is realised in this book through presenting works produced by scholars outside the pan-European world and functioning as dialogues between multiple positions and on multiple levels. That there exists an affinity between art and anthropology because of their often parallel ways of working appears a shared argument among this book’s contributors. They seem to suggest that, with the corresponding characteristics, methodological or topical, anthropology and art thus have an affinity and can work in tandem. This conclusion is, however, arrived via different routes of theorisation in each contributor’s case. To Almira Astudillo Gilles, it is the reconstruction and representation of ethnographic objects as common goals which link art and anthropology. For Shinichi Nakazawa, both practices attempt at transcendence: to go beyond the existing understanding of the self, to re-examine the self from the outside which is made possible by bi-logical thinking. In the case of Tomoko Niwa and Tadashi Yanai, their exhibition of Chinese window flowers is designed to leaving space for audience to develop imaginary connection with the displays. This again reflects this book’s goal of incomplete translation. More than that, this sense of incompleteness, is claimed not only as a property of the work of translation itself but as a frame within which artistic creation can be generated. I am less sure if this artistic creation allowed in space left by translation can be developed into understanding of unfamiliar or unknown art practices. Yet at the same time, perhaps I am still confined by the Western frame of knowledge.
production. The strength of Niwa and Yanai’s project – as well as this book as a whole – lies in that the poetic is allowed and that reflects well on art. Through the poetic, room is opened up for exploration.

This book offers a timely chance to reach to otherness in a world where on the one hand, inclusivity and diversity are constantly called for by individual scholars and institutions, and on the other hand, tensions between differences is rising and the marginalised remains largely silenced. One strength of this book comes from its organisation: each scholar's text is followed by an interview, in which ideas are given clearer shaped through dialogues.

That clarification—or at least, better understanding—could be achieved through conversations is also promising for future projects in other disciplines. As someone who trained in both Economics and Sociology, I wonder if sociologists too wouldn't see the likeness between sociological comprehension of the world and artistic creation, or economists wouldn't feel the resemblance between the logics they use to analyse social activities and the logics underlying artistic practices. It would be worth broadening the perspective offered by Schneider’s book to interdisciplinary dialogues in the social sciences. In other words, translation can happen between disciplines and thus fluid understanding, presented as the potentiality of translation in this book, can be generated from collaboration.

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