

Author Arjen Mulder

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Contributions to an Artistic Anthropology: Arjen Mulder

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Editor Youngchul Lee, Henk Slager

Translation Ji-Young Yoo, Soojung Park,
Wonhwa Yoon

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Arjen Mulder

Arjen Mulder is an essayist and media theorist based in Amsterdam. Mulder has taught at various art schools in the Netherlands and Belgium. He has published four collections of essays in Dutch and co-wrote **Book for the Electronic Arts** (2000) with Maaïke Post. Mulder is Winner of the Media.art research award (Ars Electronica), 2008.

In the age of globalization, everyone is an anthropologist. If you walk through any of the major cities in the West you'll meet people from more nationalities, communities, clans, tribes and extended families than any anthropologist in the 19th or early 20th century ever came across during his adventurous trips to remote places in Sub-Saharan Africa, Mid-Asia or Amazonia. Anthropology has become the dominant way of relating to the people that co-inhabit the city with you. The exotics live among us, are actually having a good time here, but remain as exotic as ever, even in a coercive political climate demanding "integration of allochthonous people" and using racist slogans like "stop immigration, our country is full". Immigration won't stop, not in this century at least, and the great post-colonial worldwide wandering of groups and individuals will continue until everybody is a stranger to everybody around them. We are way beyond tourism, since there is no return home; even if we stay at home everything keeps changing around us and in us all the time, because the world is brought into all houses via our information and communication media. Everybody is forced to explain themselves to everybody else continuously, forgetting who they are themselves in the process. Everybody sees that everyone else is doing things differently. The "primitives" study the "civilized" researchers as much as they themselves are being studied by them. Who is who anyway? In a global network society, anthropology is more than a method of studying foreign peoples or collecting funny objects: it is the dominant way of being.

Cultural anthropology used to study sacred and profane artworks of other peoples under denominators such as "fetish", "totem" and "material culture". Nowadays

artistic anthropology studies the normality of one's own people under secular and holy denominators such as "interactive art", "participation art" or even "collective art" (that is, the art of collectives). In relational aesthetics, the art is in the relations, whether these take the form of a conversation, a meeting or a shared project. In anthropological aesthetics, the art is in the interaction, the participation, the collective. The only valid definition of art in this new paradigm is when an individual or a group of persons say, "What we do is art." That makes it art, and then the conversation can start about craftsmanship, conceptual richness, developmental possibilities. There are no critics left to judge this art from the outside, because to understand or empathize with the art of anthropological aesthetics, you have to become part of the artwork, you have to join in and interact, participate, share, that is suspend any critical distance, leave the ego behind, and enter the "we" of the network. As soon as you leave the artwork the art is gone again, hardly a memory, maybe just a sense of an experience beyond words and beyond media that you once had and have lost. You can talk about it, like mystics talk about their (re)union with God, but like them you know that everything you say is beside the point. The experience is too material and physical to be translated in spiritual media such as language, image or sound. Maybe touch-media could do the trick, if they existed, for touch is never abstract or transcendental but always immanent, bodily, native.

So, what kind of art are we talking about? I'll give you just one example and you can figure out the rest for yourself. This specific project started with a map that was drawn in real time by a few of the inhabitants of Amsterdam moving through their city, on foot, bicycle, public transport or car. Every few seconds their GPS-signal was uploaded via a sort of mobile phone system to a central computer, that visualized these data as dots that lasted for minutes or hours on a black screen and formed lines: vectors of movements. On a single day there were usually some thirty participants involved in the project, which lasted for a couple of weeks, and together they created or designed, hour after hour, day after day, a live map of how the city was being used by its inhabitants. The interactive map was on display in the

Amsterdam City Archive. **Amsterdam realtime** (2002) by Esther Polak and Jeroen Kee is a classic of interactive art. It is anthropological at its most basic level: it shows the different uses of interactions within a given context by a local population. It visualizes what Arjun Appadurai calls “the production of locality”, that is the “series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts” that give value to what otherwise would have remained just a “neighborhood” - the sort of thing one can read from a printed map. The map of Esther Polak and Jeroen Kee was a collective effort produced in real time by participants that were interacting both with the technological system of GPS/phone/central storage computer/visualization software/screen, with the streets of the city, with each other, and with the viewers of the map in the Amsterdam City Archive. Because they knew they were being watched, they sometimes planned special routes through the city so as to produce a beautiful drawing on the map -that was printed every now and then.

For Esther Polak the next step in this project was to take the GPS-system and attach it, not to people, but to a product: milk, as it moved through places. The first version of **NomadicMilk** (2006-2008) showed how streams of milk move every day through Northern Europe: from cows in Lithuania via trucks through Germany to milk factories in Holland and on to supermarkets in various countries. The second version (2009-2010) comes from Nigeria and follows an industrial stream of powder milk going from the harbor of Lagos to Aboudja in the interior (in 2 days), and a nomadic stream of milk from cows that wander about with their Fulani shepherd in the course of a year in a large area not far from Aboudja. This again is anthropology at its most basic: production and distribution of a resource in connection to two different local customs and traditions. This work is presented to the participants with a clever printer-robot that can produce the routes they have followed in sand on any flat surface. And then they start to tell stories about what happened, where along the way, and why they took certain routes. This is filmed and shown to audiences in the West in the form of an installation.

Esther Polak is a painter by training, and the lines that are being produced by her GPS-medium have

a quality that all painters dream of: every point on the lines it produces has a meaning, a decision behind it. I noticed it is very difficult for Polak to avoid the seduction of producing ever more meaningful lines and patterns, just for art's sake, to create beauty really. She doesn't even care that much about milk as a life giving substance. Considered as painting, her GPS art provides a nice contemporary commentary to art history. Considered as anthropological aesthetics it gives much more. The way Polak uses her GPS-system turns it into a story producing device, creating empathy, involvement, friendship even. The stories are not the end goal of the project, friendship is: that connection beyond words that abolishes our alienation without removing any of our exoticness. You don't understand what these others are doing, you just see them move, but you get totally interested in them, in the ways they use their world, in their ways of worldmaking. That's what artistic anthropology is all about. It's about more than just art, it's about you and me and everybody else, trying to live and produce locality on a huge and vastly overpopulated planet.

<http://www.nomadicmilk.net>



Performance at the Geography department of the Bayero University Kano



Workshop with Mr. Idiris on rainy season route



Images courtesy of *NomadicMILK* project; Esther Polak, 2009 Nigeria