

Ethnography in Visual Arts Practice Workshop Programme

December 2011 – February 2012

Fire Station Artists' Studios in partnership with FOMACS (Forum on Migration and Communications)

A workshop programme exploring the relationship between ethnographic methods, representation, human rights and the ethics of collaborative engagement in visual art practice. Consisting of three interconnected one day workshops in early December 2011, January and February 2012, facilitated by internationally recognised guest lecturers, each session will combine prescribed readings and discussion, connecting ethnographic theory and method to participants' creative practice. 'Ethnography in Visual Art Practice' will appeal to visual art and media practitioners conducting long-term fieldwork in sited communities.

1. Creative Arts and Social Engagement: The Role and Responsibility of the Artist as Ethnographer

Date & Venue: 9th December 2011, Fire Station Artists' Studios

Lecturers: Áine O'Brien, Alan Grossman and Roberta McGrath

This introductory session will provide an overview of visual ethnographic inquiry, its key principles and methods. Participants will gain an understanding of ethnographic practice across numerous national, transnational, and institutional fieldsites, together with an appreciation of the distinction between reflexive and reflective representations of sustained ethnographic fieldwork. A focus on the place of the archive within human rights discourse will also be explored, mediated through a critical understanding of the artist/researcher/fieldworker as an embodied, politically situated cultural actor.

Áine O'Brien is Director of the Forum on Migration and Communications (FOMACS) and Co-director of the Centre for Transcultural Research and Media Practice, School of Media, DIT. She has published widely on politics of identity and representation and the role of creative arts and participatory media in furthering social engagement, civil society activism and social justice (eg., *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* and *Crossings: Journal of Migration and Culture*). She co-directed *Silent Song* (2000) on Kurdish lyrical protest in Europe and *Here to Stay* (2006). She further co-directed *Promise and Unrest* (2010), funded by the Irish Film Board, on gendered migration and long-distance motherhood (www.promiseandunrest.com). She is co-editor with Alan Grossman of a combined book/DVD-ROM *Projecting Migration: Transcultural Documentary Practice* (2007, Wallflower Press) and co-edited a special issue on the cultural politics of representation and practice-based research in the *Journal of Media Practice* 9(2), 2008.

Alan Grossman is a Lecturer and Co-director of the Centre for Transcultural Research and Media Practice, DIT. He has a longstanding visual ethnographic involvement with the cultural politics of identity, migration and diasporic formations across infra and transnational contexts; from the perspective of the minority Welsh-language resistance movement in Wales, to Kurdish refugee music in Scotland in the form of a short performative documentary film *Silent Song* (2000), to his co-directed ethnographic film projects *Here To Stay* (2006) and *Promise and Unrest* (2010), which combine to address questions of migrant agency, gender, global care work and the material outcomes of remittance

payments. He has published in numerous refereed journals including *Space and Culture*, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* and *Crossings: Journal of Migration and Culture*. He is co-editor with Aine O'Brien of *Projecting Migration: Transcultural Documentary Practice* (2007, Wallflower Press), a combined book/DVD-ROM engaged with questions of mobility and displacement through the analytical prism of creative practice.

Roberta McGrath has built a reputation on imaginative and creative pedagogy, utilising film, photography and print in her teaching in order to encourage students to think about the economic, social and political consequences of looking. Her essays on art and photography have appeared in anthologies and catalogues including *The Somnambulists* (Kane, 2008) and *The Photography Reader* (Wells, 2003). She is particularly interested in archives and has published widely on the theory of the image and the representation of the body from the visualisation of HIV and AIDS *Ecstatic Antibodies* (Boffin and Gupta 1990) to the sexual politics of representation and reproduction in her book *Seeing Her Sex: Medical Archives and the Female Body* (2002). Roberta describes her approach to the visual as interdisciplinary 'circumstantial activism' (Marcus, 1995) that creates a dialogue between images and texts drawn from different registers and from other times and places. Her essay 'History Read Backward, Memory, Migration and the Photographic Archive' is included in *Projecting Migration: Transcultural Documentary Practice* (Grossman and O'Brien, 2006).

2. Installation, Creative Practice and Relocating the Archive

Date & Venue: 19th January 2012, Fire Station Artists' Studios

Lecturer: Roshini Kempadoo

Drawing from an art practice that has interrogated how individuals of Caribbean origin have been visualized historically and her experiences of working with photographic archives more broadly, this workshop will encourage participants to engage with the archive as a resource rich in ethnographic content and creative potential, in addition to raising questions about the representational limitations of the documentary image as historical record.

Roshini Kempadoo is a photographer, media artist, and lecturer. Her research, multimedia, and photographic projects combine factual and fictional re-imaginings of contemporary experiences with history and memory. Having worked as a social documentary photographer for the Format Women's Picture Agency, her recent work as a digital image artist includes photographs and screen-based interactive art installations that fictionalize archive material, objects, and spaces. They combine sound, animations, and interactive use of objects, to introduce characters that once may have existed, evoking hidden and untold narratives. Roshini is represented by Autograph ABP, London. She is currently working on the photographic series *State of Play* (2011).

3. The Lives of Others: *Ethnographic Ethics or Politicized Aesthetics*

Date & Venue: 16 February, Fire Station Artists' Studios

Lecturer: Anthony Downey

This session will address the ethnographic turn in collaborative art practices, alongside the ethical and methodological implications of art-making that involves social and community-based groups over extended periods of time. The workshop will examine how critical analysis can develop a series of questions that avoid the pitfalls of current critiques that often either overtly politicize art — reducing it

to a series of statements — or rely too much on a “soft ethics” that merely normalizes reactions to art as a practice and thereafter the means of its production.

In more specific terms, we need to ask whether current artistic practices that engage forms of ethnographic observation — from the work of Artur Zmijewski and Santiago Sierra to the films of Renzo Martens — are formulating a “situated ethics” that, in the moment of questioning the ethical relativism and forms of “moral communalism” prevalent in the West today, have become paradoxically ethical in their import. **Could such works, in sum, be the starting point for an ethics of aesthetics that answers to the recent demand for a politics of aesthetics?**

Anthony Downey is the Programme Director of the MA in Contemporary Art at Sotheby’s Institute of Art, London. He is an Editorial Board member of *Third Text* and the Editor of www.ibraaz.org, a research forum for visual culture in the North African and the Middle East. He is a trustee of the Eisler Foundation and an Advisory Committee member for the *Art and Patronage Summit* (to be held at the British Museum in January 2012). Recent and upcoming publications include “Beyond the Former Middle East: Aesthetics, Civil Society and the Politics of Representation”, in *The Future of A Promise* (Ibraaz Publishing, 2011); “An Ethics of Engagement: Collaborative Art Practices and the Return of the Ethnographer”, in *Third Text*, issue 100, 2009, pp. 593-603; “The Production of Cultural Knowledge in the Middle East Today” in *Art and Patronage in the Near and Middle East* (Thames and Hudson, 2010). “The Lives of Others’: Artur Zmijewski’s ‘Repetition’ and the Aesthetics of Surveillance”, in *Conspiracy Dwellings: Surveillance in Contemporary Art*, ed. by Outi Remes and Pam Skelton (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2010); “The Burden of Representation: Contemporary Visual Arts in the Middle East”, in ‘Representing Islam: Comparative Perspectives’ (Cambridge Scholars Press, forthcoming, 2012); “Zones of Indistinction: Giorgio Agamben’s Bare Life and the Ethics of Aesthetics,” *Third Text*, issue 97, 2009; “Thresholds of a Coming Community: Photography and Human Rights”, *Aperture*, issue 194, spring 2009; “Camps, or, the precarious logic of late modernity”, *Fillip* 14, 2010; and “At the Limits of the Image: Representations of Torture in Popular Culture”, *Brumaria*, 10 (Spring 2009). He is currently researching a book on *Art and Politics Today* (Thames and Hudson, 2013)