



**AUTHOR(S):**

**TITLE:**

**YEAR:**

**Publisher citation:**

**OpenAIR citation:**

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(ISBN \_\_\_\_\_; eISBN \_\_\_\_\_; ISSN \_\_\_\_\_).

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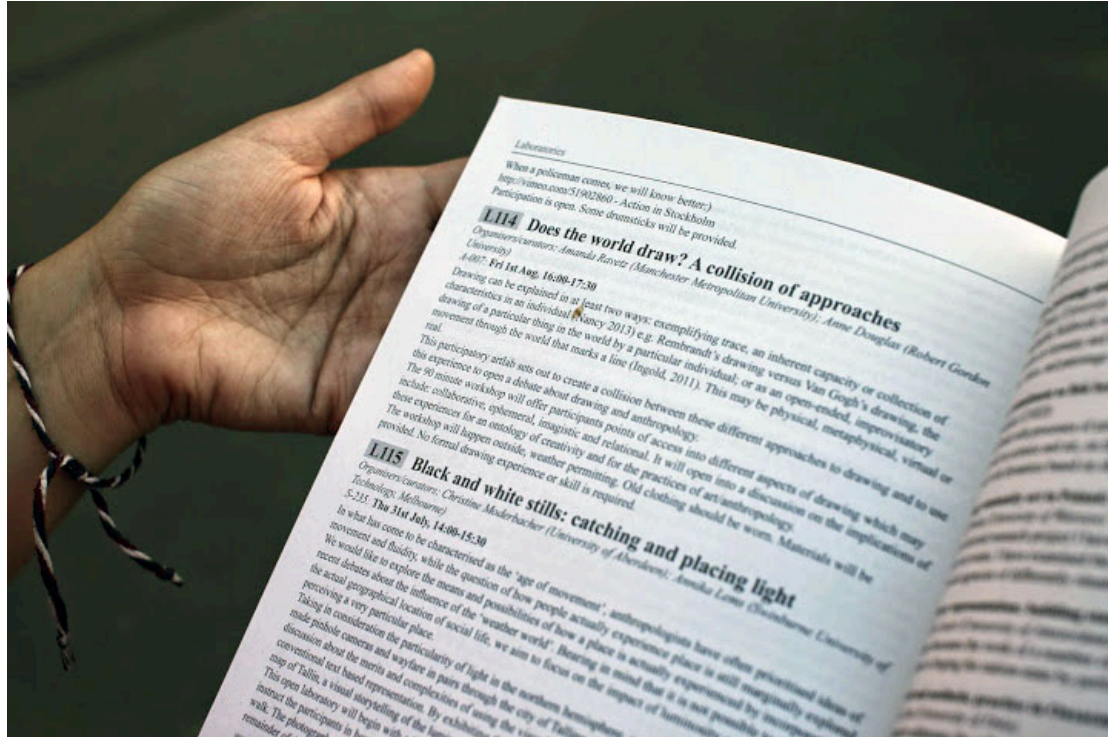
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## Tallin workshop: Does the world draw?

Amanda Ravetz and Anne Douglas

With Liis Serk

### 1. The workshop



Does the world draw? That was the title we gave to a drawing workshop at a conference of anthropologists in Tallin, Estonia. In the heat of the afternoon, in a courtyard area of Tallin university, an hour before the workshop was due to begin, three of us prepared the materials - Anne, Amanda and our volunteer MA anthropology student, Liis Serk. We laid out four very large sheets of thick white cartridge paper, two trays of creamy black acrylic paint, a tennis ball and a golf ball, and smaller pieces of paper hand torn into random shapes. We also laid out graphite sticks, pastels, pencils of various grades and a ball of string.

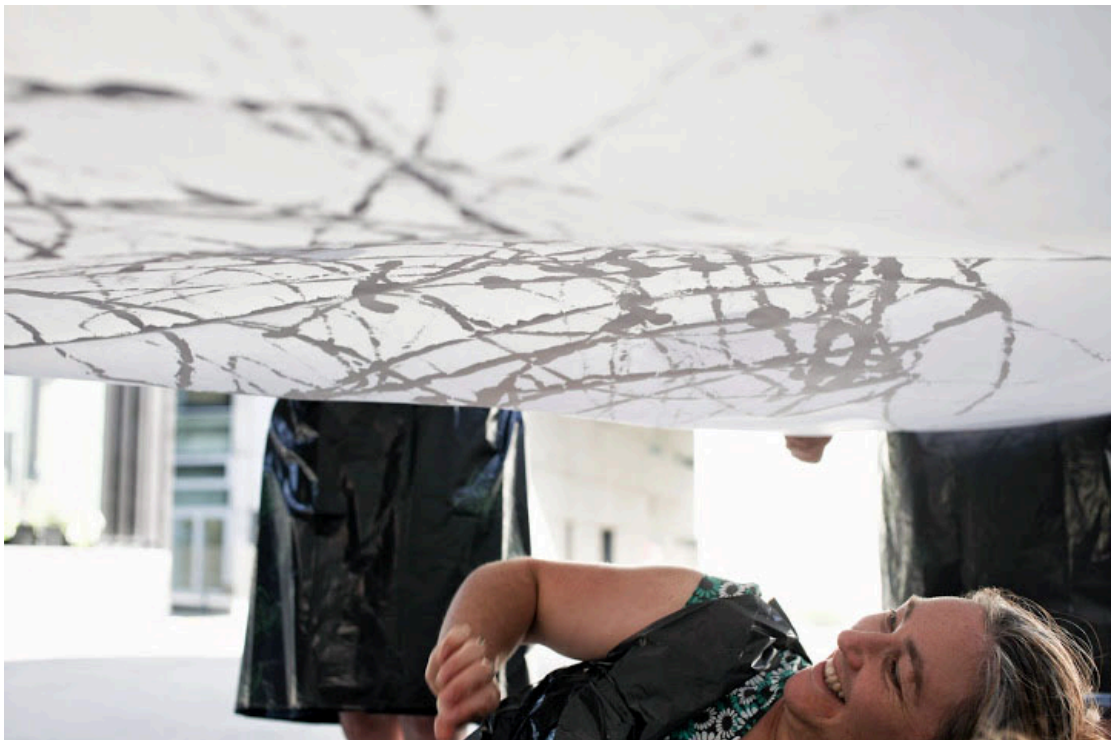
An hour later we were joined by sixteen people. We invited them to stand in a circle around the materials. Amanda introduced the first part of the workshop – it was a workshop about connecting, influenced by an anthropology that took drawing as a central motif for a generative practice, an anthropology WITH and a counterpoint to the anthropology OF. There would be two exercises – the first in which cooperation would be necessary, the second in which we would work individually, putting the ‘parts’ together at the end. There would be discussions after each exercise to do with how all this related to anthropology – with an invitation to speak up if there was any doubt about what the exercises had to do with anthropology.

The sixteen divided into two groups. Amanda stood with one and Anne with the other, while Liis did whatever was needed between the two. Inked balls were rolled onto the paper and the ‘rule’ was explained – not to let the ball fall off the paper. Of

course it would and it did, but the effort was to keep it on – like the game of keeping a balloon in the air – was the sole explicit goal.



Photo Liis Serk



Anne's group quickly fell into discussing tactics and ways to proceed.



Amanda's group communicated less through speech, focusing on the activity. Both groups eventually finished with one sheet of paper and tried another. The second sheet became a chance to use skills honed during the first trial and to expand these through improvisation.

To begin the discussion after this exercise, we explained the origin of the exercise – we had taken it from a video of a workshop led by artist Gabriel Orozco. We chose it because of the way it required cooperation and we liked it because of how it made the relation between surface and mark appear in a fresh light – the surface no longer a passive and inert receptacle, but a moving component of the creative process.

We asked the participants what they made of it. Suzanne Hammacher, of the Royal Anthropological Institute, in London suggested that the exercise had taken her to the core condition of anthropology as a set of relationships between an individual with other individuals working /being together in a context that is social, cultural and environmental.

Silvia Vignato said she wasn't convinced about the relationship to anthropology, other than in one respect – something that had not occurred to her before: coming to this exercise was a bit like coming to something free of cultural programming. There was only one thing fixed already, which was the paper, ball and the rule. But there was no specified way to behave in this situation. It had to be discovered. We talked a bit about the parallels we saw between an anthropology that thinks of itself as a form of poesis and this activity as marking traces of connection.

The second exercise was led by Anne and was based on an exhibition she had seen in Melbourne's State Library. The exhibition had featured an insight from Ptolemy. Ptolemy had evolved our current topographic system of mapping based on scientific principles of measurement. He had also observed that it would take 1,000 years of

individuals journeying to different parts of the world and returning with their stories, to create a comprehensive map of the world. This appeared to say something important about the quest of anthropology. Anthropology has traditionally grappled with cultural difference frequently in cultures far distant from one's own and brought the resulting stories back to create insight. In terms of process, the anthropologist needs to be present, deeply engaged with each place in the terms that it presented itself.

With these starting points in mind, we invited participants to draw something in their environment or something about the experience they had just had, to bring the drawings back to the whole group and lace them together using string to reflect on and think through the specific experiences of our encounter with that afternoon.



Photo Liis Serk

We tore sheets of paper randomly and offered a range of drawing materials. This exercise, unlike the earlier ball rolling, drew individual rather than co-created responses. In some way it also demanded a certain level of skill in a particular 'direct' form of drawing to be able to explore to some depth, place and encounter. In the little time we had left, a brief discussion developed around the histories of drawing in anthropology. There emerged a tentative proposal to meet in London in the archives of the Royal Anthropological Institute on Suzanne Hammacher's invitation in a small seminar of interested individuals who could bring their own drawings into a discussion along with historical material.



Photo Liis Serk

## **2. Exhibiting the work**

After the workshop was finished the conference organisers asked us if we would like to display the work. We felt this would be worthwhile and then spent most of a day doing this as well as we were able given the space and resources. We had a room in which to work which was helpful and luckily contained some materials we were able to use such as nylon wire. Without this, it would have been hard to do justice to the quality of the Lab output, so this is something organisers of future workshops might want to consider.

## **3. Feedback from participants**

### **SILVIA VIGNATO:**

As for the feedback. The lab was great fun and gave the idea we were producing something, unlike the rest of the conference. Everybody was very much into it and the atmosphere was very concentrated. The idea was interesting and the practice very well conducted so that everyone felt involved. On the whole it was a very good experience.

I missed a deeper engagement into linking the practice of something if not artistic (I'd say: definitely not artistic) then clearly expressive with reflexions and understanding of social realities, beyond "gosh we were all doing something together". Also, on technique, craftsmanship and interpretations. Notice that what I say might be irrelevant because probably there is a difference between young first-timers and others, like me, who have already some experience of similar practices.

As I told Amanda, I found the whole project very stimulating!

### **JO VERGUNST:**

I thought the 'Does the world draw' lab was really interesting and very worthwhile. We thought about the role of art in producing collaboration, along with different ways of describing movement and lines. The convenors did a very good job in introducing and arranging the activities, and their efforts in exhibiting the results afterwards were

much appreciated. Overall, I think the laboratories were a very welcome addition to the EASA programme

**SARAH BUCKLER:**

I wanted to write that I really appreciated (and enjoyed) the lab session – and I am still thinking about it.

For me it was an opportunity to know and understand the relationships between environment, tools, materials and persons in a different, more experiential and less intellectual way. It drew on aspects of communication, collaboration, sharedness and tensions in a way demonstrated the origins of culture.

Through playful experimentation we tested the boundaries and the possibilities of the exercises which allowed us each to come to our own sense of what it was we were doing together.

But the session was too short, just a taster, which probably explains why I am late in sending this in as it left so many open ended questions and possibilities. On the other hand maybe that is a good thing as it means I am still working through the experiences and ideas and probably they will become more integrated in my own work than they would have been had the session been more fully worked through and neatly rounded off.

I would like to see more anthropology like this – particularly fieldwork.

**4. Reflection**

We thoroughly enjoyed the challenge of running the workshop. Perhaps the experiential, immersive and playful nature of the activity revealed aspects of anthropological endeavour that escapes/eludes conventions of reporting and analysis - the collaborative and relational nature of fieldwork, the role of perception and the senses in grasping what is unfamiliar. This kind of open-ended inquiry, a sense of suspending disbelief to be able to ‘see’ the unfamiliar, creates a particular kind of vulnerability. In this sense drawing may establish a ground and perspective for fieldwork and fieldnotes.

There are some practical things to consider around the running of future labs:

- a. It was not really possible to create a ‘doing’ space for people, as well as a reflecting space in 90 minutes. We suggest three hours would be more practical. A balance between reflection and practice is really important in our view.
- b. Display of work produced in workshops produced much debate between us as workshop leaders. Should we display the work without explanation, and expect conference goers who were not at the workshop to interpret for themselves what it ‘meant’, if anything, or should we provide context for it? We didn’t have pre-knowledge, time or resources to do the latter since display had not been invited in the original call out – but having been invited to put up the work produced at the workshop we eventually agreed that had we known

and thought about this in advance, we would have wanted to briefly film some of the workshop, and write a text and present these alongside the drawings.

- c. Feedback – we collected email addresses of all participants but only three replied without prompting. How to get better feedback? Perhaps this could be built into the session, also requiring a bit more time.