

Interview with James Clifford

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Alex Coles: Since we last spoke - over a decade ago - at the very end of the 1990s, there have been many shifts in territory and technique in both of our fields. One thing we focussed on was the volume of traffic created by the exchange between art and ethnography - practitioners like Susan Hiller and Renee Green, and critics like Hal Foster and Miwon Kwon. The book our interview appeared in, *Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn* (Black Dog Publishing, 2000), contributed to that debate. Now this is no longer the case: ethnographic method is seldom explicitly evoked by artists and critics. What are your thoughts about how this exchange heated up for a time and now seems to have cooled?

James Clifford: I'm somewhat taken aback that it was over a decade ago since we did that interview. Where did that decade go? For me, in retrospect, an intense time - the sense of a break. Recently I often find myself asking what kind of historical transition we're in the midst of? In the 1990s the ground was already shifting, but I didn't really feel it, not viscerally. I had a pretty clear sense of location inside the West's neo-liberal hegemony and the academic resistance it engendered. But that bubble has burst in the last decade, and I've begin to feel the deeper shifts I had previously understood only intellectually with a new sense of excitement, confusion and, yes, fear. It's as if a

rug has been pulled out. Perhaps not an uncommon feeling of insecurity for most of the world, but new for me: the feeling of no longer being able to place yourself in an intelligible moment of transition, a clear narrative series. Feeling yourself 'in history' like this alters everything. And I don't have adequate terms to describe where this shift is taking us, separately and together. The periodizing language we used in the 1990s - 'late capitalism', 'postmodernity', 'globalization' - seems inadequate to a world of multivalent connectivities, obscure transitions, and emergent cultural forms.

I suppose all this is background to whatever I have to say these days. But your question refers more narrowly to art's proximity to ethnography. And you think that exchange has cooled down since the nineties?

AC: As a literal theme or an explicit grafting of technique it has certainly cooled. Maybe it's just an indication of how this model has become implicit to art's trajectory.... But art criticism and history could definitely put this model to work in a productive way. The art critics I mentioned who took ethnographic models into account did so to analyse the art practices that invoked it. I'm interested in what happens if critics actually use the ethnographic model as a method for their own research and writing.

JC: So, for you, what remains of value from the 'ethnographic turn' is a practice, rather than any specific content, theory or critical method? Maybe that's the best we can hope for. The model of a

kind of fieldwork, or perhaps simply a de-centered, 'cultural' research, could be productive for art practice - for a time anyway. And in a larger view, the 'turn' now seems circumscribed by those larger shifts I just mentioned, a way of responding to new kinds of rupture and interconnection at scales ranging from global structures to everyday practices. Not some new paradigm, but two discourses do a dance together and then separate: using one another to open up new perspectives and territories. One shouldn't expect a coherent methodology or a new institutional formation from this kind of contact. I think the essay 'On Ethnographic Surrealism' from *The Predicament of Culture* (1988) indicates how the exchange between art and anthropology was always already there. It was just a matter of bringing it into focus, giving it a name. And once the turn was underway, art no longer had any need for an explicit 'ethnographic' lever. So many of the things ethnography represented are now taken for granted. All sorts of everyday actions and locales can be sites of artistic production. And few think of art now primarily in terms of Western high culture. Sometimes I think of such 'turns', or exchanges, as a kind of inter-disciplinary exoticism. Ethnography looks interesting and strange. It names a practice that gets you outside of yourself. And that's a good thing, no? But of course like any exoticism it can end up in superficiality.

AC: The chapter on Susan Hiller's installation at the Freud Museum in London from *Routes* (1997) was just as important as the surrealism essay you just mentioned. The way the chapter experimented by playing its theme through its compositional technique was particularly pertinent at that time. Again this links to the notion of the critic not just analysing theoretical and textual models in relation to contemporary practice but actually adapting them for their own use.

JC: Of course writing is a form of social practice. In *Routes* I wanted to push what was possible in an academic book. *Returns* will be experimental in different ways. I'm thinking of the book as essentially three very long essays with each one written in a different style. Sometimes I think of them as academic 'novellas' - a form I think we could use.

And I think of the three books – *The Predicament of Culture*, *Routes*, and *Returns* – as a kind of trilogy, different angles on largely the same set of issues. The difference between them is a temporal one. They are written in specific decades, with changing tools, pressures and limits. For example, in the new book the interest in art as a cultural practice continues but with a focus on 'indigenous art'. Tribal artists today inhabit discrepant, overlapping worlds for which the older vocabulary of 'tradition' and 'modernity' is completely inadequate. From the ritual exchanges of kinship to the buying and selling of art and tourist markets, they work in a complex contemporaneity. Some are entering into curatorial relationships with museums to make innovative interventions. Some, like James Luna or Rebecca Belmore, are becoming well known and are active on the Biennale circuit. In following these developments I've found that a lot of the tools I'd previously grafted from George Bataille and Michael Leiris now need to be supplemented by a deeper social analysis. Transgression and irony coexist with profound social and ideological commitments. The juxtaposition of cultural forms has to be understood in very specific, constrained fields of force. Indigenous 'art' negotiates ambivalently between residual and emergent cultural strategies and audiences, between essence and invention - which is just to say that it is part of 'the real'.

AC: This relates to the notion of the 'indigenous curator' explored in your as yet unpublished essay 'Times of the Curator' (2010). Following your previous engagement with contemporary art practice in the 1990s, this issue gives you contact with a subject that has been of central importance to the art world over the past decade. Besides a legion of conferences and books, there are now a series of academic courses dealing with precisely the role of the curator. The previously hidden activity of the curator has now been almost totally recovered.

JC: Yes, recovered and opened up... The talk that you mentioned was given at the conference 'The Task of the Curator', organised by Lucian Gomoll and Lissette Olivares, two graduate students in our History of Consciousness Department at UC Santa Cruz. Their notion of the curator as a translator turned out to be very provocative. Up to this point, I'd not actually given a lot of thought to the term 'curator'. For me, the word had always connoted a fairly old fashioned and conservative vision of the museum and its role. A curator was essentially someone who protected and interpreted a given collection. But getting to know the work going on in tribal museums and in some of the more innovative ethnology museums has made me see that there is more involved in the process of curating than I had assumed. It's about opening up these museums to the contemporary life of cultures and providing new, inventive spaces for the curator. The dictionary definition of 'curate' - from *curare*, to care - takes on a widened sense. Caring/curating is not so much about defending, preserving, or controlling as it is about enlivening. How can collected or recollected things take on renewed life? How do objects and communities thrive? In the indigenous contexts I've been studying museums

operate as cultural centers and sometimes as something like lending libraries. Community stakeholders - elders, artists, heritage activists, youth - participate in event-planning and cultural 'research'. The development of tribal art, craft, and ritual life depends on copying the old models. More than copying: translating and performing anew the stories they embody. Where is authenticity in these caring practices? Does it reside in the museum artefact that has to be handled with white gloves, or in the new versions, the 'copies' that are danced in a family ceremony or that circulate as 'art' beyond the tribe?

A quick example of what I'm getting at. Travelling in Japan recently I spent some time at the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka. Founded after the World's Fair of 1970 the museum aspires to a global reach. This has required a lot of collecting beyond the regional collections it began with. From both necessity and principle it doesn't focus on old artefacts but instead sponsors the fabrication of new work. For instance, when they wanted a large ocean-going canoe traditionally made by the Kwakwaka'wakw of Vancouver Island they commissioned an established tribal artist, Doug Cranmer, to carve one and at the same time to teach the skills to younger apprentices. In this way the acquisition practice of the museum has a positive effect on the ongoing life of a community. A whole new curatorial mindset, and a crucially different sense of the temporality of artefacts...

AC: Along with the role of the curator, the notion of the 'relational' and of 'performing identities' have been crucial to art over the past decade, so it's interesting to hear you speak about their impact in a different field. Another major thing that has happened in anthropology

since we last spoke a decade ago is the death of Claude Lévi-Strauss - it wouldn't seem right to interview you and not bring that up. Do you think his passing marks the end of the relevance of the perpetual reinterpretation of the models associated with a particular moment in anthropology?

JC: That's a good question - and a big one. When Lévi-Strauss died - and he lived a hundred years - it returned me to the historicising questions that began our conversation. Lévi-Strauss was one of the great figures of the last century. And I think, too, of Clifford Geertz's death in 2006. It's almost inescapable to ask whether their deaths mark the end of an era. And yes I think they do, though elements of their thinking certainly outlive their historical moment. While very different, they both opened up border crossings between art, anthropology and literature. Geertz once told me that he had wanted to write like Henry James; and Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) is a classic in the widest sense. Along with this 'literary' openness, they both defended their discipline's analytic rigour - one hermeneutic and the other structuralist. Neither was a positivist; each explored the borderlands of an expansive anthropological science.

With the small degree of hindsight we now enjoy, however, it can also be said that Lévi-Strauss and Geertz both wrote from within a Western place from which they could survey the diversity and development of mankind - they were anthropologists with a capital 'A' in that sense. But it seems to me that this historical location can no longer be assumed. The connected, discrepant, unfinished processes of decolonization and globalization have

irrevocably altered the ideological landscape. I don't mean to suggest that what they wrote is no longer relevant. Lévi-Strauss and Geertz will continue to exert an influence, especially in their approaches to the relational complexity of cultures, but in a radically new situation we're not yet in a position to 'map'.

AC: Did you have any direct contact with Lévi-Strauss? Had he read the pages devoted to him in *The Predicament of Culture*?

JC: I have no idea if he read those pages, but if he did, he probably found them irritating and reductive. They did, after all, focus primarily on moments of his early career - New York during the war and the vision of global disintegration in *Tristes Tropiques*. His thinking would evolve.... But permit me a small anecdote. I did have one face-to-face meeting with Lévi-Strauss in the mid-1970s when I was in Paris researching my dissertation. I plucked up the courage to call his secretary and make an appointment. It turned out that Lévi-Strauss reserved a certain amount of time each week to meet with visiting academics who wanted a moment with him. At the appointed hour I entered an impressive office in the Collège de France. (I recall tall windows, books in cabinets, a cloth-shrouded seminar table, a richly-coloured topographic map of the United States behind the desk.) Lévi-Strauss insisted on speaking English, answering all of my naive questions in a politely opaque manner. After forty minutes I ran out of things to say and was completely flummoxed when I realised that absolutely nothing had been revealed. Perhaps this was the desired outcome. At the office door, I thanked my host for his time and walked through the outer area of the 'Laboratoire

d'Anthropologie Sociale', on my way to the stairs. I passed a small forest of steel cases (cross-cultural data collected in George Peter Murdock's postwar 'Human Relations Area Files' project). In a fog, thinking of things I should have asked, I became aware of someone walking silently behind me. And as we approached the stairs I realised that Lévi-Strauss had accompanied me to the edge of his domain. Another round of gracious goodbyes, awkward thanks, and I was stumbling down the staircase, wondering what kind of a ritual I had just been part of. Something had been communicated, but not what I came for...

AC: So far we've focussed on the shifting parameters of the field of anthropology in the past decade, but now I'd like to push on to the development of ethnographic techniques. When you grappled with the participant/observant model in your early research and writing how did it look to you then? *The Predicament of Culture* devotes a chapter to the postmodern rereading of the founder of that method: Bronislaw Malinowski. How do you feel about this moment now?

JC: That method of critical reading was probably most associated with the collection I co-edited with George Marcus: *Writing Culture* (1986). By the way, the book is being repackaged this year by U.C. Press in an 'anniversary edition'. I suppose it's become a monument - but to what? Some still see it as a symptomatic wrong-turn for the discipline. And critiques of the book still appear from time to time, trying to drive a stake through the heart of 'postmodern anthropology'. But much of the book's critique has now become routinized. And its radical, avant-garde edge has worn off - for better and worse. Today, I see that mode of interpretation as part of a specific conjuncture - a public crisis for Anthropology and many comparable fields of inter-cultural

work. Feminism and decolonization were very much part of the moment, as I stressed in the introduction to *Writing Culture*. The critique was always both theoretical-epistemological and political, and the social transformations underlying it are, of course, unfinished. But something shifted, and there's no going back to the older situation of one part of humanity claiming to authoritatively understand all the others.

You mention Malinowski: there's a story I like to tell that sums up the changes in perspective. You'll recall that Malinowski's model of participant-observation required work in the local language. Malinowski was a polyglot European, and he claimed to have a good grasp of the Trobriand Islanders language, Kiriwinian. In the early 1990s I attended a conference in his honor organised by Annette Weiner who had conducted a famous restudy of that community. She described an entire system of exchange controlled by women, a major aspect of Trobriand society that Malinowski missed. At the conference, somebody asked Weiner how well Malinowski actually spoke Kiriwinian. Instead of answering the question directly she said something much more interesting. During her fieldwork in the 1960s the elders told her that she was grasping more than he did. But it wasn't, they said, because she spoke better Kiriwinian. It was because when Malinowski was there in 1916-17 they didn't speak English well enough, so they had no way to correct him when he got things wrong.

AC: That's intriguing.

JC: Yes, the whole process opens up. The historical, dialogical elements of fieldwork – you studying them while they’re studying you. So we have to conceive of a representational realism that doesn’t stand outside these dialectics to construct an abstract ‘object’ of study.

AC: In relation to this, did the development of New Journalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s have an indirect bearing on the emergence of postmodern ethnographic technique? So often the journalists associated with this model describe how it gets them nearer to the real. Are there any parallels in, for instance, the way Hunter S. Thompson immersed himself in the subculture of the Hells Angels and the things you were working on? Obviously these parallels don’t hold in terms of the precise communities selected, but more perhaps in the development of a fully reflexive dialogical participant/observant model....

JC: I wasn’t reading Thompson – New Journalism just wasn’t on my map. But as I think about it, there have always been works around that seemed ‘journalistic’ to the academic professionals but were incisive forms of cultural analysis and evocation. Do you know *Indians in Overalls* by Jaime de Angulo?

AC: No.

JC: That's a wild, subversive work of 'ethnography' from 1950 which certainly looks like a precursor of Thompson. More recently, the anthropologist Ulf Hannerz has explored the borders of anthropology and journalism in an insightful book, *Foreign News* (2004). Where previously I was concerned with opening up the borders between anthropology and travel writing, now I'd like to loosen those between anthropology and journalism.

AC: The chapter on field-work in *Routes* focuses not only on the model used to conduct field-work, but also on what constitutes a field in the first place: this includes then emergent areas of ethnographic research conducted on the web with the chat room as their field. What do you really think of the development of this form of field-work? Does researching a virtual field push the participant/observant model too far and fail to produce concrete research and results?

JC: I'm not particularly well placed to comment on that. But there is definitely some interesting research being conducted in this area. Today it's impossible to not use the web when doing cultural research because so much of culture takes place on it. What the boundary marker might be for ethnographic field-work is something I'm still not quite sure about. To date, I haven't read a purely web-based study that has the requisite richness I would hope for in an ethnographic study. On the other hand, there are now quite a few projects bringing participant observation in embodied social contexts together with interactions in cyberspace that are quite convincing. Maybe we fetishize embodied interaction too much. A lot of social and affective life is happening elsewhere. In my current research, I get the feeling that every self-respecting tribe has a web site - some of them very elaborate and engaging. Formerly isolated indigenous

communities are beginning to archive their culture and history, managing the circulation of images and knowledge. It's a matter of performing identity in expanded public spheres, of course, and some very interesting post-/neo-colonial tensions have emerged around the coexistence of 'open access' with tribal protocols of secrecy and revelation.

AC: One site ripe for field-work that I'm currently engaged in is the life and community of the practitioners' studio.

JC: I'm very interested to hear more about how the studio can function as a possible field for ethnographic research. One thing I like is that you don't seem to see it primarily in terms of traffic or border crossings within the art culture system. Instead you're interested in a new kind of practice – reworking the participant/observation model....

AC: Specifically, I'm trying to define what constitutes the culture of the studio – whether it is in the Yucatan, Los Angeles or London – and gauge the bearing this has on its output. By spending weeks with each studio – attending meetings, lunches, brainstorming sessions, and generally hanging out with studio members - I'm striving to get to grips with how I can give a more fully textured account of their working methods. This is also partly a gambit to further displace the art object and the traditional role of the artist as author. By situating an interpretation of art production in the context of a small community - each member of which has a very specific role in its production - the authorial centre becomes dispersed. I'm conceiving of the studio as a

'field' which I'll use a version of the participant/observant model to interpret. My starting point is the studio of the artist Jorge Pardo in LA and his micro-studio in Merida, the Yucatan, which is currently engaged in generating the designs and furnishings for a Hacienda in the middle of jungle there.

JC: What's the Hacienda going to be used for?

AC: The hope is that it will act as a centre for generating conferences and publications - about just what, exactly, is still up in the air. A number of multi-lingual architects and designers with very different skills and approaches to them constitute the studio. Pardo's personality is felt in the very structure of the studio: from the way part of the studio has been swallowed up to store his rapidly expanding wine collection, to the role food assumes, to the loose but highly sophisticated approach to design and fabrication.

JC: It does sound as though the process of production with its diverse approaches and its multi-lingual context will ultimately prefigure the final product - which in this case sounds like it may be something that will be a scene of contacts and cultural work with diverse inputs and outputs.

AC: Hopefully. Writing about Pardo's micro-studio in Merida interests me in terms of ethnographic technique but also in relation to the archaeology of interpretations and

interventions in the Yucatan. Of course, I'm thinking about John Lloyd Stephens's *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan* (1843) as viewed through the optic of Robert Smithson's *Hotel Palenque* (1969) and *Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan* (1969). In addition to these writings, there is also your 'Palenque Log' from *Routes*. Just last week I came across a further book: *The Lost World of Quintana Roo* (1963) by Michael Peissel. Do you know that one?

JC: I haven't read the Peissel.

AC: It might interest you at the moment because it's a discursive form of travel writing. It doesn't have the sophistication or the density of a proper ethnographic study like *Tristes Tropiques*, but nevertheless is engaging.

JC: I haven't been back to Palenque since I wrote the piece you mentioned. But the relative remoteness, the 'connectivity', we might say, of these places remains interesting to me. Palenque is an essential node on the 'Ruta Maya' tourist circuit, and a fast new road is planned from San Cristóbal in the highlands. Do you remember the part of Stephens' book where he is hacking his way through the jungle and finally after great effort manages to get to Palenque? Once he arrives he's irritated to encounter a lot of graffiti and a pair of travelling clerics - *tourists* present at the moment of 'discovery!' And of course, he's been taken everywhere (sometimes literally carried) by the Mayan folks along the way.

So I have to ask the obvious question: how does Pardo's project react to and how is it understood by the local community? Is it just a source of menial labour for them? Will it attract a certain type of visitor to the area who will provide a significant income? Taking even the most progressive people down there can just end up in an art safari. What's it going to be? And what's the new place going to be called? An art centre? A cultural centre? Both words, 'art' and 'center' carry ethnocentric baggage. What kinds of interactive 'culture' will be made in this expanded studio? The fact that we struggle with names reflects what we began this interview speaking about - a historical transition and a displacement: from somewhere we know to somewhere we don't know, from art and culture as these were made in the West to their next life (elsewhere).