

VOL 4 Berghahn STUDIES IN APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGY

GENERAL EDITOR: SARAH PINK, Loughborough University.
Reflecting the contemporary growing interest in applied anthropology this series publishes volumes that examine the ethnographic, methodological, and theoretical contribution of applied anthropology to the discipline and the role of anthropologists outside academia.

Visual Interventions

Applied Visual Anthropology

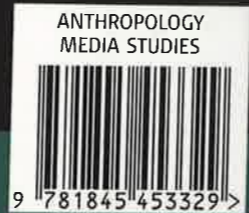
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Visual anthropology has proven to offer fruitful methods of research and representation to applied projects of social intervention. Through a series of case studies based on applied visual anthropological work in a range of contexts – health and medicine, tourism and heritage, social development, conflict and disaster relief, community filmmaking and empowerment, and industry – this volume examines both the range of contexts in which applied visual anthropology is engaged, and the methodological and theoretical issues it raises.

Sarah Pink is a social anthropologist whose research includes a focus on visual methodologies and the relationship between applied and academic anthropology. Her books include *Doing Visual Ethnography* (2007), *Home Truths* (2004), *Working Images* (2004) and *Applications of Anthropology* (2005). She is Reader in Social Anthropology in the Department of Social Sciences at Loughborough University.



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Berghahn
STUDIES IN
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ANTHROPOLOGY



Edited by
Sarah Pink

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Studies in Applied Anthropology

General Editor: **Sarah Pink**, Loughborough University
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Visual Interventions

Applied Visual Anthropology

Edited by

Sarah Pink


Berghahn Books
New York • Oxford

First published in 2007 by
Berghahn Books
www.berghahnbooks.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A C.I.P. catalog record for the book is available
from the Library of Congress

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library
Printed in the United States on acid-free paper

ISBN 978-1-84545-332-9 (hardback)

CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	vii	
List of Tables	x	
Acknowledgements	xi	
PART I	INTRODUCTION	
Chapter 1	Applied Visual Anthropology: Social Intervention and Visual Methodologies <i>Sarah Pink</i>	3
Chapter 2	The Applied Visual Anthropology of John Collier: A Photo Essay <i>Malcolm Collier</i>	29
PART II	MEDICINE AND HEALTH	
Chapter 3	Combining the Applied, the Visual and the Medical: Patients Teaching Physicians with Visual Narratives <i>Richard Chalfen and Michael Rich</i>	53
Chapter 4	<i>Steps for the Future: HIV / AIDS, Media Activism and Applied Visual Anthropology in Southern Africa</i> <i>Susan Levine</i>	71
Chapter 5	Bodywork: Social Somatic Interventions in the Operating Theatres of Invasive Radiology <i>Christina Lammer</i>	91
PART III	TOURISM AND HERITAGE	
Chapter 6	Look to Learn: A Role for Visual Ethnography in the Elimination of Poverty <i>Dianne Stadhams</i>	119

Chapter 7	Archiving 'Heritage', Reconstructing the 'Area': Conducting Audiovisual Ethnography in EU-sponsored Research <i>Vassiliki Yiakoumaki</i>	143
PART IV CONFLICT AND DISASTER RELIEF		
Chapter 8	Emergency Agents: A Birthing of Incipient Applied Visual Anthropology in the 'Media Invisible' Villages of Western India <i>Jayasinhji Jhala</i>	177
Chapter 9	<i>The Hunters Redux</i> : Participatory and Applied Visual Anthropology with the Botswana San <i>Matthew Durlington</i>	191
Chapter 10	Sharing Anthropology: Collaborative Video Experiences among Maya Film-makers in Post-war Guatemala <i>Carlos Y. Flores</i>	209
PART V COMMUNITY FILM-MAKING AND EMPOWERMENT		
Chapter 11	<i>The Rhythm of Our Dreams</i> : A Proposal for an Applied Visual Anthropology <i>Ana Martínez Perez</i>	227
Chapter 12	Performing Urban Collectivity: Ethnography of the Production Process of a Community-based Film Project in Brussels <i>An van. Dienderen</i>	247
PART VI INDUSTRY		
Chapter 13	Video Ethnography under Industrial Constraints: Observational Techniques and Video Analysis <i>Werner Sperschneider</i>	273
Chapter 14	Engaging Our Audience through Photo Stories <i>Tracey Lovejoy and Nelle Steele</i>	295
	Notes on Contributors	315
	Index	319

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

2.1	John Collier Jr making cultural inventory, shot in Northern New Mexico, 1957.	29
2.2	View of Rodarte, New Mexico in 1957.	30
2.3	Grandfather Romero, age 99, at home in Truchas, New Mexico, 1943.	31
2.4	Part of a linked 180 degree panorama.	32
2.5	Agricultural practices, Fruitland, New Mexico, 1953.	33
2.6	Agricultural practices, Fruitland, New Mexico, 1953.	33
2.7	Housing study image, part of a large sample of housing types.	34
2.8	Navajo wage workers on a natural gas line, New Mexico, 1953.	34
2.9	Traditional plough and rocky (but productive) soil.	35
2.10	An oblique view of a section of Vicos.	36
2.11	Labour on hacienda lands.	37
2.12	Vicosinos harvesting for themselves.	37
2.13	Photograph of family compound.	38
2.14	Diagram of family compound.	38
2.15	Store room with food, clothing, tools.	39
2.16	Fiesta scene in front of the Vicos church.	40
2.17	Family portrait.	41
2.18	Family meal.	41
2.19	Project staff interacting with a community leader.	42
2.20	Project staff interacting with a community leader.	43
2.21	Classroom at the Vicos school.	43
2.22	Teacher aide and students in Tuluksak, Alaska, 1969.	44
2.23	Head Start class in Kwethluk, Alaska, 1969. Discontinuous clips.	45
2.24	Head Start class in Kwethluk, Alaska, 1969. Continuous clips.	45
2.25	Still photograph of the Head Start program in Kwethluk, Alaska, 1969.	46
2.26	Elementary level classroom in government-run school in Tuluksak, Alaska, 1969.	46
2.27	Lower grade classroom in the government-run school in Kwethluk, Alaska, 1969.	47

Notes

1. The Mesquita is one of the most important historical and tourist heritage sites in Spain. The Patio de los Naranjos is literally a patio courtyard outside the Mesquita with orange trees.
2. This is an ideology which came about in Bujalance, Córdoba whereby the olive pickers worked as a group; women, men old and young, each person did their part of the job within the bounds of the group and when the work was finished the money was divided equally between the workers without regard for sex or age. We have taken this ideology and used it as our own in our documentary work.
3. Here Fourth World refers to marginalized people within the First World.
4. The layout of Spanish cities tends to differ from the models produced by urban sociologists for British and North American cities. Whereas in Park and Burgess' (1925) model the inner zone represents the poorer area inhabited by immigrants and the urban poor, while the upper and middle classes progressively move out to the suburban periphery, in Spanish cities the city centre tends to be inhabited by the wealthy while the outer suburbs represent the poorest areas of social exclusion.

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Filmography

- A Buen Común*. 1999. A Buen Común.
- Mujeres Invisibles*. 2000. A Buen Común.
- The Skin of the Mountain*. 2002. A Buen Común.
- The Rhythm Of Our Dreams*. 2002. A Buen Común.

Documentary Film Credits for *The Rhythm of Our Dreams*

- Script and Coordination*: Ana Martínez Pérez and Victoriano Camas Baena
- Production*: Manuel Cerezo Lasne and Ricardo Rivera Pena
- Camera operators*: Lorenzo María Hormigos and Jesús M. Tirado
- Sound technician*: Ángel López Alonso
- Sound assistants*: Raúl Montoto De la Fuente
- Salvador López Ajero
- Production assistants*: Rafael Muñoz Sotelo, Manuel Ortiz Mateos and Ángela García Miranda
- Editing*: Manuel Cerezo Lasne
- Original Idea*: Rafa Corpas Reina and Miguel Santiago Losada

Chapter 12

PERFORMING URBAN COLLECTIVITY

Ethnography of the Production Process of a
Community-based Film Project in Brussels

An van. Dienderen

This chapter offers an analysis of the process through which a community-based film project was developed. It is a study of a visual social intervention that emphasizes process as the subject of its analysis. I argue that researching processes rather than the final 'text' is of crucial importance in dealing with the way (cultural) identity and visual representation are intertwined (van. Dienderen 2003; 2004). To achieve this goal, I analyse the mediated interactions between the 'author', the 'viewer' and the 'other' in their plural and variable agencies during the preparatory phases of a community project in Brussels. Through this ethnography of a visual arts project I apply visual anthropology to further understanding the kinds of social interventions applied visual arts community projects can produce.

The community art project was titled *The Return of the Swallows* led by artist Els Dietvorst. This work can be regarded as an 'off the map place of dominant media cartographies' (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002: 8). Dietvorst collaborated with a collective she named the Swallows located in a marginalized area of Brussels.¹ Mostly populated by immigrants of different cultural backgrounds, the area can be characterized as a transit zone. Although she had never worked with a video camera before, Dietvorst felt drawn to this medium because of its social and collective qualities, and proposed to make a film with the people of the area. The ultimate goal was to produce a fiction feature film based on the lives of the inhabitants. Abstract notions such as utopia and collectivity, and more pragmatic concerns, such as encouraging communication in the area by inviting the inhabitants to express themselves in a joint experience, were of primary interest. They created a broad area of presentations over the course of five years such as street performances, 'jukebox stories',² films and glossy magazines covering the

activities of the Swallows. Their final performance was a concluding exhibition of their archive in Bozar, the high cultural palace of 'Beaux Arts' in Brussels.

As a film-maker and anthropologist, I have been involved in this project for more than five years, sometimes as an observer, sometimes as an assistant or consultant. It allowed me to fully submerge myself in the project, to collaborate but also to inspire confidence in the Swallows. The aim of my participatory collaboration was to produce an ethnography of the project. By considering the subject of this ethnography a performative event, while at the same time applying performative methods, I emphasize the turn Fabian proposes from 'an informative to a performative anthropology' (Fabian 1990: 18), 'the kind where the ethnographer does not call the tune but plays along' (ibid.: 19). Being part of this project and at the same time reflecting on it, forced me to develop complex interpersonal roles, affirming the reflexive correspondence (performative) anthropology invites.

This ethnography offers a way of understanding how community arts projects can create social interventions, demonstrating the complexities of imagining or performing collectivity. The project of the Swallows is different from other community-based projects because of its focus on negotiating different values and codes, rather than on a pre-scripted film product. This approach is difficult to analyse solely from artistic end results. I therefore stress the importance of not simply analysing the end product but of attending ethnographically to the processes, relationships and identities that are integral to its production. In doing so, it is my aim to suggest an investigative tool for the examination of the rich potential of audiovisual media in the construction of the self and the formation of socialities. This tool allows me to assess the ideological and social forces at work in film production in a particular context.

The Process of Production as a Site of Critique

Some years ago I worked for the Flemish Broadcasting Corporation as a documentary film-maker. An independent production company that offers programs to different television channels engaged me. Because of my anthropological background, my employers wanted me to work for a documentary series that was sold to Canvas, the so-called quality channel. The story line I was asked to create needed to deal with a family of Turkish descent who were looking for a house. Before I started my research, my series editor, to my utmost surprise, handed me a detailed script in which not only the specific scenes were described but the quotes of the main 'characters' were already written. In this script, stereotypically, the family lives in a scrappy house with lots of relatives, the women are veiled and they all encounter many racist situations. 'Make it happen', my series editor said, clearly affirming that I needed to model my interaction with this yet unknown family in such a way that I made them fit the script. 'Of course,

otherwise we couldn't have sold the format', he answered when I asked him whether he was serious. The story quickly ended: I encountered a very interesting family with whom I made a documentary, without connecting to the script, so obviously this experience resulted in my dismissal.

From the perspective of the 'viewer', it seems that crucial information about the production process is obscured. As images are not critically contextualized the way written texts are – there are no footnotes, or bibliographical references – the audience seem to depend on the status of the channel to evaluate the truthfulness of the images they see. In this case that is precisely what is shocking. Next, from the perspective of the Turkish family, this script seems absurd, as they were unwelcome guests in their own script. Finally, from the point of view of the 'author', this story questions the process of production as a site where authors, producers and editors are tangled up in a web of values, responsibilities and audience ratings.

This experience inspired me to scrutinize the production processes of (documentary) film practices through a critical understanding of the image and its impact in our society. My research follows a key strand in anthropological thought, which questions the transparency of the transmission of information claimed by ethnographic methodology and writing. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz has a powerful voice in this debate. He states in his book *Works and Lives* that the construction of texts ostensibly scientific out of experiences broadly biographical, which is after all what ethnographers do, is thoroughly obscured (Geertz 1988: 10). His main goal is to strip off the pretensions of textual discourses which mystify their construction so as to assess critically their authorship and discourse. Written ethnographies are grounded on pseudo-claims such as text-positivism, ethnographic ventriloquism, dispersed authorship and so on (ibid.: 104–145). These pretensions are even harder to challenge in documentary film production. Indeed, as visual media are able actually to present recognizable and even mimetic traces in the audiovisual counterpart, positivist assumptions appear much harder to combat. The idea persists that images represent without any censorship or manipulation whatsoever. This can be explained by their indexical qualities, which Bill Nichols defines as 'signs that bear a physical trace of what they refer to, such as a fingerprint, an X-ray, or a photograph' (Nichols 1994: ix).

In contrast to Geertz's approach, in my exploration of documentary film production it is thus not sufficient to analyse the end result (a film, a documentary), as is classic in cultural and film studies. A final film product would not inform me for instance about the scripting of the producer that I experienced when working for Flemish television. The indexicality of the image and the resulting positivistic assumptions hamper a critical analysis. Rather, I investigate how the audiovisual system is employed by the principal agents who are implicated. I therefore propose to understand the process of production as the mediated and variable relationship between 'author' and 'other' in which the 'viewer' is prefigured. It creates

a complex set of interactions, during production, reception and consumption. It involves many stages of and negotiations on the creation and appreciation of visual presentation. This analysis therefore offers a study of a visual social intervention that emphasises process rather than the final 'text' as the subject of its investigation.

The 'author', the 'other' and the 'viewer' are plural positions, related to one another through several aspects of the medium, such as recording, editing and screening. As such, I propose to view these positions as inherently mediated: they cannot be understood without referring to the medium. Furthermore, not only is the 'viewer' prefigured throughout the entire production process but it is also necessary to question how the 'viewer' is perceived as having a critical position within this process (Dornfeld 1998, 2002; Mandel 2002).

An ethnographic approach to cultural production offers the possibility of rethinking and bridging the theoretical dichotomy between production and consumption, between producers' intentional meanings and audience members' interpreted meanings, and between production studies and reception studies. In doing so, it transcends disabling debates in media studies, moving beyond the binaries of media power versus resistance, ideology versus agency, and production versus reception. (Dornfeld 1998: 12)

Moreover, as Winston and Volckaert both argue, not only is the audiovisual configuration a socially elaborated construal, which is itself ideologically embedded, but it also has certain specific parameters which cannot be ignored as they constitute the very operational forces of this configuration (Volckaert 1995; Winston 1996). I therefore explore the hypothesis that the audiovisual configuration with its social, ideological, operational and technological features determines the interactions between the main agents during (documentary) film production. By examining this hypothesis I want to question the way narratives reconstruct the experience of the real, to investigate the manipulation of the contexts, to trace selection and intrusion and to analyse the technological, social and ideological forces at work.

Fieldwork in a Swallows' Nest

Performing Multivocality

I hope to demonstrate the relevance of investigating film production processes by presenting some examples of my fieldwork in what I like to refer to as 'my tribe of film-makers'. Because of the specific audiovisual choices, be it the elaboration of the medium, the process, the authorship or the narrative, these cases can be referred to as 'alternative', 'experimental' or 'independent' cinema. Without locking these cases into a genre, I understand them as 'off the map' places, a term formulated by Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin in reference to the research on indigenous media

to point out differences in the cartography of dominant media (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002: 8). In this article I elaborate on the process of a community-based film project in Brussels. Artists Els Dietvorst and Orla Barry in collaboration with a hybrid tribe, which they named the Swallows, directed this project. The film is called: *The March, The Burden, The Desert, The Boredom, The Anger* and had its premiere on May 2004 at the Brussels KunstenFESTIVALdesArts.

To explore my fieldwork I adopt Fabian's reorientation 'from informative to performative ethnography':

'Performance' seemed to be a more adequate description both of the ways people realize their culture and of the method by which an ethnographer produces knowledge about that culture. In search for a catching phrase I proposed to move 'from informative to performative ethnography'. This has epistemological significance inasmuch as I recommend an approach that is appropriate to both the nature of cultural knowledge and the nature of knowledge of cultural knowledge. (Fabian 1990: 18)

Fabian claims that a performative approach is not only the subject of ethnographic research – it is 'appropriate to the nature of cultural knowledge' – but it is also descriptive of the ethnographic method – 'appropriate to the nature of knowledge of cultural knowledge' – by which ethnographers continuously engage with the communicative, corporeal, sensory and performative dimensions that define the activity of ethnographic field research (ibid.: 86). Fabian states that various forms of cultural knowledge cannot be represented in discursive statements:

What has not been given sufficient consideration is that about large areas and important aspects of culture no one, not even the native, has information that can simply be called up and expressed in discursive statements. This sort of knowledge can be represented – made present – only through action, enactment, or performance. ... The ethnographer's role, then, is no longer that of a questioner; he or she is but a provider of occasions, a catalyst in the weakest sense, and a producer (in analogy to theatrical producer) in the strongest. (Ibid.: 6)

Asad also claims that translating another culture is not always best done through the representational discourse of ethnography (Asad 1986: 159). MacDougall highlights that many aspects of social experience are not finally translatable (MacDougall 1998: 266). On the contrary, an interaction, an encounter can simply not be represented by textual discourses without transforming it. Rather, they are productions of the original and not mere interpretations: transformed instances of the original, not authoritative textual representations of it, as Asad underscores (Asad 1986: 159).

I hence view this chapter as a production of my encounter with the Swallows, without any interpretive or even representational pretensions. It is

a transformed instance of the original performance and I therefore present it as a performative production – ‘the kind where the ethnographer does not call the tune but plays along’ (Fabian 1990: 19). I attach three important qualifications to this type of production. The first one is that the subject of my research can be described as the Swallows’ performances and their mediated interactions during the preparatory phases of the film. I regard these social interventions as performances. I hence use the word ‘performance’ in Fabian’s first meaning, namely as the way people realize their culture. My research deals with processes, which occurred before the end result was presented. I suggest an ethnographic approach towards film processes that deals with the mediated interactions between the main agents. In doing so I present an alternative to an exclusively text-based interpretation of film. I hence deliberately shift the attention from analyses focusing exclusively on the end result of (documentary) film productions towards an examination of the context of interaction in which this result is submerged.

The second qualification deals with the interactive nature of the methodology of this research. I have been involved in the making of the Swallows’ film for several months, sometimes as an observer, sometimes as an assistant. This enabled me to fully submerge myself in the project and to collaborate with the Swallows. This methodology could be regarded as an applied visual anthropological perspective. It values Pink’s definition of ethnographic research which aims ‘to produce a loyal and reflexive account of other people experiences, an account based on collaboration and recognizes the intersubjectivity of the research



Figure 12.1 Playback night. © Orla Barry 2006.

encounter’ (Pink, 2004: 10). Of particular significance in this performative fieldwork is that it involves studying people whose projects have such reflexive correspondence with the practice of ethnography (Dornfeld 1998: 20-21) and applied visual anthropology. Indeed, Pink describes applied visual anthropology as follows:

[It] entails designing visual productions that are informed by anthropological theory, have ethnographic integrity, are appropriate to the context one is working in, and can communicate with specific target audiences. Here however by ethnographic integrity I do not mean that they are necessarily based on long-term fieldwork, but an understanding of both the researcher’s and local people’s subjectivities, developed through a reflexive process of collaboration and research. ... In these projects applying visual anthropology involves promoting self awareness by representing individuals and groups to others and to themselves. (Pink, 2004: 8)

Els Dietvorst adopts a practice, which has several similarities with this type of survey, involving concepts such as collaboration, feedback and interaction, aiming at giving a voice to minorities in a collective and integral way. Given my experience as a film-maker, and my ‘double’ identity in these projects, I faced complex interpersonal roles, forcing me to sustain a reflexive attitude throughout the fieldwork. Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin point out that this type of correspondence should be understood by the position of media in society: ‘Anthropologists now recognize that we are implicated in the representational practices of those



Figure 12.2 ‘DLNVDN’. © Orla Barry 2006.

we study; and we are engaged or complicit, as the case may be, in complex ways, with all those communities for whom media are important' (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002: 23).

The third qualification deals with the formal presentation of this fieldwork. This 'produced' fieldwork was deprived of its oral and physical qualities as it transferred to a text. The citations are thus weaved and intertwined with the pictures, as in a multi-vocal conversation, to try to recreate a performative production instead of an authorial representation. This discourse suggests a discussion, a happening where my voice is clearly contextualized as the one who has selected the citations and is situated between others. As Fabian contends, 'Translation is a process; the texts we call "translations" are but documents of that process. They, too, are produced through contingent events – in fact, they may in turn be regarded as rehearsals and performances – and are therefore never definitive' (Fabian 1990: 99).

I interviewed eleven people from the cast and the crew in French or Flemish. The interviews took place immediately after the main shoot in Brussels in June 2003 and before the film had been completed. Because matters such as balance of power, hierarchy and financing were discussed during the interviews, and because of some of the participants' frail position within society, all interviewees remain anonymous. The participants have been divided into three groups: the Swallows/actors, the film crew members and Els Dietvorst. This has allowed me to contextualize the quotes and, at the same time, remain sufficiently vague in order not to reveal the person behind the answer. After a first draft I invited the participants to correct where necessary, thus using their feedback to enhance the understanding of this collective experience.

The interviews consist of open, semi-structured conversations and deal with three broad strands of questions. The first strand looks into the relation between the 'author' and the collective: how does the author handle the parameters of the medium and how are they employed and negotiated with participants? Who introduces what, when and where? What is the barrier between author and participant? I focus on the interviewees' expectations and input at the various stages of the process and the differences between preparations and shooting. I consequently monitor the participants' input in their own representation. Next, I look into the social and ideological forces at work during this type of film production. How are these forces tangled up with the goals of the Swallows? Lastly and briefly, I investigate how this project has impacted on the lives of the Swallows, their self-esteem and community relations. In sum, I investigate how this project 'can lead to innovations that give it the potential to be the basis of theoretical, methodological and substantive contributions to academic visual anthropology' (Pink 2004).

The Breeding of the Swallows

Sculptor Els Dietvorst was invited by a contemporary art gallery in the Anneessens area of Brussels to exhibit her artwork. Although warned by the gallery curators about the area's high crime rate, instead of remaining inside the gallery, she started to explore the area on foot. The area is located near the Southern railway station in the heart of Brussels. Yet whereas other areas in the centre were revived recently through several urban activities by which local government officials invited the inhabitants to designate the most acute problems and helped to solve them (1994–1998), the Anneessens area remained isolated (Demeyer and Van Pee 2003: 164). Main arteries, such as the ring road and two new housing projects, physically lock in the area and so prevent integration with other parts of Brussels. Rubbish dumps, vandalism and neglected public spaces all help to create an atmosphere of carelessness, negligence and sloppiness. Mostly populated by immigrants from different ethnic backgrounds, the area can be characterized as a transit area: its different communities are very separate entities, without any common goal or interest whatsoever.

As Els Dietvorst crossed this area, she experienced various interesting encounters which encouraged her to work with the people of this neighbourhood instead of imposing her works of art on them. Although she had never worked with a video camera before, she felt drawn to this medium because of its social aspects and proposed making a film with the people of the area. According to Dietvorst, it was this type of collective experience that the area lacked. Her ultimate goal was to produce a fiction feature film based on the lives of the inhabitants.

Els Dietvorst's fascination with the area is born out of a deep concern for others. In her words: 'I always want to defend people who are oppressed or deprived of their basic rights.' Her note of intent is reminiscent of George Marcus's notion of 'the activist imaginary'. He describes how subaltern groups turn to film, video and other media not only to 'pursue traditional goals of broad-based social change through a politics of identity and representation' but also out of a utopian desire for 'emancipatory projects... raising fresh issues about citizenship and the shape of public spheres within the frame and terms of traditional discourse on polity and civil society' (Marcus 1996: 6). Dietvorst stipulates that she wanted to encourage communication by inviting the inhabitants to express themselves in a joint experience:

My dream was to create something collective, not something individual. Call me an old-fashioned Marxist, but I do not believe in a society solely steered by individuals. When it comes to that, I'm a utopian. I believe in collective values, even if we all remain individuals. It's animal nature. Why? I think it's a way of bridging our own culture with others. I'm interested in other people because I think that perhaps I can improve myself by learning what others do. I'm not interested in my own culture, or purely in myself. I'd get terribly bored if I had to draw from my own life. Looking for and finding other

things opens up new perspectives. But to use the words of Lévi-Strauss, there's always a chief. I think a collective needs a chief. I gave the people involved in the project a lot of freedom, which I did deliberately. I wanted to know what the limit was and how far I could go.

Els Dietvorst organized a casting in a container that she planted in Anneessens Square, located in the centre of the area. Although, again, many people warned her about criminal acts, two hundred people presented themselves. Dietvorst invited them to improvise, inspired by texts of Arthur Rimbaud, as he lived in the Anneessens area and wrote on exile and migration. In the container, alone with a video camera, Dietvorst recorded these performances. Rimbaud seemed a stimulating source for them: people sang his texts, recounted emotional slave narratives, some even performed somersaults and other acts of physical prowess.

An: Let's go back to the moment where you were doing an audition in front of Els. You walked through the door of the container. What happened?

Actor/Swallow: Well, I'd been given a sheet of paper with several extracts written by Arthur Rimbaud. I read them several times and selected one I particularly liked, a text about slavery. The history of slavery is a subject that has always touched me. When I was standing in front of Els, she said to me: 'Ok, we're listening. You can do whatever you like with the text, you can sing, dance ... Do whatever you please'. So I started reading out loud, in my own way and all of a sudden, I don't know whether I actually sang, but I do remember I became one with the text. As soon as I read out a phrase, I saw the image described in the text in my head. That's how I did the audition and that's why Els selected me.

This successful casting was the start of a four-year project funded by several organizations, mainly governmental, and helped by different community groups based in the Anneessens area. With this support, Dietvorst managed to engender a hybrid group she named the Swallows, consisting of people without passports, sex workers, migrants from Moroccan, Iranian and Italian descent, a computer designer and even a Belgian policewoman.

An: How do you personally feel about the image of the swallow?

Actor/Swallow: I do feel like a swallow, as a matter of fact. Proof of it is that I can say what I want to say, I can make a film and talk about Togo, about everything that, in terms of politics, goes wrong there. It would be impossible for me to do that in Togo. Over there, I would feel like a sheep or a dog on a leash or a chicken in a coop, whereas here, I feel like a swallow, I can fly to wherever I want and say what I think without having to worry about it.

An: Does this add something to your identity? Have you perhaps taken on a new identity?

Actor/Swallow: I believe I have, for thanks to the Swallows I've been able to meet other people and share my experiences and this has helped me to talk about my problems and the other way round. We've all poured everything out and mixed it all together in order to reduce it to one single issue.

An: What do you mean?

Actor/Swallow: We've all come from countries with different problems. We created 'the Swallows', and shared our experiences in order to create one single problem, namely that of the immigrant living in an environment that is not his.

An: Did your personal background as an immigrant have anything to do with your decision to stay in the group?

Actor/Swallow: It didn't. During the casting I had no idea what the film was going to be about. I didn't know what they were going to shoot, what it was all about. I don't think Els was one hundred percent sure either. I was attracted by the word 'film', like a moth to a flame.

People came and went, Dietvorst insisted on creating an open atmosphere where people felt at ease without having any obligations other than collaborating with the others on an art project.

An: How did you select the participants?

Els Dietvorst: Diplomas are of no importance. In principle M could say: 'I am the king of Belgium'. As long as he's a good actor, he can be the king of Belgium. I'm not going to say to anyone: 'This is not realistic' or 'You're telling a lie'. I don't care. If he invests in the group and wants to be Pinocchio, he can be Pinocchio.

An: Being inspired and feeling passionate about the part was important for you during the auditions?

Els Dietvorst: There were different levels. Some people stayed in the group, like L and G, because of their tremendously positive impact on the group. In the group they had a healing influence. They stayed, although they didn't get the biggest parts. The audition was an open, organic process. Every character that has stayed within the group has his own story.

Els Dietvorst, who rejects strict boundaries between art, community projects and anthropology, deliberately opted for the experimental, even freewheeling, character of the project. She did not focus exclusively on the film during these four years, but remained open to suggestions from the Swallows, who were very creative and inspired by their new nest. There were street performances, jukebox stories based on the lives of the

inhabitants and recounted in a local pub, glossy magazines covered the activities of the Swallows in full-colour pictures and rave reviews. The Swallows were invited to experiment, to defy easy categorization or definition, but this sense of experimentation was not always effortless.

Actor/Swallow: We felt as if we weren't taken seriously, as if we were puppets and had to follow the group, unable to do our own thing, really. At a certain moment we felt like guineapigs. We completely lost the feeling of playing in a movie.

An: Guineapigs for what kind of experiments?

Actor/Swallow: The social aspect, the contact with the others, with the area, while we had come to do a film.

Actor/Swallow: I believe the media strongly romanticize our social performances.

An: And where's the romance?

Actor/Swallow: Oh, in that everything is possible.

An: The fact that, even in a destitute neighborhood, these events are possible?

Actor/Swallow: That's romanticizing, it doesn't work that way. Although the neighbourhood had promised they'd be quiet, they kept on intruding. However, what happens in between, is not going to be shown.

An: What do you mean?

Actor/Swallow: The thefts, for example, how they broke into D's car, the fact that they shouted at us, that the takes were interrupted by blokes wanting to show off and other such things.

It is relevant to contextualize this project in the recent wave of Belgian socio-artistic practices, promoted by the new line of subvention by the Flemish Ministry of Culture, for its potential for promoting cultural participation and cultural competence, and enhancing emancipation by marginalized communities or persons. Principles such as accessibility, a context of encouragement and respect, and a profound exchange of experience between participants are developed to enhance cultural emancipation.

But what was unique about the Swallows is that typical socio-artistic aspects were not the foci of the project. Obviously, whenever a Swallow needed social or legal assistance regarding passport issues, or housing problems (and these occurred frequently), Dietvorst helped by assigning them to informed social workers. Although these social aims may have been attained, they were not the 'root principles or cultural intuitions' behind the project.³ On the contrary, abstract notions such as 'positive energy', 'collective' and 'utopia' inspired Dietvorst and her Swallows to create a challenging process. It is this long, enduring, flexible and vigorous process which stands out from other similar projects: not focused on a pre-scripted product or result, this process enabled the Swallows to search individually and collectively for shared moments, happenings,

performances which lead intuitively to this yet unknown art work, preferably a feature film. Dietvorst set the perfect example with her continuous enthusiasm and positive charisma, enabling many to overcome their fears and anxieties about their future by believing in this collective project. By means of negotiating and experimenting the Swallows expanded the notion of author to a more cooperative inspiration.

Collaborative Preparations of the Film

The writing of the script is one of the many interesting examples in this search for a collective and collaborative authorship. Els Dietvorst and Orla Barry invited the Swallows to write their own piece of the script. Interestingly, few wanted to take up autobiographical aspects while writing the script. Many switched identities with roles in society that seemed more appealing to them, for instance the male sex worker choose to be a policeman, the Belgian policewoman choose to be a sex worker. Some chose to fictionalize political traumas they experienced in their home land, while others wrote utopian fantasies about their future life. These performative acts might refer to what Conrad, quoting Schechner, proposes when he promotes performance as a paradigm of liminality: 'Fundamental to all performance is the characteristic of "restored behaviour" or "twice-behaved behaviour" that is "symbolic and reflexive: not empty but loaded behaviour multivocally broadcasting significance . . . [in which] the self can act in/as another" allowing the individual to become someone other than themselves. The play frame opens a liminal space where the "not me" encounters the "not not me"' (Conrad 2004 citing Schechner 1985: 52).



Figure 12.3 'The March, a Break'. © Norma Prendergast 2006.

Although a selection had to be made, during long sessions of discussions and feedback the Swallows debated on the different contributions. The collective created a collaborative script, although it is clear that Dietvorst and her co-writer Orla Barry defined the overall type of the film, as they were convinced that it would be pointless to create an experimental film not viewable by some Swallows. They therefore used the idea of 'a real film, based on real lives', to communicate about the project.

An: You said *The March, The Burden, The Desert, The Boredom, The Anger* had to be a real film. What do you mean by that?

Els Dietvorst: When the Swallows say that a real film is a feature film, like in a cinema theatre, it should be a film with a story line, characters, something about life, love and death.

An: So that was their idea, what's yours?

Els Dietvorst: As an artist, you can go many ways. I understand their idea of a real film. I think that everybody has to admit that when you're watching a film and you start crying, that's a real film. The feelings might be cliché, but we recognize them as part of our own lives.

An: And that's what you were aiming for?

Els Dietvorst: It's based on their lives and there are story lines in every life. If I were to make an experimental film based on their lives, I'd find myself a bit abusive. But that's not what it's about. It's about trying to make a film together with this collective, which showed a part of their lives and emotions. I was trying to be the director and steer things in the right direction. But at the end of the day it's not my film. I directed and coached, I introduced visual ideas. But if someone had told me four years ago: 'This is the film you're going to make, this is your film', I would have told them: 'Not entirely ... although everything about it interests me, it's based round a collective'.

An important point that is raised by this concept of 'a real film based on real lives' is the position of the 'viewer' during the shoot. Els Dietvorst projected a personalized 'viewer' – in the form of the 'Swallows'. According to Dietvorst, the first viewer needed to be the Swallows and the people for whom they were preparing this film. As such the film needed to be stretched from an art project to a community project, relating to the Swallows' anticipations and expectations, rather than to art-house audiences.

What is important to note is that Els Dietvorst not only managed to convince the Swallows of their self-identity, that they had something important to share with an audience, but she also handled this in a professional way. According to Pinxten, it is a specific kind of professionalism that differentiates a socio-artistic project from a hobby or occupational therapy (Pinxten 2003: 73). It entails a commitment to learn the specific cultural and sociopolitical codes or competences of not only the artists involved but also of the other participants.

Els Dietvorst: We started the script by asking people what kind of part they wanted to play. For many Swallows, the part consisted of something they dreamt of being in real life. It's some sort of escape from society, or something society refuses to consider. Like D (actor/Swallow), for example. He chose to be a manager in the film who decides to give everything up and leave and hitch hike. It's a romantic idea of freedom.

An: Did it not create problems?

Els Dietvorst: At the beginning, the script contained twenty-one characters with equal parts. We invited some people to read the script and no-one was able to follow it. They didn't even understand what the end was or the beginning.

An: Did you do that in order to give everyone a part?

Els Dietvorst: Yes, but having twenty-one characters didn't work. In the end, even we lost track of what everybody was doing. We had to drop some scenes in the end.

An: For the sake of logic?

Els Dietvorst: When you develop twenty-one characters and give them two minutes each, you don't get any depth. You never get beyond superficially portraying characters without contents. By consequence, is a so-called 'democratic way of writing' less productive?

Els Dietvorst: I think it's possible to do it, providing you have ten hours of film and a lot more means and a lot more money. We were limited by time and the length of the film, the time spent filming. We had to scale down, for the sake of clarity. But we discussed this with everybody, and after that it was OK.

An: You reconnected the script to the people?

Els Dietvorst: I did. We have been honest when dealing with the actors. Not all twenty of them were able to devote themselves to the project full-time. Some were only available on Saturdays. People with less time were given smaller parts.

Thus, not only in its relation to the collaborative method with the 'other' and hence the subject of the film but also in terms of specifying the 'viewer', the challenge of this type of project is to experiment with what the fragile limit might be in the relation between a collective and a 'chief', in Dietvorst's words, to invest in the collective not necessarily by finding a consensus. It is a search for the limits of negotiation, the sharing of codes and to invest these in a choice, a decision.

Crew member: When talking to the actors, it became clear they had objections. Or Els had failed to involve them in certain issues. They give a part of the history of their life, something that happened to them personally, something rather fragile. They simply gave it for her film. I thought

this was a delicate issue throughout the film. How far can you go in using other people's stories to tell your own? One could say, from an outsider's point of view, that Els created an alibi to use these people for her film.

The script presented a collage of different slices of lives touching upon local, national and transnational issues in which locality, nationality and transnationality were differently defined as subjected to the background of the Swallows in this diaspora community. As such, the script did not pretend to reveal the 'category' of the immigrants of the Anneessens area, nor did it represent them, or put up a mirror trying to mimic this community. On the contrary, the script presented a flexible and playful collage of the (utopian) lives of the Swallows, in which fact and fiction were blurred and in which concepts such as authenticity or reality were ignored, yielding a rich example of the concept of identity dynamics.

Professionalism Revised: The Filming Phase



Figure 12.4 'The March, ... Shoot'. © Norma Prendergast 2006.

The transformation of a script into the actual film shoot is of crucial importance. Driven by Dietvorst's description of 'a real film' motivated by the viewer (as the Swallows), the production unit organized the shoot as a classical fiction-film set. This meant a rather strict definition of functions: a professional cameraman and his assistants, a sound engineer and his

assistant, a script supervisor, a make-up artist, several production assistants etc. Yet they were only subsidized with a very limited budget and needed to film in a limited period of time, four weeks in total. The hierarchy of such an organization contrasted sharply with the dynamic and negotiable production process of the Swallows. Furthermore, although Dietvorst invited the crew on rehearsals and tried to make them sensitive to the overall social background of the project, it remained very difficult for a first-time director to entirely direct this 'machine', as a crew member labelled it.

Crew member: A film set deals with a group of people and you've got to get everybody organized. This way of working is characteristic of fiction-film making. Everyone has their job. But I think that when you make a documentary, people's roles are more interchangeable than with other kinds of film (the sound technician could easily be the camera man, for example). During 'The March' everything had been neatly laid down and people worked within a specific frame. I believe that to be typical of a fiction-film. You can feel it's more rigid, all the activity, the hustle and bustle of a fiction-film.

The crew thus brought another type of professionalism with them, which created a definitive rupture with the previous performances. This rupture brought changes to the project not only because outsiders infiltrated this rather intimate nest of the Swallows, but more importantly because codes and values such as the parameters of cinema (focus, frame, color, light, composition, and depth among others: Volckaert 1995) were in the hands of professionals, rendering impossible the negotiation on codes, and ultimately distancing Dietvorst from her Swallows.

Els Dietvorst: In fact, no-one dared to overstep the mark during the shooting. In the end everyone stuck to the part they'd learnt. The pressure was terrible. During the rehearsals I never had to ask them to improvise. Things happened because they were meant to be. So I thought I could say to them: 'Now you do this, and you do that, etc.' But this was impossible with all these cameras. No matter what I asked them to do, they'd have been lost for words, unable to do anything because of the stress.

This rupture had different sorts of impact on the Swallows, the neighbourhood and on the project as such. Whereas Dietvorst often felt frustrated, some Swallows felt inspired by the crew and were even discovered as new casting talents. Some people of the neighbourhood were proud of the crew while others saw them as intruders.

Actor/Swallow: It's true that sometimes I would feel intimidated, impressed by the small audience that had gathered around me, especially when my emotions got the upper hand and I started crying. It's like ... I compare it to ... I'm sorry to make this comparison, but I compare it to having sex ... that's to say, you get started, you get into it, you go for it and suddenly you're so excited because you've arrived at the top, at the point of no return, and then you ejaculate, you explode. During this explosion (as I am playing my part), I hardly recognize myself, I really feel like on the day these things happened, when I genuinely shed my tears. Afterwards I'm a little embarrassed, just like after ejaculating, when you feel a little relaxed, but also a little embarrassed towards your partner.

An: Was it a way of digesting things?

Actor/Swallow: I believe it was, I'm sure it was therapy for me, precisely helping me to digest what had happened to me. Just by talking about it, I freed myself. At last I felt relieved from this feeling locked inside me for such a long time.

An: Did this feeling of relief come about after the shooting or after the rehearsals?

Actor/Swallow: During the rehearsal I sometimes came close to the feeling, but it was nothing like during the shooting. During the shooting, I got into a trance, which took me back to the place where things happened, which brought about this relief. It wasn't the same thing at all.

Ginsburg suggests that indigenous media present a kind of Faustian contract with the technologies of modernity, enabling some degree of agency to control representation under less than ideal conditions (Ginsburg 1991: 96). The Swallows' culture is not based on a common tradition, language or relationship between generations. They created a community, a tribe, during four years, based on a sharing of codes and values and thus living in diversity. Yet the audiovisual medium threatened this community in a different way: although the script was created collectively, since they created a 'real film' they inscribed their process in this dominant and hence constraining mode of production. For the viewer in the person of the Swallow, the film needed to be projected in a commercial cinema venue, a place referring to dominant film production. The experience of most of the Swallows with film was dominant film production, more precisely the commercial blockbusters. For them to engage in a film project had reference to this type of film-making, which had different social, economic and ideological connotations to the type of project Els Dietvorst had in mind. In the project of the Swallows it was the very form of Western narratives that undermined their intentions. This form can be evaluated by the organization of the crew, which was more rigid than any the Swallows were used to. This was partly due to the number of people on the set and the need to organize them efficiently but

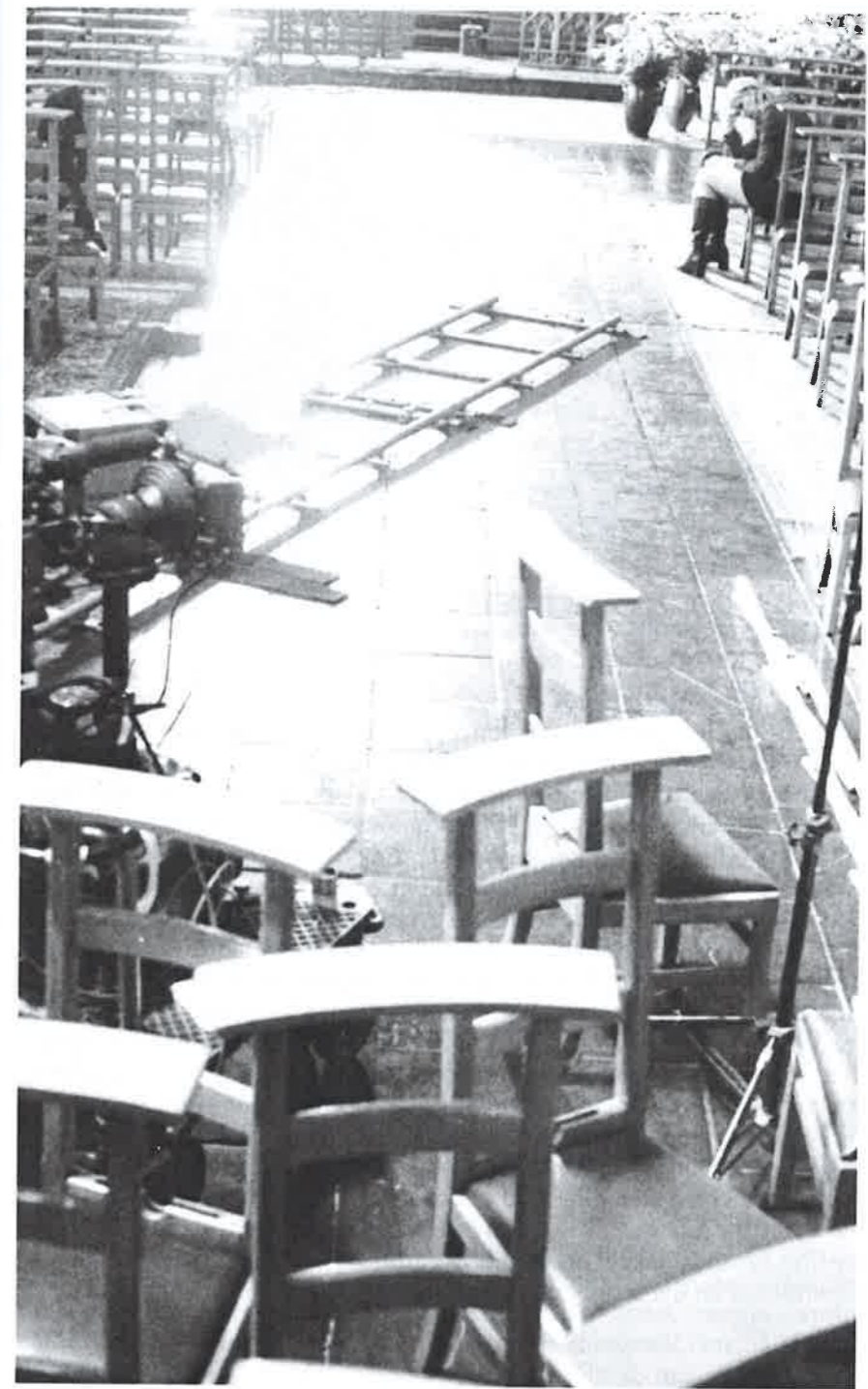


Figure 12.5 'Lara'. © Thomas Sennesael 2006.



Figure 12.6 'Kito and Kokou'. © Thomas Sennesael 2006.

also due to a type of film-making that has become common in Western cinema. Raoul Ruiz uses the concept of a Central Conflict Theory to understand this Western type of cinema (Ruiz 1995: 14). According to him, this theory has turned into a predatory theory, a system of ideas that devours and enslaves any other idea that might restrain its activity. Pink states the ethical codes and understandings of TV companies, and by extension Western film production, differ from those that guide applied visual anthropologists. She therefore urges that 'the anthropologist needs to work between these codes, acting not only as a cultural broker to facilitate the representation of one culture to another on film, but also to protect the local culture through his or her knowledge of the ethics and practices of the filmmaking culture' (Pink, this volume). Yet whenever Dietvorst or the Swallows felt uncertain over a specific choice or decision, due to a lack of experience or under too much pressure, it seemed necessary to rely upon the experience of the professional crew-members, instead of finding resources in their own flexible and dynamic methods that preceded the shoot. Instead of questioning how the relation between Dietvorst and her Swallows could be imagined, questions such as costume continuity and clarity prevailed because of this type of professional dependence on the script and on the type of organization of the set.

The Swallows' Nest Inside Out

In general, the inhabitants of the Anneesens' area appreciated the attention to their neighbourhood, which attracted press people, resulting in several newspapers articles and spots on television. The area had suddenly appeared on the map of Brussels. This social intervention, the film-shoot performance, had a major impact on the area in its stimulation of social cohesion by this collective experience during the shoot and by the expectations it raised about the 'real film' scheduled in one of the large commercial film theatres of Brussels owned by UGC. It had produced various creative moments which stimulated communication in the area. The film shoot thus replaced the image of the destitute transit area with that of a dynamic and vibrant neighbourhood that gave rise to numerous arts events, resulting in such a large-scale feature film production about the community. The shoot, which implicated the entire neighbourhood, enlarged the flexible nest of the Swallows as insiders.

Although the Swallows sometimes complained about money issues, or about the importance of their part in the film, in general their self-esteem had been empowered by the event. Some found jobs because the experience had given them more self-confidence; other continued in an artistic direction by producing their own films; others were stimulated by the social aspects of the process and engaged in emancipatory projects while still others felt depressed because of the ending of the project. Undeniably, this project had empowered each of the Swallows due to the inspiring root intuitions: utopia, enthusiasm and collectivity. They felt privileged to have been part of this undertaking.

I will not analyse the remainder of the performances of the Swallows but I will limit myself by briefly presenting the final activities. These activities demonstrate the impressive transformation of the Swallows' nest. The Swallows organized a final part of the shoot in Morocco as many Swallows were born there, or had relatives there. The film was edited during a long period with several moments of feedback. The film was titled *The March, The Burden, The Desert, The Boredom, The Anger* and was shown at the UGC in Brussels, in the 'golden room', the largest and most impressive theatre of this venue for dominant Hollywood cinema. The theatre was packed: all Swallows were so proud of this project that they had invited all their friends, family relatives, neighbours etc. After this presentation the Swallows decided to end their collective experience with an exhibition where all their events, performances, and films were accessible. They were stunned to hear that BOZAR in Brussels wanted to give them a platform. For a month they were able to present their archive in this high cultural palace of fine arts.

Enlarged by these performances and transformed by the passages through these very differentiated sociocultural areas, ranging from community centres, a high cultural palace to a dominant cinema venue, the Swallows' nest flipped inside out and dissolved, making room for empowered individuals and leaving several traces throughout Brussels.

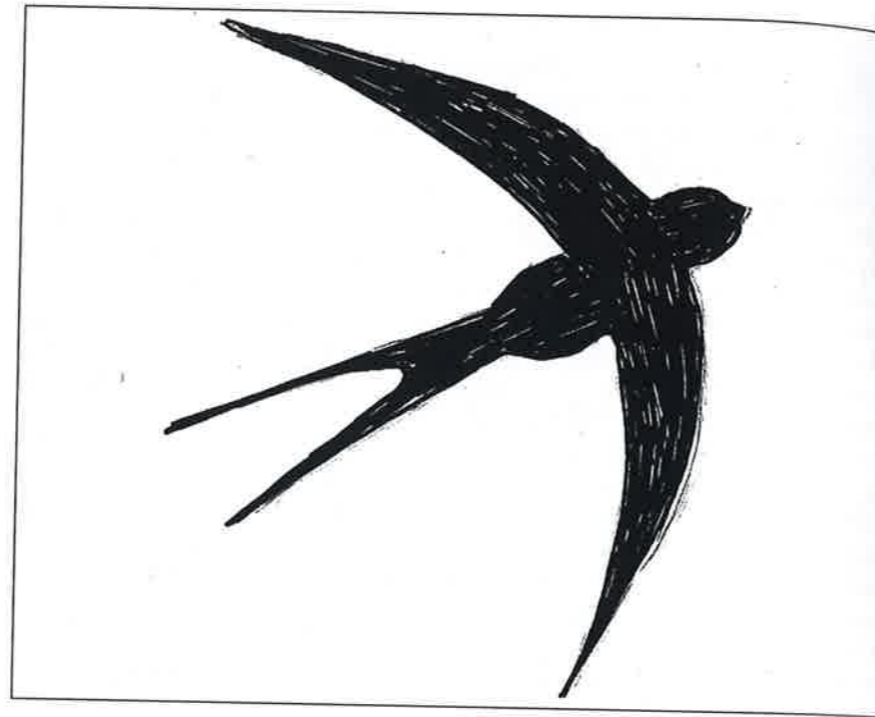


Figure 12.7 'Birdi'. Els Dietvorst 2000.

Epilogue: A Performative Analysis of Collaborative and Plural Authorship

I have taken a visual anthropology approach to analysing the Swallows project so as to offer a way of understanding how community and arts projects can create social interventions. That is, not by simply analysing the end product - the final 'text' - but by attending ethnographically to the processes, relationships and identities that are integral to its production. I emphasize the necessity of exploring the interactions during the production process in a loyal and reflexive way, based on collaboration and recognizing the intersubjectivity of the research encounter (Pink 2004). In doing so I underscore the performative turn in anthropological thinking influenced by Fabian, when he claims that a performative approach is not only the subject of ethnographic research but it is also descriptive of the ethnographic method (Fabian 1990).

Cultural intuitions such as 'positive energy', 'collective' and 'utopia' inspired Els and her Swallows to create a challenging process. These notions shape the way in which the parameters of cinema are understood or used within the interactions between the main agents. By means of negotiating and experimenting, the Swallows expanded the notion of author to a more cooperative inspiration. The process presented a search

for the fragile limits of negotiation, the sharing of codes and an attempt to invest these in a decision in which the 'other' and the 'viewer' were invited and personalized. The project thus stimulated social aims such as encouraging communication, social cohesion in the community and individual growth. Yet it had been situated within the context of a film project, with its specific social and ideological forces. The challenge of this project was to assess the ideological and social forces at work in film production and to invest these in a particular community context. These forces created anticipations, interactions influenced by a dominant mode of production, as the project was designed to create 'a real film based on real lives'. Ginsburg therefore refers to Faust when relating community projects with the technologies of modernity (Ginsburg 1991: 96).

In sum, with this analysis of the production process of a community-based film project in Brussels, I hope to have demonstrated the value of an analysis of the interactions between the 'author' and the 'other' in which the 'viewer' is prefigured during (documentary) film production. Rather than coining (documentary) film production with concepts such as 'reality', 'authenticity', 'fiction' and 'faithful representation', I thus suggest that the mediated interactions during the production process determine the 'flow between fact and fiction' (Trinh 1990: 89). The case of the Swallows offers a unique perspective on authorship and its relationship to the 'other' and the 'viewer', which could not be apprehended by simply analysing the final film. Qualitative methods mostly derived from performative and visual anthropology offer possibilities in investigating the mediated interactions between the different agents. This analysis therefore explores the relations between the production of knowledge, the different contexts in which these processes occur and the position the researcher has in these processes (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2001). As such, I hope to offer an alternative to a strictly interpretative, text-based analysis and representational discourse. As Fabian (1990: 259), notes: '... The theoretical benefit that is to be derived from making performance a guiding idea is a conception of relationships between texts and interpretation, which is neither static nor hierarchical but processual. The burden of such an approach is to show the essential openness of that process.'

Notes

1. More information on this project: <http://www.fireflyfilms.be/>
2. 'Juke-box stories' are stories based on the lives of people who regularly visited the bar 'Rouge et Noir' in the Anneessens area. Writer Anna Luyten gathered these stories and performed her interpretation in the bar, next to a jukebox.
3. 'Root intuitions' or 'cultural intuitions' are concepts suggested by Pinxten to facilitate ethnographic comparisons (Pinxten 1997: 87).

What appears at first sight to be varied, chaotic, unconnected or utterly disparate in a culture can, upon closer examination, be recognized to be unified or closely linked because of a common root principle. A somewhat similar argument holds for the synonymous term of cultural intuitions; they express the non-discursive or immediate notions, which are underlying the level of rational discourse.

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PART VI

INDUSTRY