

IMAGINATIONS

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STRUCTURES OF ANTICIPATION

Guest Editors: Yoke-Sum Wong, Karen Engle, Craig Campbell

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RANDY LEWIS AND MONTI SIGG



Wandering as Method

“Creative activities are useful only if they produce new, so far unknown relations,” László Moholy-Nagy wrote in 1922. And if nothing else, the *Ex-Situ* collaborations are producing just that¹. Every few years, the ongoing project puts academics and artists together in unexpected ways, creating work that is almost entirely conceived, produced, and exhibited within a few days. It’s the opposite of the slow gestation process of most academic work: it’s somewhere between a sprint and a bender, metaphorically speaking, and it has the excitement and exhaustion to match.

For me it's been wonderful to take part, most recently in Windsor, Canada in May 2019. But it's not easy to classify what I did with my collaborator and photographer, Monti Sigg. Much of it was simply walking, waiting, looking, talking, and sorting through what I saw in the streets, then comparing notes with other participants who were all looking to uncover something related to our common theme—"structures of anticipation." It felt like a hybrid game whose rules were unstated and fluid. The terrain was pleasantly squishy, and I did something that was not quite ethnography, not quite journalism, not quite art, and some would say, not quite scholarship.

What this means in practice is that I rummaged through the built environment like a finicky record collector at a giant flea market, moving around Windsor and Detroit, talking to people and collecting impressions. Monti snapped photos of anything vaguely related to surveillance's deeply anticipatory nature, the theme of my recent work, while I took notes and enjoyed being intentionally adrift, far from the hard ground of disciplinary traditions and professionally-sanctioned methodologies.

Perhaps wandering and wondering, collecting and reflecting, is not much of a method for the hard-core disciplinarians. Close textual reading, careful philosophical argumentation, clever turns of the historical imagination, qualitative social science—we are accustomed to seeing all of these in the humanities, which has often made room for quasi-poetic activities. But moving around and waiting for something to emerge, well, that is more the terrain of poets, private eyes, and ethnographers.

Few of us trained for this liminal zone between art and scholarship, where we feel like we are making it up as we go along, relying on intuition far more than our formal training. It is awkward, raw, unsettled, and unscientific. It requires openness and even a kind of boldness. It is an unsafe space, conceptually speaking. Unlike a scholar producing another journal article, you are doing something with no obvious precedent, and creating a product with no obvious market.

Yet that awkward, unsettled, and intuitive place is the most exciting part of the academic landscape for people like me. I'm an interdisci-

plinary scholar with connections to American Studies, cultural history, film studies, and surveillance studies. I often admire the work done within those sprawling academic zones. Yet what I find the most exciting is the work I've done with artists or as an artist/academic. As good stand-up comedians know, the boundary between *acceptable* and *unacceptable* is often exciting.

I've had an uncommon number of opportunities to explore the ragged edges of academic work over my career. When the thick syrup of methodology evaporates like a shallow puddle in the desert, all sorts of things are possible if you are not freaked out by the freedom. At this point, I'm used to *not knowing*, and I'm okay with that. Like the process artists of the seventies, I think I'm growing intellectually from just letting it happen, figuring it out, and wrapping it up simply because I can sense that it's ready. And I'm grateful for any community of scholars and allies who encourages this experimental/experiential way of being. I'm grateful to have a community who is like-minded about redefining scholarship.

When I'm writing long captions for evocative photos or creating short videos that are more lyrical than analytical, I don't have a set methodology nor a standard product that can be easily measured for quality, but I'm still compelled to try something different, something outside of the professional status quo. After too many years of watching conference papers read in a rushed monotone to a tiny audience; after confronting journal articles whose titles allow you to predict the interpretative steps and citational genuflecting to come; after feeling imprisoned within the standard academic forms and the quietly self-congratulatory rhetoric of post-Enlightenment intellectual life, it is frankly glorious to explore different ways of doing things, to create a semi-academic space for surprise, beauty, ugliness, intuition, and even a hint of the irrational.

To put art and chaos and speed into the scholarly process feels infinitely hopeful at this moment in history. If professors could make more room for newness in form and outcome, if we were willing to explore the potential of the Ex Situ model and create work that is experimental, experiential, and collaborative in nature, I think we

might surprise ourselves with the results. I hope to continue working in the Ex Situ style. Working in an interrogative mode of experimentation is simply more meaningful to me than the declarative mode of most scholarship I have known—it produces more surprises and joyful insights, and does so with greater humility.

NOTES

1. Ex-Situ was the original project (Austin, Texas, 2014) organized by Craig Campbell and Yoke-Sum Wong that launched these various international workshops (which Structures of Anticipation is part of). Its aim was to challenge and remove the hierarchies of conventional academic conference methods in search of methodologies in process. ↴