

MICHAEL M.J. FISCHER. *PROBING ARTS AND EMERGENT FORMS OF LIFE.*
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*The role of the artist is exactly the same as the role of the lover.
If I love you, I have to make you conscious of the things you don't see.*
- James Baldwin

Ever since the publication of Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency* (1998), art has been a subject of interest in anthropology. Art, and the ways in which it can captivate and enchant, incite conversations and build relationships, has invited the curiosity and scrutiny of anthropologists. And rightly so, as any study of human society would be incomplete without looking at the art that it produces, as it is something that can be seen as a portal into the history and culture of the place; or, as Baldwin points out, simply something that makes one conscious of things one tends to *not* see. This absence is precisely what Michael M.J. Fischer argues in *Probing arts and emergent forms of life* – the importance of art and seeing things from the perspective of the artists producing 'new forms of understandings' while not 'getting enmeshed in [the] all-too-fascinating philosophical and historical debates' (6).

Spread over eight chapters, the book explores the works of many artists from Southeast Asia and East Asia and presents them as case studies in 'artists' ethnographies', or what the artists themselves would call 'field research' (11). Through these case studies, he questions if it is possible to ethnographically study a place 'using primarily a montage of artworks and the discourse of the artists, privileging the artists rather than constantly referring to Euro-American theorists' (13-14). The examples in the book hint toward an affirmative response to the question so asked. Be it Charles Lim Yi Yong's *SEA STATES* project (chapter four), which explores the socio-political aspects of territorial water markers and shorelines in Singapore; or Ayoung Kim's video installations that discuss the struggles of Yemini refugees on Jeju Island (chapter two); or even the performance and installation arts of Zai Kuning that tend to inform people about the historical origins of the Malay community (chapter five), all illustrate that art can indeed be used para-ethnographically for anthropological purposes, especially in exposing 'things that cannot be talked about' (p. 205) in contexts that are highly politicised.

Fischer stays true to his original intent throughout the book, by placing the art and the artist at the forefront of all discussions. It is through the lens of the theories and ideologies of the artists that he entices the reader, rather than deriving an academic theory. Apart from possible art-anthropology collaborations, he also emphasises collaborations between artists themselves. He illustrates this configuration with the example of a display of artworks by Entang Wiharso and Sally Smart at Galeri Nasional Indonesia. He further complements the

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display by focusing on the curation of the show, specifically how it is designed ‘like a Möbius strip’, as the exit leads the viewer to the entrance making them realise ‘that there is much more to see and tell’ (98). With Wiharso’s artworks, Fischer also focuses on the space of Asian art in the contemporary art world, presenting it as a part of ‘the Asian shift in “what is happening” generally’ (214). This is a particularly important discussion as Asian artists (other than the likes of Yayoi Kusama and Takashi Murakami) have been trying to establish a place in the so called ‘transnational’ artworld, which can indeed be highly localised in the West (Harris 2012, also see Weisenfeld 2010).

The one thing that I believe the book lacks, is visual content. I do acknowledge that the text is supplemented by several visuals, but while reading I felt like there was a need for more. Especially when the book begins with Fischer presenting an example of a short two-minute presentation he made about his research project, from which ‘the only thing people remembered...was an image of Wiharso’s colourful artworks that they found exciting in a stimulating and puzzling way’ (9). This lack of visuals is particularly felt in the cases of exhibitions (i.e., not being able to see the space); and in discussion of Apichatpong Weerasethaku’s films (chapter two), where, by and large, the use of colour is emphasised.

All things considered; the book provides enough evidence to support its argument. It challenges the notion that anthropology as a discipline is majorly based on epistemological theories and texts. It asks the reader to see value in art from an anthropological perspective and makes it an important discussion to be had within the discipline. It urges us to move away from the traditional approaches to anthropology and ethnography and to look at the possibilities that can be materialised by working with artists and art objects as potential research methods. And, in my view, it turns the reader in favour of the argument that it presents. To conclude, I leave you with one last quote: ‘Rather than rehearsing the official stories of these histories, the artists lead us to conversations about cultural circulations in music, dance, and the arts as aesthetic and philosophical inquiries about the human place in the world, about the play of the affinities and differences that make up vibrant and resilient cultural tapestries and that militate against fundamentalisms, prejudices, and the turning of neighbors into alien others’. (213)

Bibliography

Harris, Clare 2012. In and out of place: Tibetan artists’ travels in the contemporary art world, *Visual Anthropology Review* 28/2, 152-163.

Weisenfeld, Gennifer 2010. Reinscribing tradition in a transnational art world, *Transcultural studies (Heidelberg)* 1/1, 78-99. doi: 10.11588/ts.2010.1.6175.

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