

CROSSED PERSPECTIVES

03/14/2016

## Questioning art and social science crossovers



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Between Ursula Biemann  
(Artist, director and  
researcher)

14 March  
2016

and Valérie Pihet  
(Historian)

Valérie Pihet and Ursula Biemann discuss the crossovers between artistic creation and scholarly research in the field of mobility. Either working together, or in parallel, these two disciplines have a significant contribution to make in terms of the public debate.

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01. Is it interesting that social science researchers and artists are working together on the same issues? If so, why?



Ursula Biemann

If your artistic practice is strongly research-oriented, as mine is, you are bound to cross path with scholars who work on similar questions. In my long-term investigation of migration on Europe's outer rims, I've frequently come across anthropologists, geographers and journalists, as we gravitate towards particular mobility hubs where migrants come through in great numbers. In my experience, these encounters with social scientists are a great source of information and inspiration, given their intimate knowledge of the sites and their social organization, as well as their historical and theoretical contextualisation. My work as an artist, of course, implies a different sort of engagement, where aesthetic questions move to the fore. In other words, we seem to be asking many of the same questions but end up producing something different with the information. Not only are artists aware that image politics are extremely important when it comes to migration. But as things stand, the visual terrain is largely dominated by news journalism. By incorporating post-colonial consciousness and more thoughtful reflection on image-making, art can productively

intervene in the visual field and invent a radically different image world that speaks to the strong desire for mobility today. The fields of visual anthropology, photojournalism and research art practices merge somewhat around these common concerns and are subsequently diffused into different channels. Our question is not how to reach an academic community, but how to touch the social imaginary through aesthetic strategies. If we succeed in combining these two intentions, we can make a difference not only in the minds of people but also in the discipline itself.



V. P

In my opinion, we must go somewhat beyond the idea of mutual inspiration today – necessary though it is – if we are to strengthen the process of co-production not only between artists and researchers, but even more so among the various stakeholders in a given situation. We founded Dingdingdong, a co-production institute dedicated to Huntington's disease. Specifically, we wanted to see how we could create the right conditions for co-production by bringing together artists, researchers, patients, their

families and caretakers – and at the same time look for ways of communicating about our work. For example, in a series of videos, we used a fake but sufficiently credible ‘doctor’ able to interact with the medical community. At scientific conferences we present “posters” similar to those used by researchers. For the past two years we have also staged a theatrical performance that presents the discoveries we’ve made in the course of our work. For us it’s a way of drawing on the different types of sharing – albeit by giving them a little twist – specific to the way we believe is best suited to creating alliances. In each case, the aim is to transform the nature of the real world. This doesn’t mean we always have to agree. Going beyond a simple critique of what we are doing makes sharing possible.



Valérie Pihet

The word “question” implies focusing only on coming up with an answer. I prefer the term “problem”. A problem does not exist beyond its solutions, to quote Deleuze. In other words, a problem for which there is no solution is a badly formulated problem, implying that we focus on the development of problems rather than their resolution. On a practical level, this approach requires careful work that is inextricably linked to creation/inquiry, which itself has consequences for our understanding of reality and, more notably, our ability to act on the present. In my opinion, it is here that we see the urgency of working together. Be it in the arts or the social sciences, we must conceive and create the possible; in other words, use the imagination, which is informed by a detailed approach to reality, and not the imaginary world, which does not take into account any historical, social or economic considerations, etc. For Dingdingdong – the co-production institute for knowledge about Huntington's disease – we created a series of video clips drawing, for example, on the skills of storyteller Olivier Marboeuf, video artist Fabrizio Terranova and neurologist Katia Youssov. We

combined this with the knowledge contributed by sufferers of the disease and researchers from the collective. It is fiction rooted in reality. Thus, it lifts this reality and disrupts it a bit. The series features a doctor who gradually transforms a terrible diagnosis – an incurable illness – into a situation that builds on the possible, where anything is feasible. We're so convinced of the beneficial effects of this series that we're experimenting with broadcasting it more widely.



U. B

This sounds like an interesting example of how artists and scientists can collaborate productively in an applied field, where the aim is to work toward solving a well-defined problem. By and large, however, art doesn't aim for a direct social use. Yet, it still plays an important role in society as it creatively draws attention to an existing issue by generating an aesthetic form of expression that works thanks to its formal structure. For instance, by using concrete poetry to comment on the structural transformations we are inflicting on the Earth, as I did in the video Deep Weather.

02. Do these collaborations show multi-disciplinarity (each retaining its own method), inter-disciplinarity (crossover between the respective methodologies) or trans-disciplinarity (what exists between, over and beyond the disciplines)?



Ursula Biemann

To begin with, my own practice is transdisciplinary. So it seems rather natural to collaborate with others, regardless of their methodologies. When art engages with science, it is never an encounter between two disciplines. Art is extra-disciplinary per se. Art has the freedom to address virtually any topic and can borrow methodologies from other disciplines. We can find many examples of this in art history. The question of art reaching beyond the realm defined by art is very contemporary, hence the desire for collaboration. In the 20th century during modernism, art dealt with art itself and was highly self-reflective and egocentric. 21st-century art engages the world, and I don't just mean the social world. I mean the whole Earth system including humans and all other forms of society. For this, art looks to science but ultimately has its own way of addressing this changing relationship between us humans and the living world.



V. P

I think it's fairly dangerous to say that art in itself is extra-disciplinary, and that it has the freedom to address any subject or draw on any methodology. On one hand, art, like any other activity, is not independent of the conditions that surround it. Artistic practice, however open, is constructed based on its own specific forms of production and distribution, as is the case with any other discipline. On the other hand, and what's troubling, is that it's precisely this line of argument that has and still contributes to making art an area that is too self-absorbed and disconnected from the everyday concerns of people in our society. Why should art be freer? What kind of freedom are we talking about? Total freedom – completely detached – or freedom that we must constantly negotiate based on the conditions in which we interact and for which we are held accountable? I can easily believe that Ursula Biemann is constantly negotiating to do what she does, and that's why we have to be careful about the terms we use – because they create the fragile way in which we tell our stories to ourselves and are important for the way we build a common future.



Valérie Pihet

In my experience, these approaches cannot be described in the abstract. One can no longer think of the arts and social sciences as being outside of the situations to which they respond. All knowledge-building and/or creativity is motivated by a vital need. It is this necessity - which is unique to every situation - that should dictate the way in which it is handled. The difficulty is often in how we formulate this need, beyond the obvious and what connects us to it, whether through our "professional" and/or "personal" practices. Given the various aspects that must be considered – meetings, arrangements, connections, issues, wishes, etc. – collaborations between artists and researchers can take many forms provided that they start from situations themselves, which must be stated in problem form and whose consequences we pay special attention to. We talk a lot about the crossover between arts and social sciences because we have a long history of compartmentalizing fields of thought and creativity, a separation that today is rightly challenged, I'm sure. However, I don't believe we should systematically impose a "multi-inter-trans" approach either, which would

be just as dangerous. Again, each situation should be afforded the power to disrupt our traditional patterns of thought. "Any object of knowledge is an active entity with which it is necessary to create connections" (Benedikte Zitouni on the "situated knowledges" of Donna Haraway). Rather than multi-inter-trans-, it is about rethinking our disciplines in terms of related or connected areas of knowledge. The main requirement is ensuring that these alliances are relevant and that they can intervene in reality in a transformative way.

03. Can art generate change at a societal or political level, specifically in the matter of mobility?



Ursula Biemann

Art effectively has an impact on many levels; most obviously, it contributes to public discourse. On a more abstract level, it develops new forms of thought and new aesthetic models for engaging the world. When showing Sahara Chronicle, a major video research I conducted on clandestine mobility in the Sahara, the European audience was amazed and truly grateful to get an entirely different view of these vibrant



migratory activities that were occurring along their borders. This art project gave a form to the relationship we maintain with our continental neighbors. It also highlights how the trajectories of artists, journalists, NGO workers, tourists and social scientists intertwine with these other forms of human mobility on their quest for a better life on their field studies. Together with migrants, we create this intense space of mobility that I don't just document with a camera but actually become a part of. Art is a form of reality-making. It is highly performative. This is the profound level on which I see art activating the social imaginary.



V. P

The Sahara Chronicle project seems very interesting. I would have liked to have known more about how Ursula Biemann worked on it and how this mobility space was created between her and the migrants. I think the effects of this project go beyond the basic imaginary world of society because, if we want a profound, long-term transformation of our reality, we must first transform the conditions of the experiment. I tend to think that the imaginary

world has too weak of a hold on the reality, and that it cannot be linked to a concrete situation, even though imagination is more of an act of creation, albeit based on experience. Wherein lies the urgency. We all need to rediscover our faculty for imagination in the face of the suffocation of possible outcomes.



Valérie Pihet

Mobility is a huge subject, but it also has the advantage of raising the thorny issue of the link between the local and the global. How can policies be formed from individual experiences? There is no one answer, obviously, but despite that I still want and need to consider the possible. The question is not whether art can generate change, but to know how it can be involved, because it cannot do much on its own. This question of "how to do it" is always brought up and reinvented according to the circumstances in which the artists decide to work with people other than themselves. Is it not, above all, about changing our way of thinking about politics and, according to Dewey, working on rebuilding actual communities – problems, communities – which fundamentally is about defining our interests and then politicizing them, rather than controlling governments? Politicizing involves being able to share one's commitments and interests, always localized and individual, and the ability to create consent, a rather heavy word but necessary, it seems to me. Being concerned is not the same as being directly affected – by an illness, a law, an economic measure, etc. Being

concerned is being put to work and changing one's perception of an experience in the world so deeply that it commits one to "taking part". Thanks to their highly evolved knowledge and skills, the arts and social sciences are undoubtedly best suited to bringing all their power to bear on situations and the people in them, by developing potential new material for today's world. They just have to accept that their ways of thinking and working may be overturned, and that they themselves will become involved in the changes that ensue. They need to see the positive side, and not only what they stand to lose.

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Keywords : [Arts](#), [Art](#), [art-sciences](#)

Disciplines : [Social sciences](#), [Art](#), [litterature and design](#)

Transport mode(s) : [All modes of transport](#)

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## Ursula Biemann

Artist, director and researcher

Ursula Biemann is an artist, writer, and video essayist. Her artistic practice is strongly research oriented and involves fieldwork in remote locations where she investigates climate change and the ecologies of oil and water. She is a member of the World of Matter collective project on resource ecologies. She is appointed Doctor honoris causa in Humanities by the Swedish University Umea (2008) and received the 2009 Prix Meret Oppenheim, the national art award of Switzerland. She

is on the board of the academic journal Geo-Humanities and is a member of the Zurich art commission.



## Valérie Pihet

Historian

Valérie Pihet has been executive director of the Ecole des Arts politiques at Sciences Po since 2010. She has worked with Bruno Latour on the conception and installation of two major international exhibitions on the crisis of representation in the sciences, in politics, in the arts and in religion (Iconoclash in 2002 and Making Things Public: Atmosphere of Democracy in 2005) that brought together researchers and artists. She also works with numerous artists and social scientists on an independent basis.

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To quote this publication:

Ursula Biemann and Valérie Pihet (2016, 14th of March), « Questioning art and social science crossovers », Mobile Lives Forum. Connexion on 21st of February 2018, URL: <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/crossed-perspectives/2016/03/14/questioning-art-and-social-science-crossovers-3182>



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