

Visual Field Notes: Drawing Insights in the Yucatan

CAROL HENDRICKSON

This article considers the creation of visual field notes as part of the process of conducting fieldwork. By means of drawing and related activities, anthropologists immerse themselves in a field-based, generative process that engages them, simultaneously, in the acts of thinking, seeing, and doing. Insight and understanding emerge in the course of producing marks on a page that have iconic and indexical dimensions. The indexical potential of drawing(s), in particular, is noteworthy as visual signs stimulate connections between the world “out there” and issues in anthropology and other disciplines via culturally recognized signifiers. This path to understanding by visual means is never entirely predictable but nonetheless vital and creative. With theoretical inspiration drawn from the fields of anthropology, art, and education, this article is based on the experience of producing a set of visual and verbal field notes as part of a college field study trip to the Yucatan. [Key words: art, drawing, field notes, fieldwork, iconicity, indexicality, knowledge production]

Introduction

The connection came to me as I was sitting in my tent. There it was—Malinowski’s triangle. The shape that calls forth the famous photograph of Bronislaw Malinowski working in his tent in the Trobriand Islands: the geometry that frames the scene of the anthropologist, in silhouette, writing at his desk while natives on the outside look in; an image that relates to the early days of anthropology as a discipline and fieldwork as a method and also figures in current conversations in the field (e.g., Clifford 1986; Stocking 1983); and a scene that seems to support a good number of enduring stereotypes of who anthropologists are, what they do, where they live, and with whom they work.

And there I was—an anthropologist in a tent in a tropical setting, part of a college field study trip to eastern Yucatan, sitting with my notebook and pens, though with only a Spanish-speaking toddler occasionally staring in at me and tourists from the United States and Europe more nearly naked than the long-term residents of the area. At that particular moment I was catching up on notes and had just written a mundane, diary-like entry about breakfast and the lack of yogurt in the town of Tulum when I was struck by the triangle before me. Like Roland Barthes’s experience of the *punctum*, the piercing effect, of a photograph (1981:27), this detail in the scene leapt out and

grabbed me. However, unlike Barthes’s *punctum*, which he contends is not culturally coded (1981:26, 51), the elements that overwhelmed me appeared supersaturated with significances and linked to a web of experiences and ideas that had particular meaning for me as an anthropologist. While I was not looking at a photograph (as in Barthes’s case), the scene was instantly framed. It was as if I were looking at something complete and present *there* in front of me. And faced with that vista, my thoughts, and the emotions of that moment, my reaction was to draw—to draw the zippered triangle of the tent opening and to produce those lines with enough detail that a viewer could not miss the shape (Figure 1). Then there was the exterior scene—a pair of my shoes and a blur of foliage—the latter especially coming across as quick, light sketches and not very important. And inside, leading away from the tent opening and down the page to the eye of this single-point perspective, a sleeping bag, my left foot and extended left leg, my spiral notebook, and my hands, one with a pen, the other holding the notebook and resting on a piece of paper. The drawing also depicts the contents of the notebook pages: a scribble to suggest a bit of writing in the upper left corner and then the triangle of the tent flaps and a miniature notebook. At a minimum, this drawn image contains an image of itself being produced while also referring to another image that was the point of inspiration for the one I was drawing.

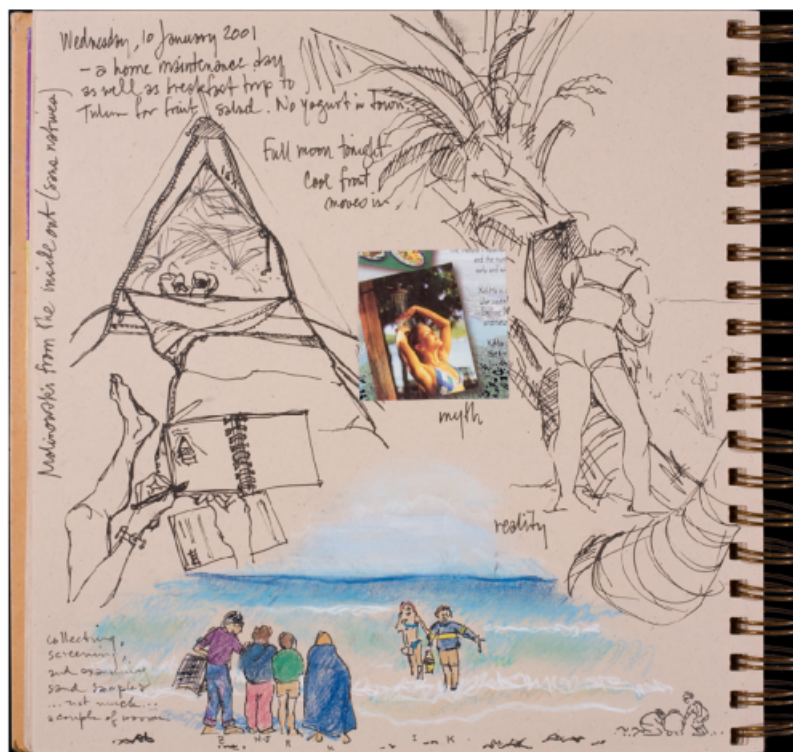


FIGURE 1. From inside the tent, a Malinowski moment.

I will return to these points and this page from my Yucatan field journal later. However, first, I want to situate the work I was doing in Mexico and outline the arguments advanced in this article. In particular (and with some irony) I write in support of drawing as a field method, one that is rich with potential on multiple levels of practice. I focus on issues having to do with “standing for” relations, with the work of Charles S. Peirce at its root, and the manner in which understanding can emerge from visual note-taking done in the context of fieldwork.

“Imagine Yourself Suddenly Set Down”

I was in Mexico as one of three faculty leaders on a field study trip, the aim of which was to introduce a group of undergraduate students to the archaeology and ecology of eastern Yucatan.¹ At that time (January 2001) Marlboro College had a U.S. Department of Education Title VI grant to internationalize our environmental studies program and this two-week trip—with home base at a

primitive campsite in Tulum, on the resort-studded shores of the Maya Riviera—was one of the outcomes of our efforts. I was the faculty member with research interests and experiences in Maya areas. Although a Guatemalanist and cultural anthropologist, I had taught preconquest history of the Maya on several occasions and was prepared to provide archaeological insight on the ancient sites of Chichén Itzá, Tulum, and several smaller excavations in the area. I would also discuss different dimensions of contemporary Mexican society as opportunities arose and encourage students to record their observations in field journals. All of this would take place with some on-the-spot improvisation² on my part because, aside from having visited Chichén Itzá twice, I had never been to any of the places we were going. I was therefore glad to be accompanied by colleagues in biology and ceramics with a good deal of knowledge and prior experience in the area. As for the students, they had backgrounds in the natural and social sciences and little to no experience doing field research, though two were preparing to head off for independent study abroad after

*Carol Hendrickson is professor of anthropology at Marlboro College. She specializes in the anthropology of art and material culture and has done extensive fieldwork in the central highlands of Guatemala with Maya women weavers. She is the author of *Weaving Identities: Construction of Dress and Self in a Highland Maya Town* (1995) and co-author with Edward F. Fischer of *Tepeán Guatemala: A Modern Maya Town in Global and Local Context* (2002). As an undergraduate math major, she took a number of courses in visual art and then attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture before turning to anthropology.*

we returned to the United States. Given this, I saw these weeks as a chance not only to teach about the area, but also to teach-by-doing, with a heavy focus on observation and note-taking. Believing that fieldwork continues to be, in the words of George Stocking, “the constitutive experience of social/cultural anthropology” (1983:70) and that record-keeping of some sort is the fundamental means by which the “doing, seeing, and talking” (Stocking 1983:101) of fieldwork are remembered and made available for future work, I was determined to encourage the students to keep field notes so they would have a record of their observations and also so they could reflect on what they had learned, begin to recognize significant patterns, and make connections to materials and ideas from other works.

To do this I made the decision back home in Vermont to make notes that were highly visual. Taking photographs as part of anthropological data collection is widespread, their use in the resulting publications common though generally limited in number and function, and the production of books and articles about photography considered from different anthropological perspectives a growing presence in the discipline. However, I intended to draw and paint, activities that are rarely discussed in books on anthropology field methods. Before the Yucatan trip, I was certainly aware of the presence of different sorts of nonphotographic visual elements in ethnographies: maps, diagrams, and charts, for example. I admired the pen and ink sketches found in a number of earlier works. I think of the drawings of gourds and bags in Evan-Pritchard’s *The Nuer* (1969) or those related to agriculture in Malinowski’s *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (1965)—though it is not always readily evident who drew these or under what circumstances. I was aware of Alfred Gell’s drawings in *Metamorphosis of the Cassowaries* (1975), and in fact remember my excitement in graduate school learning that these were part of his ethnographic production. I had also admired the different visual-aesthetic approaches Rudi Colloredo-Mansfeld employed for the drawings in *The Native Leisure Class* (1999), though I am not sure now if I had yet read his thoughtful and provocative section on “Sketching as an Ethnographic Encounter” (1999:49–56). I knew of drawings by local people collected and included in works like Claude Lévi-Strauss’s “Split Representation in the Art of Asia and America” (1963) and Gary Gossen’s *Chamulas in the World of the Sun* (1974). However, beyond works dealing with photography or film, I was generally unaware of discussions about visual or artistic production as a field methodology or much theorizing on the subject. Thus, preoccupied more with how I was going to function as a teacher while in Mexico, none of these sources really figured into my thinking as I purposefully

but rather hurriedly included in my knapsack a travel set of watercolor paints, a tube of white gouache, brushes, different pens and colored pencils, Conté crayon and charcoal, scissors, a pencil sharpener, and a sturdy spiral notebook with thick, unlined pages.³

My usual notes—scribbles in pocket notebooks meant to jog the mind or longer versions fleshed out “back home”—typically consisted of words with only the occasional quick sketch to capture some iconic sense of an object or a place. However, for the Yucatan trip, I decided to keep more elaborate visual records (along with worded ones) to be produced largely on the spot and in the presence of the students and anyone else who might be around. My thinking at this early point was rather simple: I wanted students to see me taking notes on a regular basis, to be curious about what I was putting down on the page, to engage me in conversation (either about the subject of my attention or the act of taking notes), and ultimately to be persuaded to keep abundant field records for themselves. It seemed less likely that student interest and conversations would happen if I were dealing only with words since the act of writing and the resulting written passages often act as barriers that people are reluctant or unable to transgress. Words can simply be unintelligible to people who either do not read the language or cannot read at all, though that certainly was not the problem with the students. However, there is something private and personal about words that does not invite participation. In my experience, it is rare for anyone except perhaps a child to come up to me while I am writing, peer over my shoulder, and begin reading what is on the page. For my purposes in Mexico I planned to create a more public and open spectacle of recording material using words *and* images.

In general, my note-taking experiment in Mexico had felicitous results. I drew and wrote fairly consistently each day. Increasingly students took note of what I was doing. By the end of the first week a couple of them had gone to a school supply store in Tulum to buy their own paints and begun to expand on both the nature and quantity of what they were recording. For me, at least, and this likewise seemed true of the students so engaged, the activity became an exercise in slowing down and thinking-while-seeing-while-drawing. Generally done on the spot, it was not the perfect activity for all occasions—for example, when engaged in intimate conversation or participating in activities involving the hands. However, outings that were part of our field study provided numerous opportunities for drawing (such as observing flora and fauna or Maya iconography) as did life in general on our slice of beach. In addition, fieldwork is filled with all sorts of “off” moments: down time, stretches of boredom, and periods between one activity and the next. During those moments

of focused learning or more “open” periods, drawing provided occasions to slow down and take the time to engage in active seeing-while-drawing, to pay attention to detail, to process ideas using other intelligences (Gardner 1983), and to experiment and see what might come of the effort. These were opportunities similar to those described by Tim Ingold, who, in writing about architects, states that, pencils at the ready, “they draw as they think, and think as they draw, leaving a trace or trail both in memory and on paper” (2007:162).

In hindsight, perhaps the most important outcome of the trip, for me at least, had little to do with archaeology or ecology. What has stayed with me, nagged at me, and pushed me since has been the potential of drawing as a field methodology, not in some narrow sense of a how-to technique but rather, in the words of Allaine Cerwonka (2007:37), “putting the ‘how’ of fieldwork into dialog with theory.”

Lines of Thought

The subject area of visual anthropology is large and includes the study of visual works produced by subject peoples (e.g., Kayapo film, Egyptian television, or Australian Aboriginal paintings), the analysis of visual works produced by anthropologists themselves (most often film and photography), the use of visual work as part of any anthropology research process, and the public presentation of this visual work as a final product of one’s research efforts (predominantly photography and film, again, in these last two instances). To these should be added recent collaborations by anthropologists and visual artists as well as conversations between them at conferences and in the context of edited volumes.⁴ Within this rich mix, however, there is a relative paucity of anthropological work at any level—from the collecting activities of fieldwork to final public presentations—involving visual production by anthropologists that *isn’t* film or photography, not to mention written reflections on the production and subsequent use of visual works of this sort.⁵ The drawings and writings of Rudi Collaredo-Mansfeld (1993, 1999) are a relatively rare exception, as are the drawings, paintings, and writing of Manuel João Ramos (2004; see also Afonso 2004). Both of these anthropologists have produced visual and verbal works that are important for this conversation. Others involved in such activities have yet to make their work public.⁶

In contrast to anthropology, a number of scholars in education and art departments are writing on creative visual work (which, not surprisingly, is referred to as “art” in these contexts) considered in terms of its potential for research and theorizing.⁷ In “Research Acts in

Art Practice,” Graeme Sullivan (2006), for example, discusses different ways that artwork can contribute insights to research questions depending on the persons involved and the types of work they are doing. He notes three such approaches widely under discussion, commonly referred to as “arts-based research,” “arts-informed research,” and “practice-based research” (Sullivan 2006:20–21). The first of these refers to the use of artwork to foster learning in fields other than the visual arts (in the social sciences, e.g., art making as part of fieldwork would fit here); the second has a focus on the research practices of the artist-practitioner him- or herself; and the third deals with research practices learned and practiced within the arts programs in institutions of higher learning (see also Singerman 1999). Sullivan presents a model for understanding art practice and knowledge production in which “understanding emerges within the process of media experimentation” (2006:31). His discussion, as well as those of practicing artists (e.g., David Hockney 1993; Julia Marshall 2007),⁸ contribute additional elements to my own thinking on the nature of the visual work as part of fieldwork and how it relates to and contrasts with more traditional social scientific methods. At heart are questions of how, more exactly, I can understand the visual processes of coming-to-know that I advocate as part of fieldwork practice.

In struggling with questions of how understanding emerges, I have revisited Roman Jakobson’s model of the speech event (1960). I do this not to privilege language as *the* model for all sign systems in general or visual ones in particular but because, *bricoleur* style, I can take this productive model and remake it for my own purposes. While Jakobson’s goal is a consideration of linguistics and poetics, I want to appropriate his work and generalize it, claim its potential for understanding a range of communicative events, and then use it to contemplate a very specific aspect of the functioning of visual field notes as one part of the larger ethnographic process. Briefly put, Jakobson’s model for speech events specifies that there is a speaker, someone who is addressed, a language channel used, a referent, a code or grammar, and some sort of stuff from which the message is made (marks on a page, sounds, gestures). Other anthropologists, augmenting the Jakobsonian basics, have expanded on these constitutive elements to include, for example, the social situation, social roles of those involved, the type of communicative event, and the interactional goals of the event, as these are socially defined by the different people involved (Briggs 1986:41). Taking this model and adapting it to the case of visual field notes, some of the factors involved and potentially important include the person drawing, what appears on the page, any people watching,

the materials used, the object(s) represented, conventions of representation (or mark-making), the situation in which a person is creating the work, the intended use of the piece, and the various assumptions of what the person is doing.

Thinking through this basic scenario, I can immediately see different “routes into” my own material. What I want to do now is specify my course of thought for the remainder of this article as well as mention other lines of inquiry that are promising but that will need to wait. For example, I think of the participatory dimensions of my work, of the times when I was drawing and people approached to engage in conversation because of what I was doing. As mentioned earlier, the visual note-taking was a means I used for interacting with students during our study trip to Mexico. There was also the occasion, at Chichén Itzá, when an Italian tourist approached as I sat drawing at the Platform of the Eagles and Jaguars (Figure 2). He broke the silence to chat briefly about the difference between memories of a place created by drawing versus memories of a place created by photographs. Likewise, while in a restaurant at the archaeological site of Cobá, our quiet waiter suddenly became very talkative upon seeing my notebook with sketches of the Nohoch Mul pyramid (Figure 3). He said that he too draws, that his grandfather tells him stories of the Maya kings and ritual wars, and that he turns these

stories into drawings, which he sells to people who convert them into the batik prints. Rudi Colloredo-Mansfeld (1999:49–56, 111–112, 211–212; 1993) has written insightfully on social dimensions of drawing within the larger context of his fieldwork in Otavalo, Ecuador—on interactions between the person drawing and those watching, perceptions of roles, conversations centered on conventions of representations and the appropriateness of particular kinds of work, and the value of that work within the local context. His work makes an important contribution to the literature on this subject.

Additional topics (many taken up by people outside of anthropology writing on contemporary art) that could be explored in writing or acted upon through field projects include the teaching potential of visual field notes, the embodied dimensions of drawing,⁹ the relationship between word and image on field journal pages,¹⁰ and the possibilities of co-participation in the creation of visual and verbal field records.¹¹ I, however, want to focus on the “standing-for” relationships that link the marks on a journal page with the world “out there”—Peirce’s sign and object (see Hanks 1996:45; Silverstein 1976)—and in particular the relationships specific to iconicity and indexicality. These basic types of signification underlie the functioning of a visual-communicative system such as my field notes and contribute to their active, generative, and theorizing potential.

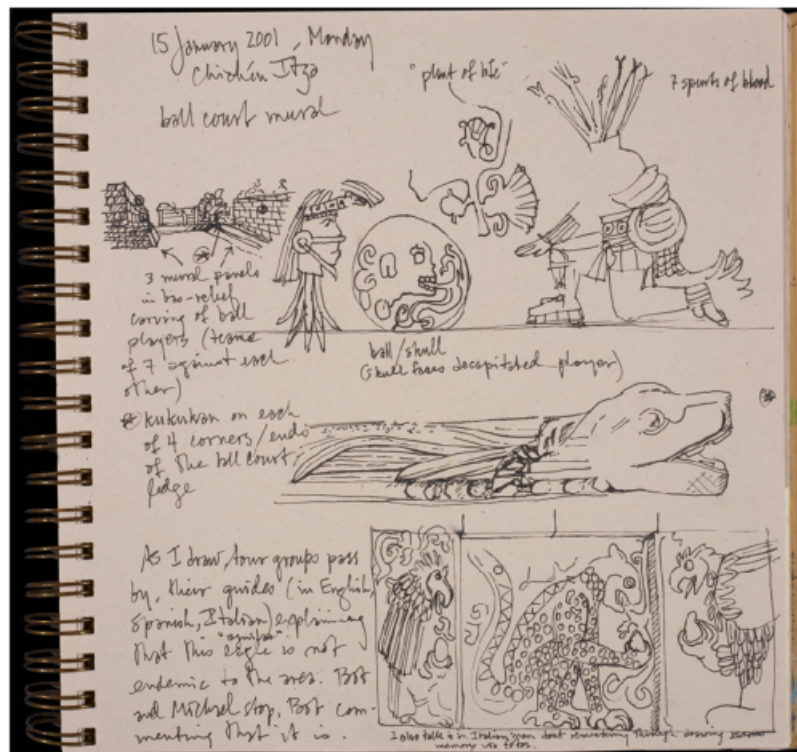


FIGURE 2. Drawings from the Great Ballcourt and Platform of the Eagles and Jaguars, Chichén Itzá.

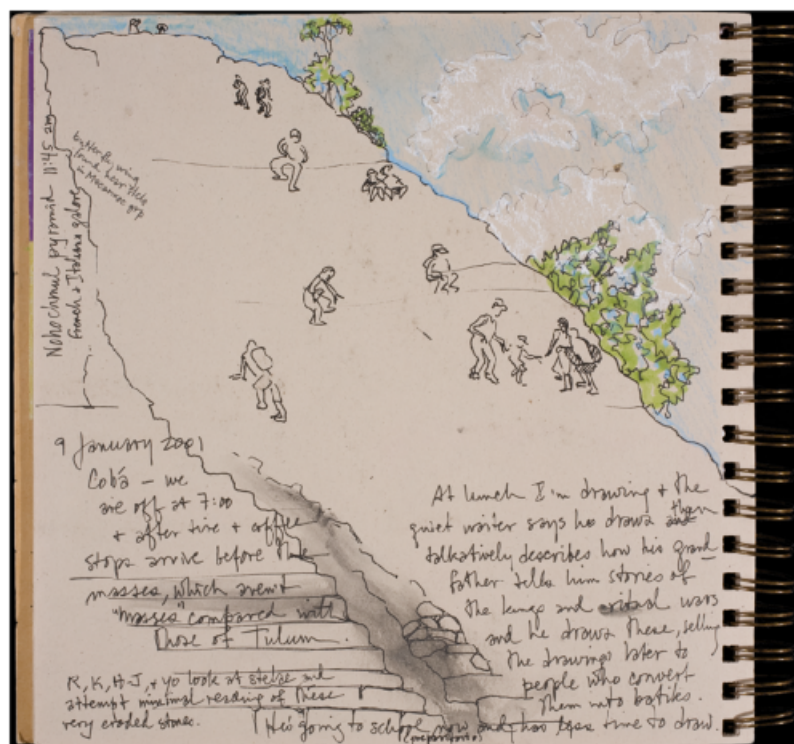


FIGURE 3. Visitors climbing Nohoch Mul pyramid at Cobá.

A Creative Problem-Generating Potential: Iconic and Indexical Dimensions of Visual Notes

Exploring the roots of British fieldwork tradition, George Stocking writes that Bronislaw Malinowski's "apparently more innovative methodological injunctions—the keeping of an 'ethnographic diary,' the making of 'synoptic charts,' and the preliminary sketching of results—all emphasize the constructive problem-generating role of the ethnographer" (1983:105). In candidly addressing issues of fieldwork in *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*, Malinowski himself emphasizes this active, creative role of the anthropologist in stating that "the field-worker must constantly construct: he must place isolated data in relation to one another and study the manner in which they integrate" (1965:317). A few pages later he adds:

As we shall see, the field-worker in collecting his material has constantly to strive after a clear idea of what he wants to know And since this idea has gradually to emerge from the evidence before him, he must constantly *switch over* from observation and accumulated evidence to theoretical molding, and *then back to* collecting data again. [Malinowski 1965:321, emphasis added]

While Malinowski's sense of the science of the discipline and his functionalist frame of analysis are dated, his comments on the rarely straight path from fieldwork to finished anthropological "product" still ring true. In a similar vein, Allaine Cerwonka and Liisa Malkki (2007) write about the improvisational nature of theorizing and use the notion of "tacking" to conceptualize the process of knowledge production in anthropology and, in particular, ethnographic fieldwork. This tacking takes on various forms: "'tacking back and forth' between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the plan and its execution, theoretical insights and surprising empirical discoveries" (Malkki 2007:183). To these I would add the potential of tacking between the verbal and the visual in note-taking, between visual and nonvisual field methods, and the creation of visual field notes as a mediating practice between being and observing in some empirical world "out there" and then theorizing and producing ethnographic accounts. I, for example, kept my field journal during the Yucatan trip and now, writing this article, constantly check back and forth from the journal pages to the books and articles piled around me, then to the computer screen, and back to the journals, reflecting on what is preserved therein to compose these sentences.

On the flip side of this, I would add that, just as I might contemplate different issues now, at home, in the presence of my journals, so too was I connected in

thought to my anthropology and art books, conversations, and more when I sat with my notebook in front of me every day in Mexico. As part of the fieldwork process, Cerwonka notes that “one always reads empirical details in the field through theory” (2007:4) and I would argue that there is no reason why those empirical details cannot be noted and contemplated by means of drawings or other visual creations before finding ultimate form in worded works, a conventional but not necessary final form for field research. Drawings (and here I use the term in a very broad sense)¹² are made from lines and colors and other marks that sit on a page. However, they are also culturally constructed as well as visually present. As Malkki notes regarding the different sorts of “data” or “facts” collected as part of the thick documentation of fieldwork, “they are a social product, whether expressed in numbers, words, images, or other media” (2007:171). Bonnie Urciuoli (1995) makes a similar point in “The Indexical Structure of Visibility.” While the focus of her article is on action sign systems and signifying acts, her ideas on visibility and invisibility are good for thinking about drawings (the products, traces, or remnants of actions that have their own set of meanings and values). Urciuoli writes that “a signifying act is not simply a bit of behavior but the way that the actors perceive its cultural intent” (1995:193). She goes on to talk about visibility and invisibility of an act in terms of what people see or do not see, understand or fail to understand, and how they accept an act as good or wrong or even something that merits their attention.

Urciuoli’s analysis centers on the notion of indexical meanings, the idea that what we see in a visual sign, for instance, is related to other elements (e.g., objects, ideas, or emotions) that can be located and, in fact, need to be understood within the context in which the sign was created (1995:189–190). I will return to this important concept. However, first I want to examine another relational concept, the idea of iconicity, with its associations to data collection during anthropology fieldwork, data collection in the social sciences more generally, and basic assumptions of what drawings “do” or represent within a broader cultural context.

In Peircean terms, an icon is something (marks on a journal page, let’s say) that relates to its object in terms of similarity. For Peirce, there are different types of icons that depend on the nature of that “similarity.” These include the diagram and the image. Thus, when I stood on the beach talking to the owner of the land where we were camping and he drew with a stick in the sand a rudimentary map consisting of a series of lines meant to show present boundaries of properties cut from ejido lands, that was a diagram. It did not really look like anything that I could see, but the relationships between the sandy scratches that he referred to as property lines

made sense to me in terms of his larger verbal account and what I gradually came to understand as the division of lands among the various landowners up and down the beach. When I sketched into my notebook what I had seen drawn in the sand (and this next to a written account of the discussion), that was an image—a brute replica—of the earlier diagram. For my purposes, that image essentially duplicated the diagram in the sand and also functioned to preserve for me a sense of the conversation that transpired on the beach.¹³

Those icons referred to as images by Peirce are more substantial in their replication of the object for which they stand. For him, images convey a sense of the brute actuality of that object (Peirce 1955:75–76). This is the quintessential notion of an image (both in a Peircean and everyday sense) as looking “just like” what it represents. This is what people regularly think of as “a drawing of X,” and my journals are filled with these sorts of drawings that “look like” things that I saw in Mexico. This is also the principle of scientific illustration underlying a (perhaps extreme) sense of the objective representation of the world, and one that carries over into the social sciences taken in their more scientific (rather than humanistic) mode (Sanjek 1990:237–239). Of course, how “just like” something a drawing may be has its limits and these are set by social conventions and needs of the moment.¹⁴ Thus, my sketch of *Lepas anatifera*, next to that scientific name (along with a drawing of a queen conch, a graph representing the Fibonacci sequence and relating to the curve of the conch shell, and an attempt to capture in ink a sense of the paths of crabs on the beach), is a reasonable visual facsimile of those particular barnacles and was drawn in the spirit of the biology that I was learning at that moment (Figure 4). It is not the scientific illustration that a biologist would need for identification purposes, but it does for me what I wanted and is accepted by third-party viewers of my journals as representing “Caribbean shells” or even a specific type of barnacle. Likewise, my sketch of part of the mural at the Great Ballcourt of Chichén Itzá (Figure 2), while lacking much detail, nonetheless allows me to return home and go to page 375 of Linda Schele and David Freidel’s *Forest of Kings* (1990), locate Schele’s much more complete and accurate drawing of the “very same thing,” verify that I was looking at what Schele and Friedel are discussing, and reread that passage. A third example of my use of iconic representation to accurately convey some sense of the world that I witnessed comes from a ritual site we visited within the Punta Laguna eco-reserve (Figure 5). Given my ongoing work on Maya dress in Guatemala, I was interested in the fact that on top of the altar stone there were three crosses, all of them “dressed” in *ipiles*, the principal garment of Maya women in the Yucatan. I

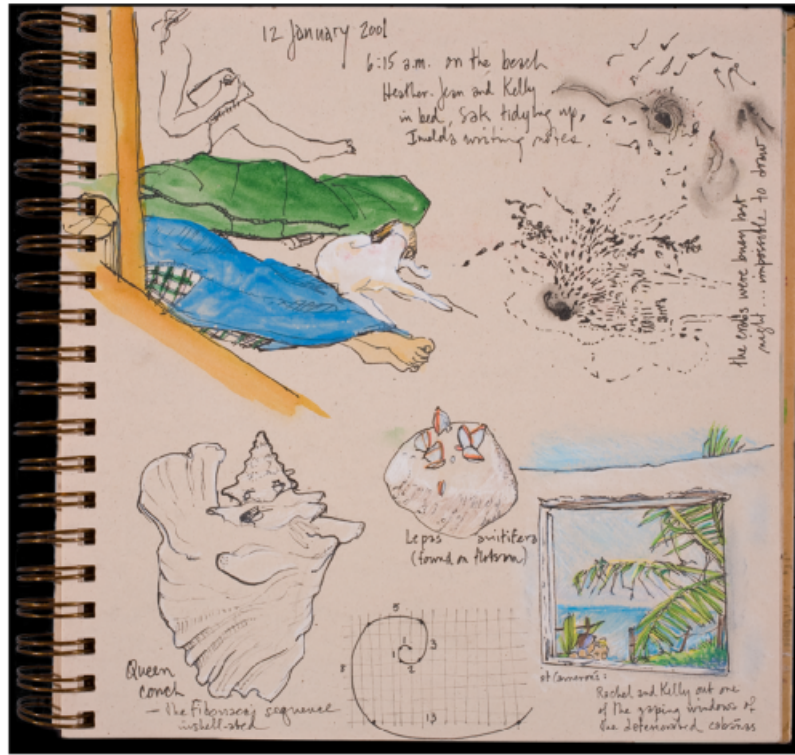


FIGURE 4. Beach life.

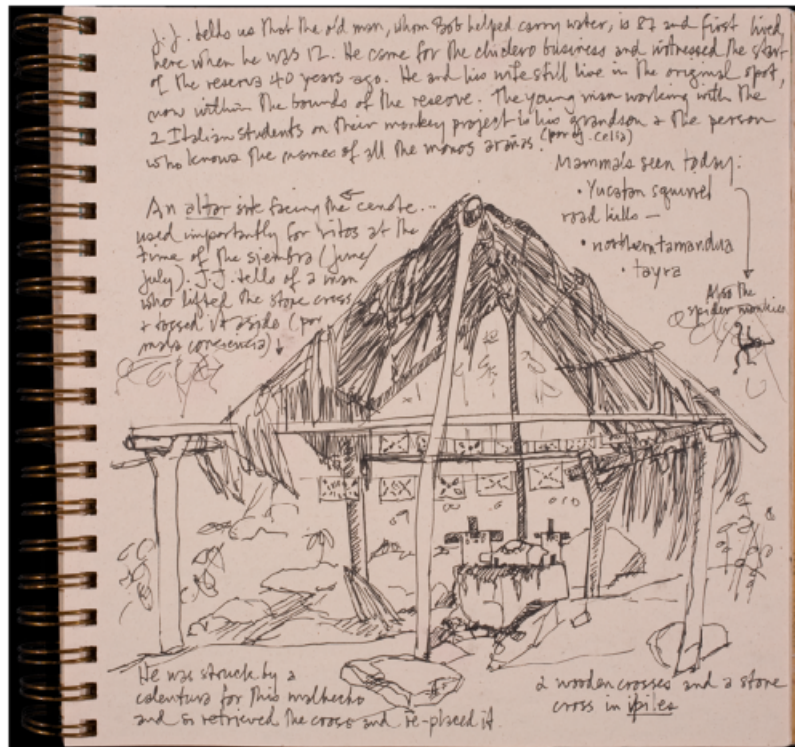


FIGURE 5. Altar at Punta Laguna reserve.

photographed the structure sheltering these and the altar in particular, but the dark forest setting, the thatch cover blocking light, the tangled backdrop of foliage, and the crowded altar space all meant that a photograph was not ideal for capturing a sense of the crosses within their larger context. Drawing allowed me to emphasize the crosses and the dresses that covered them sheltered beneath the thatched roof; and between the photographs and sketch I felt I walked away with the visual documentation I wanted.

Because conventions available for representing the world via drawings are multiple and particular conventions have strong associations with the social contexts from which they arise, iconic representations simultaneously function as indexical representations. As indexes, these drawings plus the words and whatever else might accompany them on the page point to, form relations with, and suggest different features of the context from which they come.¹⁵ Thus, the sweat- and grease-stained pages of my journal, its banged-up cover, and the distinctive lines that cover the paper surfaces speak of the heat of the Yucatan, the constant presence of the notebook wherever I went, and my own presence, with my left hand making marks with pens, pencils, and brushes. On another relational plane, once it is established that a notebook is a field journal being used to collect material on a study trip, a viewer could easily assume that I actually went to the Yucatan, that I saw what is represented, that I probably spent a good deal of time on the spot drawing and writing, and that I put entries in my journal in a particular, temporal order, and all of this without my saying a word to that effect. Taken together these basic “facts” (ones partly assumed but also established by “evidence”), which people can read into my journal, work to label and associate me and my work in different ways depending on who is passing judgment. For the purpose at hand—arguing for the creation of visual field notes as part of the fieldwork and theorizing process—the person creating the work and later viewing it, reflecting on it, and interpreting it is assumed to be, first and foremost, the anthropologist whose work it is. The indexical elements are therefore all the more rich since the associations can be very personal (and hence not easily “translated” or necessarily understood to index the exact same “objects” by other persons); they can also be ones more widely recognized by people in a particular social group with specialized knowledge (anthropologists, say).¹⁶ Therefore, personal memories can adhere to bumpy lines and blotches on the page. A “straight” line disrupted and broken because you were drawing on a second-class bus when the bus bounced over a pothole might be nothing more than a crooked line that ruined a promising sketch, something others might read as a mistake. However, the line might

also provoke thoughts about transportation, infrastructure, and class differences between those who suffer on those miserable buses and others who can afford a more comfortable ride. By virtue of such visual–physical–mental connections, leaps, and wanderings—another sort of “tacking” (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007)—the act of keeping visual field notes can become a vital part of a research triangle linking what is on a page with what can be learned in the fieldwork world with what is available from the sphere of theory and ideas.

In considering what examples to best illustrate my points, a number come to mind. There was the morning during the trip when a group of us went bird-watching in the Sian Ka’an Biosphere Reserve. I was interested in drawing birds but found myself unable to see the very animals that my colleagues were describing in detail. Frustrated, I turned to drawing the people around me instead (Figure 6). However, in the early morning light it was difficult to make out details beyond silhouettes so I began sketching individuals in terms of their outlines and blackening the interiors of these shapes. It soon dawned on me that that is how birds are often represented in bird identification books, in terms of silhouettes that characterize their bodies during particular activities (say, flying, or standing). In the case of my journal, that series of drawings not only captures people in ways that many viewers could identify as “bird-watchers” but also simultaneously refers to a representational convention—silhouettes—associated with the very activity and animals my colleagues were pursuing.

On another occasion the visual conventions of a people living at a specific historical time and place—the Maya of the Late Classic site of Chichén Itzá, in this instance—came to mind as I sat and sketched parts of the ancient city now populated with tourists (Figure 7). When I look at that page, the ideas that motivated my visual representations spring to mind; however, compared with the bird-watchers example, it would be more difficult for a third party to have a clue as to what I was thinking based solely on the drawings. The visual irony that I “saw” has to do with the use of color by the ancient Maya and the 21st-century visitors. We know, for example, that Maya public buildings were often painted in vibrant colors that have largely worn off over the centuries, leaving the structures we see today more or less a monochromatic gray. The residents of this capital city also wore ritual clothing that was a feast of hues. However, the great variety of color found at any Maya archaeological site these days is generally provided by the tourists—some of them Maya—in their tropical garb. I contemplated this idea as I sat drawing images of military men and priests in grand ritual attire carved on pillars of the colonnade at the Temple of the Warriors.



FIGURE 6. Bird-watchers.

The pillars are numerous, varied in terms of the people represented (no cookie-cutter carving here), and uniformly gray. The tourists passing through were likewise impressive in number, varied in terms of what they wore—a riot of bright colors, which in contemporary

Western society are associated with secular leisure activities versus sacred ceremonial ones (Sahlins 1976: 179–204). In my drawings I tried to give a sense of the people and place with an emphasis on color, which for me linked a set of observations to a set of research issues

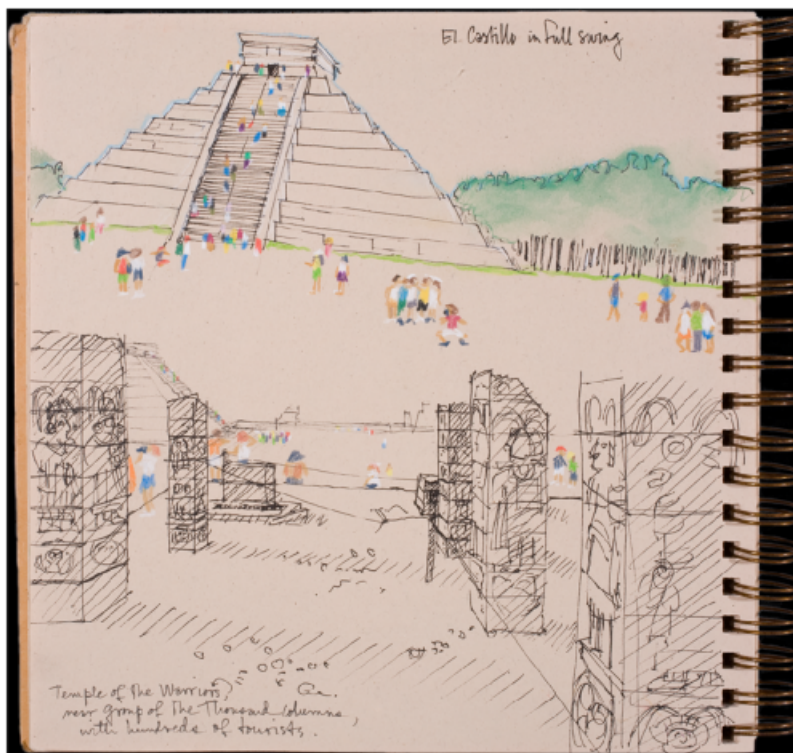


FIGURE 7. El Castillo and pillars of the colonnade at the Temple of the Warriors, Chichén Itzá.

(ancient Maya use of color, tourism in contemporary Mesoamerica) that interest me and could contribute to some future project.¹⁷

In the two preceding examples I mainly deal with the potential of images to index issues of visual convention (the first example having to do with my cultural world and the second, at least in part, with that of another group of people). In creating visual field notes, however, one is not limited to “commenting” on visual themes. Visual references are available that link to the spectrum of ideas engaged in by anthropologists. What is more, drawing, no matter how broadly conceived, is not the only means to approach subjects visually. Scissors, glue, and bits of the material world brought together on the plane of a journal page open up a universe of possibilities and enable the anthropologist to work as a *bricoleur* of fieldwork ephemera. As Allaine Cerwonka argues (2007:23–24), Lévi-Strauss’s idea of the *bricoleur* provides another model, beyond the scientific one, for imagining the work of all anthropologists. Take this idea and map it onto a not atypical fieldwork scenario where the anthropologist may harbor a squirrel’s nest of ephemera—ticket stubs, labels, leaflets, pressed leaves, receipts, postcards, newspaper clippings, posters, napkins, and more. Too precious to toss, seemingly unrelated to the “main project,” and “not serious data” by standards that people use to self-censor their actions, these objects flutter around and end up in assorted (and unsorted) file boxes and folders, often lost as materials for contemplation.

But these material miscellanea sound strangely like the raw bits of the *bricoleur*: “a collection of oddments left over from human endeavors” (Lévi-Strauss 1966:19); “the debris of what was once a social discourse” (Lévi-Strauss 1966:21); “defined only by [their] potential use” (Lévi-Strauss 1966:17–18); “retained on the principle that ‘they may always come in handy’” (Lévi-Strauss 1966:18); and utilized by the *bricoleur*, thereby “giving an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes between the limited possibilities” (Lévi-Strauss 1966:21). With this patchwork of quotes I hope not only to present a condensed sense of Lévi-Strauss’s *bricoleur* but also to emphasize that an anthropologist is always also one.

The situation in the field is therefore ripe for making collage that operates as bricolage with indexical linkages to a wide range of themes and potentialities. Leafing through my Yucatan journal now, I note where I pasted in admissions receipts next to sketches of archaeological excavations, a jay feather next to visual and verbal descriptions of the temple site near where I found it, a newspaper editorial cartoon on politics in the Yucatan next to a photo of old campaign posters and election slogans on a Tulum wall, a candle wrapper that

had been tossed in a trash heap near the Punta Laguna altar, and two playing cards from a nearby luxury resort that I found blowing on the beach and glued on a page alongside comments on beach litter, an insect infestation in the tents, and a change in the weather. The motivations for this sort of archival work vary and at different times reflect emotions, a sense of attachment, a recollection, a visual play, a classification, a kind of comment, and a general engagement with the materials and the ideas these carry. Thus, for example, after drawing the Malinowskian view from inside my tent, I sketched one of the students bathing with a camp shower, a sack of water solar-heated and hung in a palm tree (Figure 1). The image of the student crouched over and coping with the trickle of gravity-fed, semi-saline water as a “shower” contrasted with the soft-focus view of a bronzed and glowing woman dreamily stretching upward to a tropical beachfront shower as presented in a tourist brochure that I had picked up during the trip. The striking difference between the two situations—shower as struggle as we were experiencing it and shower as Edenic bliss in the tourist version—was too remarkable to leave without comment and I cut up the brochure and glued the snippet next to my drawing as part of the overall page.

My major attempt at collage-cum-bricolage (Figure 8) centered on an assortment of labels and wrappers from foods that we ate (or, in the case of the Maya-brand matches, something we used to prepare food) organized and glued in place over a two-page journal spread. (I also drew small images of five items that did not come in manufacturers’ packaging: bananas, tortillas, bakery breads, fruit ices, and avocados: handcrafted drawings for handmade or nature-made objects?) Labels from soda and water bottles, candy and cookie wrappers, portions of a juice box and Bimbo bread bag, a teabag tag and envelope, a popsicle stick with company URL, and labels from cans of refried beans and chilies—these represent a sample of the packaged foods that were a staple of our diets in Mexico. As material objects they were clearly trash, items tossed by virtually everyone (locals and tourists alike) into waste receptacles or on the ground where they became litter—“rejectionments” (Dolphin 1999:167) or Mary Douglas’s matter out of place (1966). For reasons that are still difficult to articulate, I was attracted to this flotsam of everyday life: for personal-historical reasons (e.g., a fascination with the Bimbo bear and memories of Bimbo trucks in Guatemala); because the bright labels dazzled me (so many reds and yellows); the Spanish language . . . these items were not from home; and the suggestion of “serious” issues attached to each scrap (globalization, urbanization, media marketing, women’s changing roles, and the impact



FIGURE 8. Collage and bricolage.

of NAFTA on the local food supplies). The list could continue as these pages filled with materials prompt thoughts and function to create a sense of the social world from which they come.

At this point I return to the image in my journal that I began discussing at the start of this article (Figure 1). The sketch of a person sitting in a tent with a notebook and pen is something that could be understood by virtually anyone who is likely to see it. The eyewitness perspective and severed arms and leg might be seen as quirky or interesting, but iconically there is nothing tricky about “getting” what the image is about. On an indexical level, however, I see the image as potentially loaded with associations for anthropologists and related types, while those associations—at least the ones that are most important for me—pretty much would not exist for anyone else. Thus, in contemplating the image I riff (Malkki 2007:183) on ideas having to do with Malinowski, the history of anthropology, George Stocking, fieldwork, British fieldwork, living in a tent, working in a tent, Indiana Jones (does he live in a tent?), privacy in fieldwork, writing notes, writing culture, reflexivity, notebooks in notebooks, indexical chains, and the iterative and generative potential of field notes.

But this generative potential of thinking through notes does not occur only when we are back home and ready to write. It is a central part of the process of creating field notes—verbal or visual ones—from the start. After drawing the tent scene in my notebook I wrote “Malinowski from the inside out (sans natives)” vertically, up the left side. (And I know this temporal sequence to be the case as the image of my notebook drawn in my notebook

does not include that writing.) I was thinking of the photograph of Malinowski in his tent then and knew that it included a group of Trobrianders on the outside looking in and that my own circumstances differed from his in that aspect. They were on the outside looking in; I was on the inside looking out; the camera was more or less where I was; and Malinowski, darkly silhouetted, sits perpendicular to those sight lines, ignoring all of us with his gaze.

After that flash of drawing and reflection, the connections temporarily faded and I went on to sketch other things: a colorful version of our group screening for specimens on the beach (drawing as documentation here) and the aforementioned student using our camp shower, the pen and ink image of her juxtaposed with the cutout from the tourist brochure showing a far more romantic notion of the activity (employing the comparative possibilities of images and media). The implications of seeing the world and “reading” through it to issues of importance for me as an anthropologist, who also reads and looks and works across disciplinary borders, stuck with me via that triangle in my tent and has been one of the driving forces in this much longer exploration of the potential of visual field notes.

Images Are Good to Think

At heart this article argues for the creation of visual notes as part of the fieldwork process. As anthropologists stretch beyond some of the more usual topical boundaries of the discipline and write about new visual media used by those with whom we study, we need to ask ourselves to what

degree we explore and employ these and other visual means to think through and present our own work. Producing visual along with verbal field notes, for example, has allowed me a different sort of active engagement in the worlds of people and places “out there” as well as ideas “in my head”; the two are brought together—shown to be inseparable—as marks on the page trigger thoughts, which in turn push me to draw and look and converse and think more and in different ways. This generative, iterative, reflective process is ever-present and ongoing: keeping visual field notes is not a field method (if there ever truly was one) that can be conceived back home and then executed by some random person in the field. It takes shape during the passage of time and within specific social and cultural contexts. In fact, it is those very moments and contexts that get represented—“stood for”—iconically and indexically through the drawings. Because of their cultural nature, not everyone will be able to see all of the connections, but their potential is there and ripe for the thinking.

This article is therefore the product of the very process it describes and advocates. Originally undertaken as a means for engaging students in the field, the activity of creating visual field notes ended up thoroughly engaging me as well. In thinking through what I draw, whom I draw, with whom I draw—the list could go on and the methodological and theoretical implications for these various connections are wide open for further investigation—I have been led into multidisciplinary realms of reading and thinking that I never would have imagined when I first packed those pencils and pens. I am now a convert and want other people to go out and try their hand at thinking and experiencing the world through visual notes, and to engage in a larger conversation about this practice of visual anthropology.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank my colleagues and students at Marlboro College for their input, for seeing the potential in this process, for encouraging me to explore different ideas, and for enabling me to make this article possible. Early in my attempts to articulate issues, I received a real boost from conversations during and after my poster presentations at the 2003 and 2005 annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association. Finally, two anonymous VAR reviewers provided enormously helpful insights; they improved this article immensely. Support for this study was provided by a Title VI grant from the U.S. Department of Education to Marlboro College as well as Marlboro College funds.

Notes

¹ As most anthropologists will recognize, but others may not know, the title of this section is the opening to Bronislaw Malinowski’s famous account of his entry to the field

as described in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1961:4). The “imagine” construction has echoes in more contemporary anthropological writing. See, for example, Kathleen Stewart’s *A Space on the Side of the Road* (1996).

² The use of the word *improvisation* here foreshadows my discussion of Allaine Cerwonka and Liisa H. Malkki’s book *Improvising Theory* (2007).

³ A note on materials: What I did not have that has ended up being an essential element of my supply kit is glue. Conté crayon and charcoal are generally too fragile for fieldwork and end up a blurred mess on the page (and the facing page too). I now leave them at home. On this first trip I also used conventional brushes and water—often seawater—held in a plastic cup. I have since found the perfect solution for painting while traveling in the form of water brushes (essentially plastic tubes that hold water and screw onto brush heads).

⁴ Recent edited volumes that include at least some visual production on the part of an anthropologist or a collaborating visual artist include Banks and Morphy (1997); Grimshaw and Ravetz (2005); Pink, Kürti, and Afonso (2004); and Schneider and Wright (2006). Note also the conferences “Fieldworks: Dialogues between Art and Anthropology” (Tate Modern 2003) and “Art/Anthropology: Practices of Difference and Translation” (University of Oslo 2007).

⁵ It is hard to know how many anthropologists draw as part of their fieldwork if those drawings never appear as part of public work. Doodling can be another largely private form of visualizing anthropology ideas. Cartoons are another mode (e.g., Errington 1994).

⁶ In 2003 and 2005 I presented posters on visual field notes at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association. A number of people—often younger anthropologists, recent graduates, or people still in school—stopped by and told me of their efforts, which included graphic novels and assemblages as well as drawings and paintings done as part of fieldwork. At that time, none of this work had been made widely public.

⁷ I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing me to this recent literature. I should add that I have refrained from labeling the visual production of anthropologists “art” not as a commentary on the quality of the work or because I think one needs an art degree to be called an artist. It stems more from teaching experience where students protest “But I’m not an artist!” when I suggest drawing as part of fieldwork. I counter this by saying that they do not need to be an “artist” but rather should think of making marks that remind them of what they see, where they are, and what they are thinking. These dimensions of the act of drawing also point to the indexical nature of the process and resulting work.

⁸ The bibliographies of articles by Sullivan (2006) and Marshall (2007) lead to other works in this active conversation on ways of knowing and the potential of art practice as research. I should add that my focus here on works from outside of anthropology is not meant to imply that anthropologists have nothing to say on this issue. I think

immediately of the recent book by Tim Ingold (2007), who likewise contemplates different paths to understanding and the place of drawing in these. For example, he discusses what he calls wayfaring versus transport (the former having to do with movement and a way of being while the former focuses on destination) and the parallels between those forms of travel and drawing (2007:75–84). Later in the book, after introducing David Pye’s distinction between “workmanship of risk” and “workmanship of certainty,” Ingold points out the parallels between both these and drawing a line freehand versus drawing one with a ruler, which he then says are parallels to the ideas of wayfaring versus transport discussed much earlier (2007:161).

⁹ See, for example, Wilson’s work on the hand (1998) and Farnell’s edited volume (1995) on action sign systems, and dance in particular, for broad insights on this subject. In-gold (2007:131–136) considers the embodied (and drawn) dimensions of Chinese writing and the parallels between calligraphy and dance.

¹⁰ Note the work by Simon Morley (2003), which examines the presence of words in modern art.

¹¹ Bishop’s edited volume (2006) explores the idea of participation in contemporary art.

¹² What exactly gets labeled a “drawing” changes over time and space. However, quoting himself, Michael Ginsborg offers “with deliberate provocation” the following: “Paper is not the only support for drawing but it is by far the most widespread. Drawings are made with graphite, charcoal, chalk, or ink and with brush or pen. Drawing is flat and monochromatic and it does not predominantly address colour relationships” (2003:11). Later in this article I also talk of making collages, which if not technically “drawing” is nonetheless a visual process ripe for thinking through the fieldwork experience.

¹³ In *Telling About Society*, Howard Becker (2007) has a chapter entitled “Charts: Thinking with Drawings,” which in large part focuses on diagrams in Peirce’s sense. See also Tufte (1983, 1990, 1997, 2006) for oft-cited works on the visual display of social scientific information.

¹⁴ Botanical illustrators working with field biologists know that they are not representing a plant in every possible way, that one needs to know what is important for a particular group of people for whom the illustration is intended and then to draw selectively so as to emphasize those features (Bobbi Angell, personal conversation).

¹⁵ I have picked up Alfred Gell’s *Art and Agency* (1998) just as I finish this article. Only a few pages into the book, I already know it includes important discussions about indexes, inferential schemes, and “the social relations that obtain in the neighborhood of works of art” (Gell 1998:26). I can not pretend to do justice to the book’s complex arguments now and so only mention the volume for the record and look forward to including it in my future thinking.

¹⁶ David Hockney states something similar for artists: “It occurred to me once, looking round the new wing of so-called primitive art at the Metropolitan Museum, that if you are an artist and you look at something, some sculp-

ture of a figure, there is always something you would see that an art historian or critic could not” (1993:15).

¹⁷ Peter Steinhart writes about the practice-based, process-oriented, and forward-looking nature of drawing and quotes artist Edgar Degas saying, “You have a high conception, not of what you are doing, but of what you may do one day: without that, there’s no point in working” (2004:11). Elsewhere Steinhart writes of drawing in order to learn (2004:55).

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