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Title: The Tipping Point Project: A Case Study in the Collaboration between Medical Anthropology and Art

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Project Development

The “Tipping Point Project” brings together the collaborative efforts of Professor Ellen S. Ginsburg PhD, Medical Anthropologist, and Professor Jennifer Hall, Information Artist, to create a new paradigm that merges anthropological investigation with art practices.

The project began in 2004 with lengthy discussions and a collaborative vision and goal shared between Ginsburg and Hall to bring together the disciplinary voices of anthropology, art and technology that would result in a multi-layered work culminating in seven interactive sculptures.

The project pivots around the assumption that small/large changes in health status can, over time, have a significant impact on the lives of artists and their community. Ginsburg’s collections of health narratives from artists having ties to the South End community in Boston, MA

serves as the content to inform Hall’s kinetic sculptures with ‘tipping points,’ or triggers where change would take place through interactions provided by the viewers.

The Anthropologist as Artist: The Artist as Anthropologist

In recent decades anthropology, along with other intellectual disciplines, has been overwhelmingly concerned with meaning, a topic which is likely to remain near the centre of anthropological study of art for the foreseeable future (Coote & Sheldon 1992). As a collaborative venture, our project provided a unique venue to exploit the synergy between medical anthropology and contemporary (new media) art, not as fields, which create products, but as processes, which explore how people generate, organize, and transfer their knowledge of the world. Our collaboration between anthropologist and artist uniquely identifies both as practitioners, who, in this case, appropriate and represent others. Since its inception, anthropology has drawn from a variety of methodologies and theories from other fields, such as literature, biology, linguistics, history, geography, and theatre; however, anthropological work in the field of art has tended to treat visual culture as the object of investigation (Coote&Sheldon 1992), (Gell 1998). Contemporary art is based in the conceptual and is most often, interdisciplinary. Setting a framework for the interdisciplinary nature of art becomes part of a narrative that contextualizes art as a product unto itself. The ‘Tipping Point’ collaborative navigates outside a singular discipline and seeks to form a new construct, a hybrid that combines expertise and redefines the language of each individual discipline. In the “Tipping Point Project”

anthropology and art no longer occupy opposing sides of a subjective/objective divide. Through this collaboration, the representational strategies of both anthropologist and artist have been altered, and differences and similarities between ethnographic authority and artistic authorship have been refigured. “Anthropology, traditionally, has been a discipline of words” (Mead 1975). Specifically it has been rooted in text. However, at times it has incorporated film, photography, and audio recordings, either as a featured format such as ethnographic film, or to supplement writing for fieldwork reports or publication.

Contemporary art also incorporates many media and extracting product from concept requires the use of a variety of research methods. The collaboration asks and attempts to answer the question as to what differentiates the work of the anthropologist and artist. We discovered that the answer lies not in the methods (what media are employed or who talks to whom), but rather, each respective professional field defines the outcome. These expectations then guide both anthropologist and artist to create product that fits the requirements of their practice, often missing the opportunity for authenticity of experience. “Anthropologists have remained largely unconcerned with these processes, or even actively hostile to them, in creating their own works, whether films, photographs, or books” (Schneider&Wright 2006). It is safe to say that most anthropologists use new media data in the objective form, producing synthetic or clinical documentation of their work. The “Tipping Point Project represents a new way of addressing the meanings health issues have in our experience, notably

the significance of objects, events, tools, the flow of time, the self, and others.

In a similar vein, contemporary artists have been known to use data collection methods developed by anthropologist. The artist is expected to further manipulate their findings to fit the contemporary art constructs of late 20th century art. “The viewer and voyeur are interconnected” (Rush 1999). The issues of real vs. artificial, physical vs. virtual, authentic vs. manipulated are familiar art consequences. In the context of this understanding the focus of artwork returns exclusively to process and loses the opportunity to reconnect with the original threads of research. A positive outcome of interdisciplinary projects is that it allows participants to revisit their own disciplines while exploring particular concepts from the other.

Methods

Professors Ginsburg and Hall decided that the South End neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts would provide an ideal location in which to collect artist’s health narratives, as the community is the largest art community in New England. Ginsburg using traditional ethnographic anthropological field methods collected the health narratives over a period of seven months. Ethnographic fieldwork requires the researcher to become part of the unit of analysis, in this case the community of artists living and working in and near the South End. To a great extent, the strength of this method (participant observation) is that the researcher becomes the instrument for both data collection and analysis through her own experience: first and most important is

the establishment of rapport with the informants, getting close to the people to be interviewed in the community, and making them feel comfortable with the anthropologists presence. Specifically, Ginsburg's goal with this community of artists was to collect data, analyze, and synthesize it for Hall. Fifty narratives were collected over a period of seven months. The data was collected by means of observation, natural conversation, various kinds of interviews, (structured, semi-structured, and unstructured). These data are then subject to qualitative analysis, where Ginsburg examined the collected information to discern patterns and arguments that would help explain the patterns. Ethnography typically relies on a few key informants rather than a representative sample. The informants were selected from volunteers based on their willingness to share their stories. Criteria for selecting the informants were that they were artists that had worked or lived in the South End community.

Out of the fifty narratives that were collected, a decision was made to use seven. This decision was made not only for methodological reasons, but logistical ones—a need to conform to space constraints that would be necessary to exhibit the sculptures. Once a number was agreed upon, Ginsburg, Hall and Hazen (robotics system's lead) examined all the narratives looking for patterns and goodness of fit. It was agreed that seven sculptures would be sufficient to represent a community and enable a full representation of the health narratives. The narratives collected by Ginsburg focused on discovering if a tipping point existed for the artist, a point in the artist's life where change took place as a result of a change in health status. The narratives ran the gamut from the powerful, provocative to the

mundane. “Narrative, of course, is among the most common and most powerful instruments we possess to confer meaning upon experience” (Warhol 1975). Some of the narratives were self-conscious, illness told as a personal liberation, some provided insight, great permission and absolution. The interesting point as it relates to our project is the telling of the story offers the informant an opportunity to employ the full resources of narrative reconstruction. It is also important to consider that the experience of illness is always framed in the culture in which it occurs.

The processes of observing, collecting and editing may be similar in anthropology and art while the interpretation and subsequent creative directions chosen may be particular to the discipline. Personal narratives have been thought to be the domain of both the anthropologist and artist. Narratives provide a kind of raw material of the world that both anthropologist and artist can sift through, making meaning by personalizing or subjectifying their collection.

All of the artists one way or another had recast their lives story in response to certain tipping points. In all of the narratives it was my aim to accommodate mutuality, sharing attentiveness to the experiences of the informants as they shape their stories. As the project team came to quickly learn, narrative is often indispensable in helping us grasp what our deepest values are. Important values often are discovered unintentionally and emerge as the twists of a particular life story. The narrative approach focused on the artists themselves as agents who enact choices. Of significance is how their lives are changed by a transformative or series of transformative events.

The phenomenological approach seemed well suited for the research in that it is designed to “illuminate the specific, to identify the phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors” (<http://www.anthro-phd.dk/web>). The descriptions, analyses and interpretations of the artists’ journey become our tradition represented in their art. This method was ideal for Hall and Hazen as the material translated into a coactive experience. The health narratives were configured into an interactive art installation of seven sculptures that are represented by mechanical tipping points. Robotic elements serve to reflect the flexible relationship between such issues as body/health, community/individual, and public/private self. Interactive software enables the sculptures movement both independently and collectively. Ultimately the installation, “The Tipping Point: Health Narratives from South End Artists” involves gallery goers in a cumulative expression of community.

How The Tipping Point Project Works

When a person enters the gallery, in the blink of an eye, their movement is collected and stored; seven passive infrared sensors sited at various heights on the door accomplish this. The sensors capture the speed and mass of individuals entering and leaving the gallery. The data collected by these sensors is sent to a central compilation point and retransmitted to each of the seven sculptures. Within a few seconds the tipping machines begin to move. The movement of the machines is the difference of motion pattern from the person entering the gallery and the state of the gallery before that person enters. Should another person enter the gallery, who walks exactly the same

way, is exactly the same height or is similar in volumetric ways, there will be no difference to the master machine doing pattern recognition, and therefore, the movement of the tipping machines will find stasis. If three people enter the gallery in relative succession, the pattern they create is now so different from that established by those already in the space, that a change would be triggered. In fact, few people are the same and more people entering or exiting the gallery will create some of difference that will signal movement to the tipping machines. Furthermore, the master board retains several differences of time and in a cumulative way. Through this robotic/software interface people are becoming part of past gallery goers and will affect future gallery goers. Each visitor leaves a trace that affects the space, and hence the experience of succeeding visitors.

The community of motions is not a series of individuals who have activated each tipping machine but rather a collective gesture where an individual can create great change in the larger pattern of motion. This pattern stays true to how tipping points are identified in many disciplines such as health, economics, and group dynamics.

Conclusions and Challenges

This interdisciplinary collaboration presented many challenges. It required crossing professional boundaries into what is often unfamiliar territory and challenged us to drop preconceived notions of understanding, learn new languages, and importantly to see problems through a new lens. Our collaboration required work teams from different disciplines to push through

the boundaries of any one particular profession.

Perhaps most important was establishing a consistent philosophy and set of personal values among team members that were in sync with each other. All the project participants agreed that the success of the project would be enhanced utilizing the diverse perspectives, expertise, and resources of the team requiring relinquishing control of the project and sharing with others. Hall and Ginsburg called on the expertise of Blyth Hazen as systems robotics lead and later, Arnaldo Hernandez software programmer to round out the team.

Most recently the contemporary anthropologist and art educator has been challenged to develop innovative approaches for using texts in the classroom, even though these are linear forms of representation which allow for a minimal amount of interactivity with the material. The “Tipping Point Project”, which is ethnographically based, offers a format for learning that is reliant on different data and different media, the sequence of which is not fixed, and which do not impose restrictions on the ways in which the data are assessed. No piece of scholarship exists without authorship or narrative, but in regards to this project it is important to understand that these usual hallmarks of ethnographic authority remain implicit as opposed to explicit within the body of the work. The strength of doing away with an anthropological reliance on explicit, linear narration (such as with text) is that taking this risk may enhance the user’s ability to sift through the material by their own directives, and to formulate their own analysis of the material without being

constantly exposed to various indicators of authorial control.

The interdisciplinary collaboration between the anthropologist and artist creates a mechanism that allows users to subject the data to multiple interpretations. Ethnographic methodology suggests that we look at culture “as an assemblage of texts to be interpreted” (Geertz 1973), (1988). While Geertz presumes that the ethnographer should remain the expert who provides the interpretation, in this project the ethnographer’s analysis acts simply as a meta-referent. Thus, our work reflects the ethnographer’s experience of a cultural encounter, while making available a multiplicity of possible readings, to which users bring a variety of approaches, and out of which user build their own analysis. The collaboration between author and reader requires the former to relinquish control to some extent over how information can be manipulated. This project opens up discourse on the reflexive nature of ethnography and goes beyond the linear format of a “thick description” of culture (Geertz 1973).

It is hoped that the installation evokes such questions as; how can we decipher the ambiguities surrounding the body? How do we obtain precise inform about ourselves? How can we maintain our individual integrity? The investigation of these issues regarding the body politic-objectification of the individual and sometimes contradictory discourses surrounding certain technologies is essential to reinterpreting the place of the individual as a corporeal entity in society. The gallery exhibition and incorporated narratives posit some of these questions in the examination and representation of how we can all perceive the tipping point as an

agent of change. The project represents the participating ongoing interest in ways in which technology intersects with and affects our perception of our bodies, our lives, our imaginations and our culture. More specifically this project explores how contemporary culture is reconfiguring the dichotomies of nature/artifice, real/virtual and body embodiment.

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