AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONSIDERATION of ethics in project art practices

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Prefatory note

The text below is comprised of two parts. The first, which appeared in 2005 as an Antinomian Press publication, is a short work on the definition of project art and is followed by some ethical considerations of that practice. This is reproduced below. In the current publication, however, it is accompanied by a new introduction and commentary written by Laurel George, a cultural anthropologist teaching at New York University. Laurel's text compares the ethical considerations list with the concerns faced by anthropologists in the field.

For the sake of clarity, the original introduction and the definition of project art from 2005 will appear first. This will be followed by Laurel's introduction and then the list of ethical considerations. In order to correlate her commentary to the specific sentences she is refereeing to, the original list will appear in the left hand column and Laurel's commentary will be in the right hand column.

I would like to express my gratitude to Laurel for her interest and willingness to participate in this stage of the development of the ethical considerations text and to the Kadist Art Foundation for their acquisition of the Digger dug archive (of which this text is a part) which has allowed for its further development.

Ben Kinmont
Paris 2011

Introduction

The following texts began in a class entitled “A Project Art Practicum” from the Fall, 2005, semester at the California College of Arts. The sections entitled “Towards a definition of project art” and “Ethical considerations in project art” were based upon an assignment I gave to my students towards the end of the semester. Written by the class as a group, the sentences were summarized into the lists below, edited by myself, and then approved by the class. They represent a culmination of a semester of class discussions around ethics and project art. During the semester students conducted their own project work and presented that work to the class. They also made group presentations on project work by others, including Christo, Creative Growth (an arts community center for developmentally disabled adults in Oakland, California), the Guerrilla Art Action Group, Santiago Sierra, and Tim Rollins and KOS. Since that time the texts have been used by students in a second class entitled “The Third Sculpture” at the San Francisco Art Institute and have been slightly altered and added to.

I consider the two lists on project art (definition and ethics) to be a work in progress and, therefore, welcome all comments (bkinmont@gmail.com). Although project art is often defined by its involvement with others its practitioners are usually very independent. This independence has often come out of a need to figure things out on one’s own and to do so without institutional support. As a result, for every definition of that practice there are ten exceptions, and for every suggestion as to what constitutes something ethical, there are 100 disagreements. Still, however, I do believe it important to at least try to get something down on paper, if only to aid in the discourse about the nature of this practice which some call “project art.”

Artists are increasingly refocusing their attentions away from institutional critique and towards working with people outside of the art world. These efforts often fall into two different categories: one, projects where artists are trying to help others and, two, projects where artists celebrate that which is already happening around us. In both cases, in order to begin to critique and understand this new genre called "project art," it is important to move towards a definition of what constitutes project art and, insofar as projects work with others from different value structures, it is also important to develop a sense of the ethics of our interactions with others. It is towards this discussion that the following text is offered.

Ben Kinmont
Sebastopol, CA
12 December 2005

Students thus far involved in the text are Bridget Barnhart, Angela Deshazer, Lee Pembleton, Julia DeGuzman, Anne Devine, Jennifer Durban, Joyce Grimm, Amanda Herman, David Maisel, Jessica Martin, Bobby McCoid, Ford Mindon, Eran Nave, Boyd Richard, Mark Rodriguez, & Stephanie Summers.

Towards a definition of project art

Project art considers value structures outside of the art historical discourse.

Project art involves the public and the artist in a dialogue that usually occurs outside of the art world.

Project art often involves artist and non-artist collaborations and public research.

In project art the community influences the content and structure of the project as the project takes place in the community.

Project art changes in response to particular environments and situations.

Project art is not necessarily contained by normative art exhibition spaces but rather may take place on the street, on the move, or in your home.

Project art is often defined by its duration and interaction with others and is not limited by physical dimensions.

Project art is often ephemeral or transitory.

Project art often encompasses activities that are normally considered tangential to or in the service of the art-making process (e.g. the phone call, the letter, the research, the conversation, & the failed attempt).

Project art does not set out to create an art object to be sold and resold.

Project Art uses social structures to achieve relationships that are often unattainable in other art mediums.

Human Subjects: An introduction to commentary on “Ethical considerations in project art”

When Ben approached me about this project, one thought was to have a group of my anthropology students comment on his CCA students' text, “Ethical considerations in project art.” In a very successful 2006 visit by Ben to my graduate-level Anthropology and Aesthetics class at NYU (which included a lively conversation about relational aesthetics, both the phenomenon and the book by Nicolas Bourriaud), we discussed the parallel experiences and shared concerns between artists engaged in project work and anthropologists engaged in fieldwork. The fundamental similarity is that both project artists and anthropologists rely upon interaction with other human beings in order to generate their work.

Central to project art and fieldwork are the relationships between authors and participants, i.e., the artist and the community in which s/he realizes the project and the anthropologist and the community in which s/he works. Using human encounters as the source for and the very stuff of an artwork or intellectual project is tricky proposition indeed, one shot through with potential problems of power imbalances and unequal gains. At the very least, it is a relationship in which each party occupies a unique position and has a different stake in the interaction and its outcomes.

In 2010, when Ben and I re-visited our conversations about including anthropology students in a discussion about the shared concerns of project art and anthropological fieldwork, I didn't have a ready group of graduate students, but I had just taught an undergraduate class on the Ethics of Workplace Research. For this class, I required students to take NYU’s Human Subjects test, which is required of all university scientists and social scientists, including anthropologists, engaged in research with human beings. Here students and researchers learn the professional standards expected of those working with other people. They are also introduced to the history of medical and psychological experimentation with human beings that has made clear the need for protections for individuals who participate in research projects.

Ben's students' "Ethical considerations for project art" enter into a historically-rich and multi-disciplinary conversation about standards surrounding the ethics of doing research with human beings. Accordingly, some of the key tenets the CCA students' text are also those that show up in the widely-accepted codes and institutional rules that guide social science researchers, including: avoiding doing harm to people; giving complete information to participants (informed consent); and maintaining confidentiality when the participants so desire.

What impresses me most about the CCA students' text is that it is simultaneously broad (accounting for the infinite range of potential projects) and succinct, even elegant, in its economy of words. It functions in ways remarkably similar to the various (much lengthier) codes of ethics generated and published by a wide range of professional associations, within academia and beyond.

Below, I use my own training as an anthropologist and my fieldwork experiences together with the American Anthropological Association's current Code of Ethics (http://www.aaanet.org/issues/policy-advocacy/Code-of-Ethics.cfm) to guide my commentary on "Ethical considerations for project art." In order to highlight the relationship between anthropological fieldwork concerns and those of project art, my annotations consist largely of excerpts from the AAA Code of Ethics keyed to correlative entries in the CCA text. I also include my own thoughts on further similarities between project art ethics and anthropological ethics, and comment on places where the well-trodden ground of anthropological entanglements with institutional sponsors and diverse communities of interlocutors could possibly provide guidance for project artists. Finally, I ask questions aimed at getting both anthropologists and project artists to consider how ethical considerations might push both disciplines further in producing rigorous, humane and fair projects.

Laurel George, Ph.D.
Brooklyn, New York
January 23, 2011

[1]The Nuremberg Code (1947), an international code of research ethics, resulted from awareness of Nazi medical experimentation on war prisoners. Two of its key principles -- voluntary participation and avoidance of harm and suffering -- still guide research with other human beings. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Belmont Report (1979) is the standard for U.S. researchers; its central tenets are: respect for persons; beneficence (not only avoiding harm but also "doing good,") and justice, by which is understood the opportunity for all to benefit of from research results. (http://www.nyu.edu/ucaihs/tutorial/2/)

[2] The relationship between project-based art and anthropology is a long-standing interest of George Marcus, a leading figure in the rethinking of the ethnographic project, especially the ways in which we represent others. Recently, Marcus has considered how the design of performance and installation-based art projects could provide models for designing and representing anthropological research. In a sense, just as Ben is looking to anthropology for insight into project art ethics, Marcus looks towards art for new ideas about fieldwork design. Marcus' 2010 article "Contemporary Fieldwork Aesthetics in Art and Anthropology:" calls upon anthropologists to rethink the classical, site-bound fieldwork model to consider one that is more interactive, co-authored and reflexive (i.e., taking into account the position of the researcher). Marcus, George E. (2010) "Contemporary Fieldwork Aesthetics in Art and Anthropology: Experiments in Collaboration and Intervention," Visual Anthropology, 23:4, 263-277.

Ethical considerations in project art

Project art should carefully consider the context in which the project is occurring.

When participants are involved in a project the participants' needs should also be considered.

Laurel George:

Simply recognizing the integrity of the community and people with whom one is working is a necessary starting point. Responsibility to others is defined early in the AAA Ethics Code: "Anthropological researchers have primary ethical obligations to the people, species, and materials they study and to the people with whom they work. These obligations can supersede the goal of seeking new knowledge, and can lead to decisions not to undertake or to discontinue a research project when the primary obligation conflicts with other responsibilities, such as those owed to sponsors or clients." (AAA Code of Ethics, III.A.1). What would be the ramifications for project art if this were rewritten to state that ethical obligations could "supersede the goal" of creating an art work, or that an art project should be discontinued when the primary ethical obligation to participants conflicts with what is owed or promised to museums, grant-makers, galleries, or collectors?

Projects should not harm participants physically or mentally.

This echoes perfectly: "[Anthropologists'] ethical obligations include: To respect the well-being of humans and non-human primates." (AAA C. of E, III.A.1.)

Projects should minimize personal risks and hazards to collaborators, the public, and the environment.

"[Anthropologists'] ethical obligations include: To avoid harm or wrong, understanding that the development of knowledge can lead to change which may be positive or negative for the people or animals worked with or studied." (AAA C. of E., III.A.1.)

The artist's intent and actions in a project should not contradict the known will of the participants.

"[Anthropologists'] ethical obligations include: To consult actively with the affected individuals or group(s), with the goal of establishing a working relationship that can be beneficial to all parties involved." (AAA C of E, III.A.1) Interpreting this AAA Code as a call for mutual benefit may be reading too much into it, but given the history of anthropology and of art-making that uses other human beings, the goal of mutual benefit is potentially a radical one. What would that result in? Truly collaborative anthropology and art projects?

Information given to participants should be accurate.

This succinct principle gets to the heart of informed consent, an ideal that is a reaction to the legacy of exploitative scientific and social scientific research that relied upon deception. Informed consent is central to the ethical codes of many disciplines and institutional bodies, including universities, that oversee and fund research. New York University's Institutional Review Board, for example, defines it thus: "Informed consent is a person's voluntary agreement, based upon adequate knowledge and understanding of the relevant information, to participate in research." (http://www.nyu.edu/uchais/tutorial/glossary).

The AAA Code of Ethics also highlights the centrality, but also the dynamism, of the informed consent process: "Anthropological researchers should obtain in advance the informed consent (my emphasis) of persons being studied, providing information, owning or controlling access to material being studied... Further, it is understood that the informed consent process is ***dynamic and continuous*** *(my emphasis); the process should be initiated in the project design and continue through implementation by way of dialogue and negotiation with those studied." (AAA C of E, III. B. 4.)*

Participants should be treated with dignity and artists should try to express appreciation for the participation and contribution of the participants.

Projects should respect confidentiality and privacy where applicable.

The previous two considerations point to the tension between including specific individuals as participants in the work and maintaining their privacy when they don't wish to be identified. "Anthropologists must determine in advance whether their hosts/providers of information wish to remain anonymous or receive recognition, and make every effort to comply with those wishes." (AAA C of E III. A. 3)

When funds are changing hands in the project, establish a bookkeeping strategy ahead of time, open or closed, with clearly defined guidelines for allocation of funds and profits generated.

Be clear with participants as to what can and cannot be provided as part of a project.

The question of monetary and other tangible gain is also taken up in the AAA Code of Ethics: "While anthropologists may gain personally from their work, they must not exploit individuals, groups, animals, or cultural or biological materials. They should recognize their debt to the societies in which they work and their ***obligation to reciprocate with people studied in appropriate ways*** *(my emphasis). (AAA C of E., III.A.6.)*

Explain to participants how their material and contributions might be used afterwards (e.g. in a publication, archive, exhibition, or website) and obtain consent where necessary.

When the abovementioned material is being used, make an effort to help the participant understand how their contribution will be viewed, understood, and used.

When projects involve production and authorship, be clear with yourself and the participants about where the authorship lies.

Honor commitments made through a project and don't make commitments that can't be fulfilled.

When conducting a project that is engaged with a participant, whether long or short term, think ahead to how to end the project.

Try to be aware of the long-term consequences of the project, if any.

In cases of dispute, attempt to resolve the problem through dialogue before resorting to legal action.

Do not abuse your authority as artist of the project.

Project art creates materials that publicize (make public) the project and participants. These materials may end up in places and be subject to eyes and interpretations that the participants, and indeed the artists themselves, could never predict. Anthropologists, using the language of the sciences, talk about dissemination of results and the potential effects on participants asserting: "The results of anthropological research are complex, subject to multiple interpretations and susceptible to differing and unintended uses. Anthropologists have an ethical obligation to consider the potential impact of both their research and the communication or dissemination of the results of their research on all directly or indirectly involved." (AAA C. of E., VI. I.)

This awareness of consequences draws attention to the potential forlong-term and wide-spread effects of artistic projects. Academic researchers are in the habit of thinking about these effects in positive terms like "posterity" and "contributions to the field." Anthropologists are told that they "should also make every effort to insure preservation of their fieldwork data for use by posterity." (AAA C. of E., III.B.6.) This excerpt falls under the heading "Responsibility to scholarship and science," suggesting that there is a third player, a larger domain beyond the researcher/participant dyad, to which the researcher is contributing and to which s/he is also responsible. Who or what would the parallel domain be for project art? The art world at large? The smaller community of project artists? Is there a parallel domain or is this one of the places where social scientific research and project art are fundamentally dissimilar?

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Laurel George holds a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology from Rice University. Her work addresses the professionalization of dance in the U.S., with a focus on career and life narratives of experimental choreographers. She has conducted fieldwork in non-profit arts organizations and at the National Endowment for the Arts, where she also served as a Dance Program Specialist.

The role of the aesthetic dimension in contemporary U.S. society and an inquiry into the relationship between ideology and institutional structure are topics central to her research and teaching. She was the Faculty Fellow/Assistant Professor of Art Worlds at NYU's Draper program from 2005-2008, and is currently an adjunct professor in NYU's Gallatin Division and College of Arts and Sciences. Her work on dance and cultural politics appears in the volume *Corporate Futures* (1998) and in the journal *Terrain* (2000).

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