

Exhibition Review

A Gallery of Prototypes: Ethnographic Terminalia 2010

Curated by Craig Campbell, Fiona P. McDonald, Maria Brodine, Kate Hennessy, Trudi Lynn Smith, and Stephanie Takaragawa. Shown at the Du Mois Gallery and Barrister's Gallery, New Orleans, November 2010.

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No longer content to theorize the ends of the discipline and possibilities of new media, new locations, or new methods of asking old questions, those associated with Ethnographic Terminalia are working in capacity to develop generative ethnographies that do not subordinate the sensorium to the expository and theoretical text or monograph.

Ethnographic Terminalia is an initiative designed to celebrate borders without necessarily exalting them. It is meant to be a playful engagement with reflexivity and positionality; it seeks to ask what lies beyond and what lies within disciplinary territories. As an initiative to bring contemporary art practices in closer proximity to forms of anthropological inquiry, Ethnographic Terminalia is primarily concerned with creating opportunities for the exhibition of non-traditional projects. ~*Ethnographic Terminalia 2010 Catalog*

In his review of *Ethnographic Terminalia 2009: Philadelphia*, Lucian Gomoll's only criticism, a gentle one, concerned the limits imposed by "a serial spatial order that is conventional to art galleries," and he suggested that the curators "might explore the performative and critical potential of looking at alternative histories of exhibition and spatial articulation" (2010:35).

I did not have the pleasure to see *Ethnographic Terminalia 2009: Philadelphia*, but *Ethnographic Terminalia 2010: New Orleans* certainly seems to have taken this suggestion to heart. While *ET2009* encamped in the Ice Box Project Space (a massive former walk-in freezer) of Crane Arts, one of the largest contemporary art venues in Philadelphia, *ET2010*, although involving more artists (29) and installations (25) than its previous

iteration, appeared under more modest circumstances. The exhibit was split across two gallery spaces in New Orleans, the great majority (23) of the installations appearing in a shotgun-style home in the Freret Corridor (Du Mois Gallery) and the other two at Barrister's Gallery in the St. Claude Arts District.

Ethnographic Terminalia seems to me one of the most important and innovative commentaries on the representation of anthropological knowledge to have appeared in the long history of the American Anthropological Association (AAA). Coordinated with, but always at a distance from, the sprawling bazaar that the annual AAA conference has become, Gomoll describes *Ethnographic Terminalia* well as "an ongoing, collaborative project that features inventive installations by ethnographers, artists, and individuals who might identify as both [which] explore the boundaries of ethnography, challenging traditional disciplinary notions of what we might classify as anthropology or art" (2010:32). I would highlight especially *Ethnographic Terminalia's* interest in exploring "non-traditional" engagements of the senses and space (physical and conceptual) in the representation of "ethnographic" (I use the term broadly) encounters.

I came away from *Ethnographic Terminalia 2010* feeling as though I had toured a gallery of prototypes, of small-scale experimental versions of more complex artifacts to come. In the notoriously difficult section of *The Savage Mind* devoted to François Clouet's representation of Empress Elisabeth's lace collar, Lévi-Strauss writes that all art works "on a diminished scale to produce an image homologous to the object" (1962:24). He contrasts this to the method of science in that the latter would have worked on a real scale, "inventing a loom." Lévi-Strauss emphasizes that the artistic miniature is "not just a diagram or blueprint"; rather, it synthesizes an "intimate knowledge" of the morphology of its objects with "properties that depend on a spatial and temporal context" (25). This method "accentuates some parts and conceals others, whose existence however still influences the rest," leaving the artist "always mid-way between design and anecdote." It would be fair to say that, like Lévi-Strauss's miniatures, all the works in *Ethnographic Terminalia 2010: New Orleans* engage

complex problems on a more cognitively and experientially manageable scale, trading the appearance of scientific precision for the exploration of accentuation and concealment. Yet, I would hope that the *Ethnographic Terminalia* collaborators would share my skepticism that they are therefore stranded “mid-way” between design and anecdote. I saw a much more fertile range of juxtaposition and hybridization here, from photographic flirtations with the “merely” anecdotal to works whose materializations more resembled blueprints and looms. In these borderlands between art and anthropology, the miniatures are obviously restless, pluralizing the modes through which the intimacies of anthropological knowledge can be imagined to communicate. They operate, I would argue, in a prototypical mode, as experimental assemblages of form, function, and effect, designed to provoke new insights and ways of understanding.

There were many examples of these prototypes on display at *Ethnographic Terminalia 2010*, each with its own methodology and its own sense of audience and impact. Stephanie Spray’s video, *Untitled*, which I confess was one of my personal favorites in this show, was marvelously able to capture the 99 percent of life experience—those mundane moments of waiting, boredom, and uncertainty—that comprise no more than one percent of written ethnography. Dona Schwartz’s photographic series, *In the Kitchen*, offered provocative glimpses into the complex energy of two families merging. Kate Hennessy and Richard Wilson’s road video, *Active Pass to IR9*, explored the processual dialogical negotiation of understandings of place, much as Roderick Coover’s *The Last Volcano* treated in anecdotal form the complex interrelationship of landscape and memory. Candy Chang’s *I Wish This Was* stickers suggested a different mode of prototype, elegant, and portable, capable of extending the mission of *Ethnographic Terminalia* beyond galleries and into a variety of creative and personal engagements with cityscapes. Material experimentation was extended in a number of productive directions, for example, Ryan Burns’s *Profane Relics*, a powerful archaeological transect of the residues of war and resource exploitation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Simon Rattigan’s *The Skull Re-construction Project*, which assembled and disassembled a human skull made of found materials surviving in the cracks and streets of London. Ian Kirk-

patrick’s *Transfer* and Nicola Levell and Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas’s *Seduction* experimented very evocatively with aesthetic mash-ups that captured, respectively, the global traffic of images on blue and white ceramic plates and Haida narratives in the graphic form of Manga.

Given the mission of *Ethnographic Terminalia* to “develop generative ethnographies that do not subordinate the sensorium to the expository and theoretical text or monograph,” I was particularly curious about the experiments that sought to move prototypically past more familiar assemblages of vision and sound. These stood out against the majority of works that continued to rely heavily on more established ways of viewing and listening. Like Chang’s stickers, the tactility of Fiamma Montezemolo’s *Belonging Machine* was remarkably solvent of the norms of audience and thus able to evoke the presence of belonging in a very unique way through its play upon memory, touch, and sound. Lina Dib’s *Recantorium* and Trudi Lynn Smith’s *Finding Aid* both utilized, although in very different ways, sensitivity to the spatial presence of the audience as an index for communicating memory and meaning. All of these were extremely effective beginnings. My own gentle critique of *Ethnographic Terminalia 2010: New Orleans* would run something like this: Could reordination of the sensorium not be pushed even farther? Could more be done, for example, with tactility and interactivity in future projects? Could more be done with scent, a sense so central to the experience of anthropological habitation and knowing and yet so absolutely absent from textual, visual, and sonic accounts?

In sum, *Ethnographic Terminalia 2010: New Orleans* was deliciously paradoxical. At times teasing, at times fulfilling. At times playful, at times somber (especially the minimalist power of Susan Hiller’s *The Last Silent Movie*). And then, there was the paradox of a growing abundance of marvelous experimentation miniaturized to the level of a shotgun home. Given the size of Du Mois particularly, I was pleasantly surprised that the environment of the gallery did not produce a sense of confinement. Quite the contrary, it felt exactly like a family home straining to contain its transformational adolescent energy. That energy greeted you at the door, drew you deeper into the convivial sanctums of the family room and kitchen before turning you out into the party in the yard. In this respect, the choice of gallery space and that space’s organization proved a marvelous

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crystallization of the entire intervention. *ET2010* operated very well as a contemplative para-site of AAA 2010, but it also functioned more basically as an escape, a domestic sanctuary from the sensory excess of New Orleans (welldocumented by Robert Willim and Anders Weberg's *Elsewhereness*) and from the anxiety-inducing corridors of AAA. I can imagine that some visitors might have felt overwhelmed by the informatic density of the *New Orleans* show and that others might have missed the possibility of larger-scale environmental installations as at *Ethnographic Terminalia 2009: Philadelphia*. But, in my experience, the gallery of prototypes was an immensely effective and egalitarian curatorial assemblage, one in which quiet corners never felt marginal. Above all, *Ethnographic Terminalia 2010: New Orleans* was immensely inspirational. As someone who remains very

invested in the craft of traditional assemblages of text and voice, *Ethnographic Terminalia* makes me want to photograph an anecdote, to draw a blueprint, to connect somehow to the fascinating experiments and artifacts that one feels certain are still to come.

References

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