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EDITED BY
G R E T C H E N B A K K E
M A R I N A P E T E R S O N

B L O O M S B U R Y

Bloomsbury Academic

An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square	1385 Broadway
London	New York
WC1B 3DP	NY 10018
UK	USA

www.bloomsbury.com

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First published 2018

© Selection and Editorial Material: Gretchen Bakke and Marina Peterson, 2018

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-4742-8920-7
PB: 978-1-4742-8923-8
ePDF: 978-1-4742-8922-1
ePub: 978-1-4742-8921-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record the this book is available from the Library of Congress

Cover design: Adriana Brioso

Cover image: Spatial Intervention (1), 2002, by Nicole Six & Paul Petritsch. (© DACS 2017)

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

Printed and bound in Great Britain

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Nightly Jelly filled her notebooks: scraps of fact, fiction, essay.

—*Fay Weldon, Splitting*

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Formless Matters: A User's Guide

Gretchen Bakke and Marina Peterson

An unusual book, *Between Matter and Method* might be easy to mistake for an edited volume, especially given that its primary contents are indeed a series of single-authored essays. It is however a work in common—a multi-authored musing on the nature of creative action, and a set of essays (as in trials or attempts) toward bringing what we feel (respectively and each differently) matters to anthropology as a discipline unfolding. Imagine an origami swan flattened back into a piece of paper. Imagine a whale putrefying on a beach. Imagine ethics. Language. Story.

More prosaically, our aim was to reorient the terms of interdisciplinary encounters between artists and anthropologists. To accomplish this we brought together a select group of anthropologists who incorporate critical and creative dimensions of artistic practice into their research methods and ethnographic writing: Bakke, Campbell, Dib, Dumit, Greene, McLean, Murphy, Myers, Peterson, Sansi, Stewart, Thompson. All are accomplished ethnographers whose work is driven by concerns with creative practice, made manifest in their conceptualizations of arts, aesthetics, and anthropology, in their interdisciplinary collaborations with artists, and in their writing. Some also work on the arts in a conventional sense, but this was not, in the end, what mattered.

In framing the volume we—the editors—were more interested in borrowings of artistic *process* emergent in contemporary anthropological practice. Likewise, there was an alignment regarding the hoped-for after-effects of this process. Just as an artist's method is integral to how he or she makes an object, a sound piece, or a performance that also does "work," which is to say that it reveals something not already evident in the world, so too are many contemporary anthropologists seeking to produce something that does its own work, in and on the world. Thus this volume differs from much recent work on the intersections between anthropology and art, insofar as our emphasis is on a critical conceptualization of process rather than on subject matter or outcome.

Between Matter and Method embraces the inchoate and (seemingly) illegible, resisting both form and container. Moreover, while it draws from previous lineages

insofar as it takes aesthetics as a fundamentally social category, it is committed to an understanding of art as social process with forms and qualities as inherent to not separable from worlds.

These were the ideas guiding the project. What happened then, once the participants had been approached, and (much to our delight) agreed to contribute, we said to them: Write the piece that you always wanted to write. Write the thing that's bothered you. It's a book about art and anthropology. Then they did. We all did. In the meantime we also wrote a grant that funded us to go to the Banff Centre for the Arts in the Canadian Rockies for a week (thank you Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada!). There we workshopped the papers. Nearly everybody said: I am not an anthropologist of art. Then they presented. Art is there, anthropology is there. Mostly issues relating to matter are there. Everyone wrote about matter, matters, mattering. Most also wrote about method, methods, methoding. The Anthropocene is lurking about the edges of it all. There was a kind of collective desire for bloat, for breaching, for sensors, for unmaking, for doings that don't map onto productivity or reproductivity. There was fat, shit, whales. It's a weird book. Matter and a kind of dense playfulness are what bind it. That, and Georges Bataille, who crops up everywhere. The question we turned to after two days at Banff was: "What is happening?"

We had talked, walked, and talked; sat, eaten, listened, and laid on the floor together; and maybe we were a little tired, a little punchy. Something was happening, and it took shape, then, in and through words. Some things—ideas, words, objects, events—had percolated to the surface, had resonated across pieces, had lodged themselves into our minds, had come into focus, skittering across surfaces or drawing things together. We had words—words on a whiteboard, words written, some later wiped away. We could select from what remained. Orange and green and brown words, plucked from the scribbled and erased board, the palimpsest board, generative as sounds and as thoughts. We wrote for twenty minutes. Fast. Each of us threading a thread through the words that remained. There was silliness in all our seriousness.

The resulting pieces, edited in minor ways for clarity, have been scattered throughout this book, though most are gathered in the section entitled "Another World in this World." Someone had written this phrase on the board and no one had erased it. These short pieces foam around what we had been doing, as a still emergent process, as writing, as practice. It became clear that, just as our essays and our free-writing play with form, the book should as well (thank you to Bloomsbury, and especially our editors, Jennifer Schmidt and Miriam Cantwell, for allowing



us this play). We won't claim artist status as such, though many of us are also artists—sound artists, visual artists, musicians, dancers—these practices inform our writing. Some of the writing is about these practices even, but we imagine that if anthropologists could give creative form to what they (we) do as anthropologists one way that it might look is like this. This is our stab at giving shape to that imaginary. And though not all of us feel we have a writing practice, or aspire to experimental nonfiction, in all the pieces something is definitely happening in the writing.

After Banff, we all went back to our four corners and rewrote what we had. So though there is a kind of fibrous connectivity between things there is no real order. Throughout, the essays interweave conceptual arguments with case studies, making strong arguments for modes of analysis and interpretation that emphasize emergent qualities and processes over essentialisms and ontological claims.

Walking Route

The book opens with **Thompson's** "Labyrinth of Linkages," a rich and nuanced introduction to the overall project, in particular the "space of resonance" between artistic practice and anthropological endeavor. An essay about the essay, it is also the textual partner to an essay film made by its author. In emphasizing "*method* over genre," Thompson insists on the essay as "an open-ended investigation" that moves in and out of the "material at hand." The essay asks, "What method does the matter demand?"—a method that is investigative and ambulatory rather than definitive. **Stewart** hones in on the "method of mattering"—"a concrete conceptuality of objects, events, and bodies"—that takes shape across skittering surfaces of affect, of attunements that draw together worlds of people and things, of stories and ways of making sense of things that don't seem to make sense. Stewart's writing *enacts* a mattering of bodies and words, of "ordinary contact aesthetics of being in a world with other things and people."

Skittering off in another direction, a mattering of bodies takes shape quite literally as the grotesque of shit in the performances of GG Allin, whose punk aesthetic of misanthropy raises the profound question for anthropologists: must we like people? Here **Greene** adopts something of a punk (academic) voice in writing, minus the misspellings of his epigraph.

Dumit improvises with and around theory, using notecards as a form that allows a written dance around a quote presented as object. As objects, the quotes are openings, presented as a means of moving from one practice to another,

across sets of social norms and affordances. The cards themselves are a game, a process, but they are not random or indeterminate. Rather, moving from a discussion of improvisation in comedy and dance into race, he draws out the politics of improvisation—a racial politics that is world making, and from which anthropology might learn. **Myers's** essay is about an oak savannah in Toronto that has become a city park. In part concerned about the colonial nature of ecological restoration and the erasure of Indigenous land care practice, she writes toward a sensorial multispecies ethnography, providing a guide to becoming sensor. She attunes herself to the inexorable unstoppable slowness of the vegetative, and takes us with her, into interactive practices that open our sensorium to the engagements of people ways with plant ways. The outcome is an enacted methodology that is ethical all the way down.

Murphy turns to the work of designers and architects to ask about the role of intervention in anthropology. Why, he muses, do anthropologists not allow intervention? How is this built into a code of ethics, and what would it mean to intentionally intervene in one's field site—or to acknowledge the ways in which we are already doing so? This, Murphy suggests, puts pressure on notions of "objectivity," a logic of stasis and determinacy that we are all in some way here pushing against. **Sansi's** discussion of the gift is a continuation of his larger project that emphasizes what contemporary artists and anthropologists have in common. Both Murphy and Sansi draw out commonalities between anthropology and what is now referred to as social practice art—artistic modes of engaging people, and engaging "the social" as such. For both, engaging artistic modes of sociability and social engagement are productive for considering not only a reflexive critique of anthropology, but the possibility of disciplinary transformation.

"Another World in this World" gives pause. It intervenes in the book form by presenting process through writing and image. We've gathered most of the texts generated during a twenty-minute writing exercise—on our last day in Banff, Alberta, Canada ("hungry mountains lurk in the background," [Greene])—written in response to the question: "What's happening?" Some pieces toggle between form and formlessness, between getting stuck—at dead ends, with hardened concepts—and moving through. Others play with form, explicit as they index this impulse across the book. Two of these pieces stand as an introduction and an index to the volume as a whole. Writing, reading, guffawing, questioning was all of a moment, much like other academic convenings. Here, however, we amplify the gesture, the unformed thought, the twinkling of exchange—all themes that run throughout the book. Our hope is that, taken together, these can resonate as something ongoing that is re-engaged and re-entered by this group



and with others, as the substance of anthropological practice and of thought as creative, common work.

A tour de force of world making, **Campbell's** essay is based on a grant application for an artwork in the form of a collective garden. Burying the ruins and giving sprout to futures both built and grown, it plots a post-Socialist, turnip-filled theme park, where cartoon characters scamper around Lenin's forearm, poking up from underground. This buried monument to a Soviet past marks a turn toward the future, forming the center point of small-scale private agriculture open to all who care to garden. **Peterson** gives us a series of short prose poems that play with the exclusions and margins of the techno-rational formulations of noise pollution. Attending to the physicality of the ephemeral, she engages what Barthes refers to as "formless," dwelling "in the vagaries, the gaps . . . , where the sensible moves back into sense." **Bakke** falls off the deep end, giving us a scholarly novella about the comparative method in two registers: science fiction and history of technology. It is about social norms and self-making, breakfast cereal and the poverty of the young. Whales figure prominently. **Dib**, a practicing sound artist and anthropologist, records a park and plays it back in the park. This is an essay about that process, about sound and materiality, about a sensorium of concrete, rain, touch. It is about getting lost, dwelling in surfaces, listening and letting sound still. **McLean** ends the book with a BOOM. An exploding whale, an artist becoming octopus, becoming lobster, becoming prawn, a festival on a remote island, the sea pressing in. Fat. Art. Artfat. This is the soul of the book.