Immersive Technologies and User-Generated Content:
From Environmental and Social Media Education and Activism to Digital Bodies

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The fourth issue of the Journal of Visual and Media Anthropology presents new unpublished research results from research conducted in the years 2017 and 2018 by students of the Digital Anthropology course of the MA program in Visual and Media Anthropology of Freie Universität Berlin. Their work can be seen to focus on three significant themes within digital anthropology; immersive technology, the expansion of mobile media, apps, and digital technologies into our internal biological processes, and the amplification of communication through virtual platforms that often extends to offline spaces, specifically regarding activism and education. These works not only focus on the digital cultural phenomena which they study, but include reflections on the online/offline reality of ethnographic research. They simultaneously provide a challenge to, and reinforcement of, traditional approaches to ethnographic research, including expanded methodologies and definitions that are necessary for doing digital anthropology.

Recent years have seen a strong focus within anthropology on exploring the effectiveness of immersive digital technologies for conducting and representing ethnographic research (Pink, 2009, 2011; Horst and Miller 2012; Pink, Horst, Postill, Hjorth, Lewis, and Tacchi 2016; Cruz, Sumartojo, Pink 2017). Hongeung Jung's short film, *The Riders 360°*, contributes to this focus with regard to the use of 360° camera technologies. Employed by a food delivery app company and attaching 360° cameras to his vehicle and helmet while delivering food to customers across Seoul, Jung explores the potential of this technology to augment the traditional method of participatory observation. In doing so, he provides a sensorial study of the experience of some 'gig economy' laborers, offering a heightened visibility to an anonymous market.

Lim Paik Yin's collaborative project *in[formal] interchange,* also engages new immersive digital technologies in ways that deepen and expand traditional approaches to anthropology. The aim of collaborative ethnography can be understood as attempting to employ collaborative practices between researcher and informants at every stage of the ethnographic process (Lassiter 2005; Rappaport 2008). A significant way in which such practices have been limited is by the separation of the ethnographic process into two distinct stages: field work and 'writing' this work up away from the field. While collaboration is largely seen as a possibility in the former it is

considered more difficult in the latter. Lim Paik Yin's short film documents her attempt to open up a dialogue between 12 southeast Asian performance makers using YouTube Live, a streaming platform. Through the use of this digital streaming technology, Yin can be seen to explore collapsing these previously separated stages of the ethnographic process into one live collaborative moment.

The second theme taken up by contributions to this issue concerns the use of digital technologies in accumulating and transmitting the biological data of the contemporary subject. That we carry these technologies, such as mobile phones and wearables, with us everywhere, interacting with them constantly whilst allowing them to listen in on and influence our daily life, has already received significant attention across the social sciences. Britte Van Meurs' film, *The Freed Hand,* investigates this issue from a fresh and playful perspective. In Meurs' study, hands are the way in which human beings access the world- the way through which we interact with concrete objects. However, in her provocative and poetic view, the aim of digital technologies, like smartphones and computers, is to free our hands from such objects, replacing them with keys and algorithms. In this way, Meur's work "emphasizes the embodied qualities of digital society" (Collins 2017).

If Meurs' film can be seen to ask 'how am I when digital technologies free my hands from the concrete physical exterior world?', Buse Yildirim's film, *Circa*, goes further, asking 'how am I when my internal biological processes are accessed by digital technologies?' It is only recently, with the advent of digital tracking apps, that these same technologies which we carry with us everywhere have gained access to these processes. Yildirim's work details her own complex relation to a period tracking app on her smartphone. By providing the app with data on her menstruation cycle and, in return, receiving "health insights", Yildirim at once notes a sense of heightened awareness and manageability of her biological processes whilst at the same time citing a dislocation from them as a result of the increasing attention and trust she gives to the technology rather than her own bodily rhythms. Further underlying this work are contemporaneously crucial questions for the social sciences; In allowing the tracking of our internal biological processes by digital apps, what are we really handing over, to whom, and to what ends? Are we welcoming a new stage in capitalism (Srnicek 2016; Zuboff 2015), what some are pointing to as the "capitalization of life without limits" (Couldry and Mejias 2018)?

The third theme considered by the contributions in this issue is that of the amplification of communication through virtual platforms. Several of these works focus on social media platforms as field sites and explore a multi-sited ethnography of social media and physical space, focusing on expanded modes of communication and the ways in which they increase connection, both virtually and physically. Reconciling online and offline realities as multi-sited ethnographic inquiry allows anthropologists to achieve an understanding of embedded and embodied digital culture (Hine 2015). While social media have been studied extensively by anthropologists, the contributions to this journal focus on the most recent developments in the social media "fieldsite"

and the ongoing effect it has on communication and placemaking.

Reflecting on social media's role in identity construction and the communication of self, Claudia Quigua's article, *Visual Representation of Rural Landscapes of Colombia: Redefining Territorial Misconceptions on Instagram*, examines how social media and virtual communities, like Instagram, can influence the construction of a collective identity through the representation of the self, and utilize this identity to inform cultural understanding and education. Michael-Oliver Harding's article, *Immigration, Teendom & Identity Building Online*, explores how social media plays a key role in the adaptation of immigrant teenagers. Both of these articles highlight the ways in which social media platforms are being used as tools for expressing self-representation and defining community in relation to physical location and ideas of nationality.

Five contributions in this edition look at the flexible boundaries between virtual and physical spaces. Lillian Dam Bracia's film, influencer, reflects on the construction and performance of self on Instagram as a simultaneous and mutually affecting online and offline process. Dam Bracia interviews Caroline Viehweg, a social media influencer, who accounts for her Instagram feed as a representation of her "ideal" self, but states that this "ideal" self is an inspiration to her "real" offline self with this inspiration manifesting in lifestyle decisions and actions which, then, come to be reflected back in her Instagram feed. In this way, influencer considers Instagram as a space where representations of an "ideal self" and a "real self" might co-exist. Diana Troya's film, *YASunidos: Diversity in Conservation*, explores the diversity, interdisciplinarity, and intersectionality in environmental conservation activism in Ecuador and the activists' utilization of online modes of communication and organization. It looks at the representation of the natural environment in digital activism and the role of social media in physically organizing activist movements. Shannon O'Rourke's article, *Seeking Space and Place: Experiences of Online Engagement Among Queer Women in Cape Town, South Africa* focuses on understanding the significance of virtual platforms in the lives of queer women in Cape Town. This multi-sited ethnography deeply explores the importance of online and offline spaces to facilitate connection for marginalized groups. Lorena Novoa's film, *SOME/BODY IS DANCING,* looks at the use of social media platforms as spaces of performance and community by Colombian dancers. Her research explores the boundaries between physical and virtual space and movement, and questions how bodily expression is communicated virtually from performer to audience. Finally, Christina Rizk's article, *Grief in Digital Spaces: How We Use Facebook to Grieve*, discusses how online social networks gain importance during bereavement and allow users to feel less isolated in spite of their physical distance from their support group. Her research goes on to explore how Facebook can potentially cross earthly boundaries and serve as a means of communication with the deceased.

The projects presented in this issue explore the boundaries of digital technologies and the reality of new, as well as familiar, virtual spaces as integrated aspects of human experiences of corporality, representation,

communication, activism, and knowledge creation. The contributions are representative of the most current research interests in digital technology and virtual cultural phenomena in regard to anthropological practice and theory. They reflect not only on the possibilities of digital technologies and virtual environments as research tools and methods, but on the reaction of anthropologists to expand our field of inquiry to include the embedded nature of digital technology in culture and human experience.

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