

**Thirty-Third Annual  
VISUAL RESEARCH CONFERENCE  
ABSTRACTS**

**National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution  
Constitution Avenue and Tenth Street, Washington, D. C.**

**November 27-29, 2017**

**Ingrid Ahlgren** (Smithsonian Institution) "Marshallese Weaving Patterns: Encoding Class, Clan, and Change Through Design"

This presentation will describe the early results from my current Smithsonian Postdoctoral Fellowship at the National Museum of Natural History, examining form and pattern in the borders of Marshallese woven mats as a way of understanding how sociality and identity are expressed in material objects. Early ethnographic documentation suggests the carefully worked designs encode layers of social meaning and identity, whereby each band, constrained to a finite number and set of motifs, are symbolic abstractions of membership in matrilineal clans and of these clans' totems. There has been no study devoted to the designs of mats from the Marshall Islands, or their overarching aesthetic system, and this project aims to do just that – to systematically examine, document, and analyse design elements in Marshallese mats, and to consider how they may, or may not, be visual expressions of authority and belonging. Drawing on research elsewhere in Oceania, I will seek to answer three questions: (1) Are clan membership and social status encoded within these designs? (2) What elements comprise a Marshallese stylistic system? (3) What kinds of motifs are being employed in modern works, and what do they communicate about historical shifts in purpose and preference?

Answering these questions will be achieved through close examination of the mats, materials and techniques used, the design motifs and where they hail from, as well as the histories and meta-data of the collections contained in the National Anthropological Archives. The patterns woven into mats from two sets of collections will be examined for this research: The first includes the more than 90 Marshallese mats held at the National Museum of Natural History, in addition to photographs of pre-1920 mats readily available online from other institutions. The second set of data constitutes contemporary mats being copiously produced in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, thanks to the recent Jaki Ed "revival and revitalization" program with the University of the South Pacific established in the mid-2000s. These latter decorative mats of similar construction are now being displayed on walls and sold to local and foreign parties. Their border patterns incorporate and suggest changes in form and design, and will provide an excellent source for analysis and discussion of the expressions of change in material culture. These two sets of collections, dating more than a century apart, will provide data for an examination of the importance of stylistic form in Marshallese culture temporally and spatially.

**Anne Chahine** (Freie Universität, Berlin) “Memory is Not About the Past: Walking as a (visual) method. Accessing different layers of memory in relation to urban space”

This project aims to understand how former East Germany is remembered in accordance with the national historic discourse today. It focuses on members of the Third Generation East, meaning individuals born in the German Democratic Republic between 1975 and 1985, who experienced the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 as a child or young adolescent. The intent of this ethnographic encounter is not solely to observe and conduct interviews, but also to stage encounters with the participants in order to access the different layers of memory and perception.

Following the sensorial and performative research approaches of Pink (2014) and Irving (2015), the participants of my research were asked to take a walk through their former childhood neighborhood in Berlin and articulate their thoughts while moving through the area. The walk-through was aimed at conjuring up memories that were directly connected to the environment as well as revealing unconscious thoughts and behaviors of each individual while physically retracing their routes of the past.

During the course of data collection, I used audio and video recording equipment and introduced its use during the first meetings. One of the determining factors for relying on technical equipment while conducting the interviews was the chance to analyze the data afterwards extensively. As Pink (2013) suggests, when using video in ethnographic research, we should not only reflect on the relationship with our participants, but also need to think about how we relate to the camera and the equipment that we are using during that process (Pink 2013:104). The person and not the camera should be the center of all my attention. With the help of a small microphone closely attached to their body and a stabilized camera device that I could hold in one hand I was able to solve these challenges and recorded the journeys from beginning to end.

As Irving (2007) points out, every environment has its own agency and is profoundly intertwined with the stories of the (former) inhabitants. The performance-like movement of the body through the different places of the city functions as a catalyst for emerging stories and memories from the past. With every step, an individual reclaims his or her childhood neighborhood and at the same time positions himself or herself in the present day. It helped me get to know the person in front of me and revealed a deeper layer of his or her perception of themselves. If regular sit down interviews could be represented through a simple 2D plane that represent a certain idea of that person, then the walk is able to extend that plane into a 3D object that I as a researcher could analyze from multiple angles. The neighborhoods gave access to stories of communal solidarity, social change but also a certain estrangement from these areas. Memory cannot be accessed at random, so the confrontation of the physical representation or absence of these memories during the walks through the former childhood areas clearly helped the participants to voice inner thoughts and experiences.

The walk has proven to be a highly effective method of rendering an emotional and almost abstract idea of the individual characters performing these walks. I, as a researcher, could give my subjects back their agency -- their right to shape this study with me and to be active participants.

**Aynur Kadir** (Simon Fraser) "*Transforming Practice: Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in a Digital Age*"

Digital Dastan – currently in development – is a community-based digital archive platform for Uyghur epic oral narrative. It has been collaboratively supported by the Xinjiang Folklore Research Center (XFRC) in Xinjiang, in northwest China, and the Making Culture Lab at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada. This project supports the XFRC in its efforts to digitize, preserve, and create access to Uyghur intangible cultural heritage. We have been both designing and critically analyzing the process of this digital archive prototype, which contains more than a hundred hours of audio-visual materials, thousands of contemporary and archival photographs as well as scanned manuscripts. Dastan is one of the most significant traditions of storytelling in Central Asia, consisting of epic oral narratives that use both poetry and prose, accompanied by music, to dramatically recount events from the past. Since 2007, XFRC has documented more than 50 different Dastans from different folk artists as well as digitized hundred hours of analog materials. As the project has reached out to communities, increasing number of local ethnographic collectors have contributed their old analog documents for further digitization and centralization of this archive. Metadata construction, standardization of audio-visual format, and intellectual property issues, however, can lead to tensions between those closely involved with intangible cultural heritage and the digital preservation of this cultural heritage. Central to the development of this database is an ethnographic exploration of Uyghur traditional protocols for the representation and curation of these endangered narratives in digital form and their subsequent ethical circulation.

This project aims (1) to support the participatory development of a digital archive prototype of Dastan at the XFRC, (2) to connect communities to the XFRC documentation of Dastan from their villages, (3) to evaluate the potential for Traditional Knowledge Labels and Licenses to aid in the ethical circulation of Uyghur digital heritage, and (4) to advance collaborative media production and documentation methodologies informing the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage as a whole. The outcome and level of access to the archive is still in the process of consulting and negotiation. Access will be determined through a collaborative decision with communities and will highlight the usage of cultural protocols and national concerns as defining features of a future interactive system. This study is exploring how traditional cultural gatekeepers have functioned in the past and how that role may evolve in the future. In this presentation, I will explore complex tensions around access to and ownership of the intellectual property of cultural heritage in the digital age.

This presentation will be a public discussion about harmonizing the metadata scheme, with examples from different format videos and digitized audio in order to highlight the research questions and findings that are raised above. Social processes will be analyzed, including questions and concerns that emerge from the integration of community-led negotiations with appropriate technological approaches to the archiving and sharing of intangible cultural heritage.

**Hilary Leathem** (University of Chicago) "Where the Walls Speak: Oaxacan Street Art"

This presentation explores the recent florescence of political street art and graffiti in Oaxaca, Mexico. It first seeks to demonstrate the political and affective power of street art and graffiti in Oaxaca as distinctly and enduringly material acts of protest and social power. Second, it situates this street-art in Oaxaca's own history, demonstrating a particular Oaxacan perspective

on the ways in which materiality can, at least figuratively, speak. Through a combination of visual documentation and analytical captions, I argue that this street-art demonstrates the polyvalent nature of politics in Oaxaca. It is not enough, I contend, for the recent protests against Mexico's purportedly neoliberal educational reforms to be documented through media reports or even by the crush of human bodies at rallies and at protests. Instead, the criticisms against the Mexican state must be visibly and durably *materialized* on the streets and the walls of the city itself for them to have enduring efficacy and symbolic capital. As we consider the implications behind the making of street art, I ask how these vibrant murals generate particular affective registers alongside the meanings that they engender and/or are assigned.

These material modes of politics speak to the particular history of Oaxaca itself, and perhaps even a distinctly Oaxacan form of world-making. Oaxaca's landscape is composed of layer upon layer of pre-Hispanic ruins, themselves overlaid by grecas, designs, and Zapotec glyphs that are sometimes understood, sometimes not. Again, on top of these ruins live the material remnants of the Spanish Conquest, such as soaring cathedrals and sprawling haciendas. The colonial debris of Oaxaca is striking and is a potent reminder of how an outside force shaped and continues to shape (in the form of the Mexican neoliberal state) the social life of the primarily indigenous state of Oaxaca. In contemporary Oaxaca, what is felt as the oppression and tyranny of a Mexican state results in the reconfiguration and recuperation of the city's architecture and social space by working-class Oaxacans. The reutilization of these spaces and remaking of these "walls that speak" may offer us a new perspective on Marx's "social hieroglyph." For participants in this Visual Research Conference, I offer the new, contemporary social hieroglyphs of Oaxaca that on the surface seem to speak in obvious terms, but leave much to interpret.

**William Lempert** (Colorado-Boulder) "Fires, Tires, and Paper: Reimagining Collaborative Filmmaking in Australia"

Since the earliest integration of film in ethnographic fieldwork over a century ago, visual anthropology has remained on the cutting edge of collaborative innovation. From Mead and Bateson's impassioned debates on the role of the moving image to the recent mass uptake of media production by local communities and Indigenous peoples around the world, the role of the anthropologist has shifted among being observational filmmaker, instructor, facilitator, and co-producer. Although corresponding success in academic writing remains comparatively limited, collaborative filmmaking has become ubiquitous and is helping to reimagine the nature of ethnographic data and visual representation. This contrast is partly due to the tendency of writing to be individually authored, while filmmaking is an inherently interpersonal process with myriad opportunities for mutual engagement.

Drawing on my recent 20-months of fieldwork in which I was embedded within the production teams of two Indigenous media organizations in Northwestern Australia, I argue that anthropologists should strive to maximize their engagement in such co-productions, not only because it is ethically incumbent on fieldworkers to make tangible local contributions, but also because it is within this process of countless creative and mundane decisions that the deepest ethnographic insights will be found. By working collaboratively on production teams over the life cycles of dozens of video projects as they travelled across time, space, and social scales, it has been my aim to better understand the changing stakes of Indigenous self-representation by becoming integrated within this process.

To contribute to increasing terminological precision, I articulate key distinctions between participation, collaboration, and what I have come to think of as co-elaboration, or the integration of creative vision at every level of the production process. Drawing on several video excerpts, I situate these modes of engagement within the context of three interrelated elements of production—local rhythms of creativity (fires), infrastructure/mobility (tires), and bureaucracy (papers)—to develop a theoretical framework grounded in local language that reimagine the nature of anthropological collaboration. This project illustrates how enduring attempts to minimize or control for the impact of the anthropologist often misread the nature of contemporary Indigenous media production and reinforce an outdated model of a distinct imagined other; as Jean Rouch succinctly proclaimed, at its best, the ciné-ethnographic “art of the double ... is a permanent crossing point from one conceptual universe to another; acrobatic gymnastics, where losing one’s footing is the least of risks.”

**Austin Lord** (Cornell) "After the Avalanche: Memory Work and Exposure in the Langtang Valley of Nepal"

On April 25, 2015, a massive co-seismic avalanche devastated the Langtang Valley of Nepal, taking over 300 lives and releasing a force equivalent to half of the Hiroshima atomic bomb. In the wake of this tragic event, I have been working with the community to create a ‘living archive’ that will help to preserve Langtangpa culture and heritage, generate intergenerational dialogue, and provide a platform for the Langtangpa to narrate their own stories of disaster and recovery. Through our collaborative efforts, which we refer to as the Langtang Memory Project ([www.langtangmemoryproject.com](http://www.langtangmemoryproject.com)), we have assembled an archive of over 18,000 images taken by community members and others who have visited the valley over the past fifty years. We have also conducted a series of photography skills workshops and organized several exhibitions, in both Nepal and the United States, that highlight the photographic narratives of Langtang community members (a photovoice method). As we begin work on a community-oriented book project and to the creation of a Langtang Heritage Museum in the Langtang Valley, we are embedded in a polyvalent and often challenging process of collaborative curation.

My presentation will focus on the ways that image-making speaks to a recursive and polyvocal pattern of sense-making in the aftermath of disaster, focusing on the ways that Langtangpa community members are using different forms of media and methods to shape different patterns of attention and exposure. Drawing from the archive, ethnographic experience, and participation in the collaborative work, I consider the ways that the process of recovery is shaped by multiple patterns of exposure: physical exposure to risk and geohazards; intergenerational exposure to tourism shaped by a process of ‘mutual gazing’ (Lim 2008); media exposure within the ‘flood of images’ that follows a disaster (Cook 2015); and the ways in which Langtangpa seek different kinds of exposure on social media. As a co-survivor of the disaster, as a friend, and as a volunteer who has been remained engaged in post-earthquake recovery work, I too have become exposed in a variety of ways—and this experience of entanglement and implication has become an important method for my own long-term ethnographic research. And so, I also seek to implicate myself within this landscape, and to consider the ways that my own visual account of the disaster and its aftermath has been woven into broader narratives about Langtang.

As the community looks forward to a time when they can ‘begin singing again’ – a festival in June 2018 that signals a return to the cycle of public ritual that was interrupted by the April 25, 2015 event, which has been suspended during a three-year grieving period – questions of memory, continuity, and re-enactment are increasingly important. As the Langtangpa continue with the process of rebuilding their lives they are simultaneously engaged in the work of memory and in imagining a multiply exposed and uncertain future.

**Diana Marks** (Independent Scholar, Sydney, Australia) "The Guna World: Molas and Knowledge Systems"

My book based on my doctoral dissertation (*Molas: Dress, Identity, Culture*, published in October 2016 by the University of New Mexico Press), provides evidence for the development of the Guna (Kuna) mola through a process of cultural authentication. The mola is tracked for a hundred years, through a process of visual analysis, and the time-intensive nature of the detailed work involved is demonstrated through visual analysis techniques.

Subsequent research has considered in detail the iconography on mola panels, which comprise the back and front panels of blouses, sewn and worn by Guna women. Publications, in five journal articles from 2014 – 2016, report on the iconography related to politics and popular culture, and also extend the meaning of the mola for Guna women and Guna communities. The impact of ethnoaesthetic criteria on the designs is explored in each publication and these criteria form the basis of the research-in-progress to be presented to the Visual Research Conference.

My current research relates to the iconography on molas that relates to the natural world, a design category found on over half the molas in a large sample. Of this work, the most advanced iconography relates to ethnobotany and molas. The intention in this presentation is to draw together the work on plant, bird, and fish iconography in mola panels and discuss the Guna world view and the place of cultural memory in interpreting designs, which may have become abstracted over time. Examples of different designs on mola panels will be shown and linked to known history of specific early designs.

The connections between the natural world, the quotidian world and the supernatural world of the Guna are expressed in the molas. Recent research in Gunayala, both from the perspective of insider and outsider observers, has related to ethnoornithology and ethnoichthyology, as well as the increasing impact of ecological change. I use this work as a basis to reevaluate mola iconography related to the natural world. The role of creativity in design, within accepted ethnoaesthetic criteria, Guna fashion trends and outside influences, including the commercialisation of the mola, will also be considered. Feedback will be sought on the work to date, particularly the methodology and potential areas to extend the work.

**Steve Moog** (Arkansas) "Behind the Scene(s): A Collaborative Visual Ethnography in Indonesia's Do-it-yourself Punk Rock Scene"

This presentation is based on exploratory research into how do-it-yourself (DIY) punk rock networks in Indonesia operate and interact with the larger global/transnational community. Beginning in the summer of 2016 and expanding during 2017, I have initiated a collaborative visual ethnographic project in Bandung, Indonesia that asks participants to take and share photographs that they feel best represent their scene. In the urban centers of Indonesia, punk rock aesthetics and symbols can be seen woven into the social fabric of everyday life, from a

studded jacket worn by an actor in a coffee commercial through to advertisements that reappropriate punk rock bands' logos. Amidst the visibility and commercialization of punk rock aesthetics in popular culture, it is easy to overlook the burgeoning underground DIY punk rock networks in Indonesia. Contemporary punk rock scenes, such as that in Bandung, thrive not because of commercial success but because of local and transnational DIY networks that perpetuate underground and countercultural communities. This collaborative visual ethnography project provides insiders' perspectives into an often masked and unseen community.

Beginning with Dick Hebdige's seminal work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, punk rock has frequently been framed within the context of its origins, and theorized as a post-war, white, working-class, youth social movement. What this theoretical position misses, though, is that soon after its inception, punk rock became a globalized cultural phenomenon that took root in places across the world far removed from its points of genesis. In keeping with more contemporary understandings of punk rock, images received as part of the collaborative visual ethnographic process have emphasized the importance of the interconnectedness of global punk rock. Collaborators' images, taken with both their phones and cameras furnished by me and which they have continued to share with me via email and Facebook, foreground and highlight the complexity of their embeddedness within a larger, transnational DIY punk rock network. For example, collaborators have sent me pictures from all over Southeast Asia while on tour with bands from the US and Europe playing in small DIY venues. The collaborative project has revealed an intricate web of DIY ethics, anarchist collectivism, and passion for punk rock that is quickly moving Bandung to the forefront of the global punk rock scene. This presentation showcases the collaborative visual research process I have been using with the intention of receiving critical feedback aimed at improving the project's data collection and analytical potentials. Specifically, I am interested in troubleshooting issues with the collaborative process, input on how to effectively expand the project for my dissertation work, and innovative ways to use the collaborators' images for analytical and representational purposes.

**Emiko Stock** (Cornell) "What Do Images Want? (Asks the Dissertation)"

How can histories under erasure be written without asserting the very descriptive modes they are attempting to escape? How can images convey such an affective sense for history to the reader in an attention that does not have to submit to explanations? How does the visual methodology of the ethnographer become theory when monographs are hungry for words and information? I bring those questions to the Visual Research Conference hoping for conversations that may result in suggestions, ideas, and thoughts in absence of answers. Working with images as object, method and mode, I ask what to make of images in relation to the writing of a dissertation without giving them up to written matters on one hand, or completely doing away with the world of words on the other hand. With an interest in the haptic and affective dimensions of history, my work follows the recent conversions of Chams -- a Muslim diasporic minority in Buddhist Cambodia -- from mainstream Sunnism to marginal Shi'ism and into the seminaries of Qom in Iran. I take pictures as potential pathways into the image of history that grounds Shi'a conversions in a long-duration devotion for Ali and his family among Sayyids, descendants of the Prophet.

The "moving images" (following Spyer and Steedly) at the center of my fieldwork are of three sorts: (1) The first sort concerns family photo albums from the pre-wars era (1950s-1970s) used as sites for a history telling because they are deemed ahistorical material. With them, I

question the notion of unconscious optics (Benjamin), punctum (Barthes) and post-memory (Hirsch). (2) The second sort of “moving images” comes from contemporary wedding photography, during which I took visual anthropology as a way to “look with” the world through a camera rather than merely look at it (Bateson; MacDougall) by conducting fieldwork as a videographer within teams of wedding arrangers, photographers and amateur selfiers. The result is a series of short movies that I now reflect on with the help of Pinney's “better selves” and Rouch's “shared anthropology”. (3) The third sort of “moving images” involves fragmented stills of Iran on Instagram (@emikostock), following Edwards' call to cross “The Boundary”: the one taking anthropology into (conceptual and visual) arts and popular culture. Finding in the practice of iPhoneography a potential to arouse curiosity, it is in the fragmented quality of those photographs that I hope to contribute to the renewal of an anthropology practice.

So, images presented in this Visual Research Conference will take us from Cambodia to Iran, from mid-20<sup>th</sup> century family photo albums to contemporary wedding professionally staged photography and impromptu selfies, and from the ethnographer's involvement as a wedding videographer to her Instagram fieldnotes. Together, what those images want may be to go beyond ethnographic illustration by collapsing practice and theory.