S. Steve Arounsack (California State University, Stanislaus) “Interactive Visual Anthropology: Creating a Virtual Lao Village Set During the Secret Bombings, 1965-1974”

To educate general audiences about the secret bombings in Laos during the 1960s and 1970s, we developed a touch-screen program called Legacies’ Multimedia Interactive Center (LMIC). Through a visual anthropological framework, we construct a virtual “village” that emulates what one might encounter upon entering a typical northern Lao village during the Vietnam conflict (1965-1974). Ethnographic features of the program enable users to watch elders recount the bombings, listen to children discuss the risks of playing with unexploded ordnances, watch demining experts detonate bombs, and examine military operations that cratered Laos. Each section is supported with authentic videos from history’s first-hand witnesses. In addition to poignant interviews, there is a diaspora map of the United States that provides Laotian population data for every state. The program is envisioned as an educational tool for the classroom and as a point of ignition for deeper conversation.

LMIC was part of the Legacies of War Project’s national traveling exhibition, where it was housed as a touch-screen kiosk. Soon after, it was reconfigured for the world wide web for greater outreach. Version 2.0 (2012) is updated with new census data and current information. Our team consisted of an anthropologist, filmmakers, graphic designers, a non-governmental organization (Mennonite Central Committee), and a demining team (Mines Advisory Group, MAG). Collectively, the team has conducted many decades of ethnographic fieldwork in Laos. Under the Legacies of War Project, LMIC was funded by the Ford Foundation.

Michael Atkins and Camilla Morelli (both from the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, University of Manchester) “Bringing the Extra-Visible into View: Investigating the Absurd Spaces, Multiple Dimensions, and Extraordinary Worlds of Graphic Anthropology”

This joint session investigates the uses of drawing in anthropological research and representation. Despite being deemed largely obsolete with the advancement and availability of photographic and film equipment, drawing is experiencing something of a renaissance in anthropology. Drawings possess
their own ethnographic significance and this presentation will explore how drawing can access and open up different ways of knowing, understanding and imagining the world that other modes of research and representation rarely allow.

The first part of the presentation will focus on how drawing can be used to research and construct a layered (re)presentation of the multiple, simultaneous stories that are encountered in the field. Based on Michael Atkins’ research on commercial and non-commercial public sexual encounters in Manchester, it uses different combinations of drawing and text that were created in collaboration with informants and incorporate their own words, to better understand how they see and imagine the world. Such forms are useful in conveying more sensuous and ambiguous aspects of life, whilst preserving anonymity and facilitating involvement in the ethnographic process. The presentation will show an extract from Atkins’ latest 'graphic novella' to discuss how drawing can critically engage with notions of ambiguity and evidence, give voice to people’s contradictory emotions, utterances and identities, and represent multiple explicit and implied meanings in ways that challenge the notion of a univocal ethnographic account.

The second part of the presentation, led by Camilla Morelli, uses drawings made by native Matses children in Peruvian Amazonia to explore the perception and imagination of children, including the different ways children imagine themselves and their environment, and as a means of accessing the impossible and fantastical spaces children inhabit. It addresses how Matses children, who spend most of their lives in the forest, engage with the urban, material and technological world of non-Indians. As such a piece of paper becomes a material space where imaginative lifeworlds find a tangible expression. In the impossible figurative space of children’s drawings, forest spirits wear sunglasses, oil drillers fight naked Indians with bows and arrows, concrete becomes magical, army tanks invade the rainforest and Jean Claude Van Damme defends Matses Indians from Japanese soldiers.

We hope to open up a discussion of the possibilities of the many uses of drawing, for example as a practical research method, as a way of knowing and understanding the world, and as a means that has the potential to complement other forms of documentary and visual media. We aim to explore drawing as a means whereby the simultaneity of lived experience can be represented in nonlinear forms, where faraway and extra-ordinary places become accessible and the absurd is brought into being.

Linda Burman-Hall (University of California, Santa Cruz) and Richard Tenaza (University of the Pacific) "Mentawai, Listening to the Rainforest: A Meditation on Endangered Primates and their Habitat"

What does the rainforest tell us about ourselves and the world? In the Mentawai Islands of Indonesia, wildlife communicates using a complete spectrum of sound
that exceeds the range and timbre of a western orchestra. More than fifty meters overhead, female gibbons sing expressive duets in the tree-tops. Hundreds of unique species of birds, frogs, and insects also call and chorus, and in the midst of this sonorous world live indigenous tribes who have listened to the rainforest and existed harmoniously with its flora and fauna for millennia.

This experimental multimedia work joins together electronic sound collage by ethnomusicologist Linda Burman-Hall (using biologist Richard Tenaza's rare field recordings of threatened and endangered species) with his photographic and her video images of their rain forest habitat. The unnarrated piece features endangered primate vocalizations, birds and other environmental sounds and also the vocals and dance drumming from Siberut and Pagai Islands of the Mentawai Archipelago, which lies in the tsunami zone more than 100 miles west of Sumatra.

This unusual work was created to increase fine arts audience awareness of environmental conservation as well as to provide a welcome aesthetic dimension for scientists working with regional issues. The striking visual and auditory materials show the integration of traditional life with the rainforest, and the disruption caused by hunting and logging.

Lydia Nakashima Degarrod (California College of the Arts) “Images of Exile and Migration”

In 2008 I created an interdisciplinary installation, combining visual art and ethnographic research, that aimed at depicting the internal images of forced migration and the creation of identity of a group of Chilean political exiles living in the United States. This presentation will discuss the effects of the use of mono-prints and video, and the dynamic and collaborative roles of the participants in the creation of memories and images of migration and exile. This project was done from 2007-8 during my tenure as Artist and Scholar in Residence at the Center for Art and Public Life at the California College of the Arts in Oakland, California, USA.

Over a period of 18 months I created 23 mono-prints maps and 9 videos with the collaboration of 9 Chilean political exiles living in the Bay Area of San Francisco, California, USA. The maps depicted the visual memories of the exiles’ journeys of migration from Chile to the United States in the mid to late seventies during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet from their contemporary point of view, and their conflicting images of their identities as Chilean Americans. The Chileans collaborated in the selection and editing of the images I created for the maps based on their narratives of memories of migration. This process alternated from image selection and editing to the creation of new memories and new reflections of identity that in turn created new images. The making of the videos entailed, in addition to the performance of the participants in the narration of their memories, their editing of images and the incorporation of their own photos.
The active involvement of the Chilean exiles in the creation of these images created a concatenation of memories and reflections. The different roles taken by the participants gave them different lenses through which to reflect on issues of identity. Central to this presentation will be discussion of the value of the use of images in the representation and creation of memories, and the dynamic role taken by informants in the creation of ethnographic data.

Susan Falls (Savannah College of Art and Design) and Jessica Smith (Savannah College of Art and Design) “The Third Way: Drawing the Pretty City”

Our series of photographs tracks a conversation through public art in Savannah, Georgia. Public art has been folded under the umbrella of “creative capital” to attract tourists and to increase property values. This turn has, on the one hand, created opportunities for artists to install public works and changed the formula for urban-scapes, but also impacts the kind of art that is exhibited – often veering towards what Cher Knight calls an “aesthetics of the bland.” The domestication of public art, best understood within the context of neoliberal city management, has also served as inspiration for unofficial, evasive, even radical, visual responses to emerge. In many ways, these unintended consequences — the appearance of alternative publics—makes public art “valuable” to the urban landscapes. We present a series of documentary photographs of the works; in reflecting upon the shortcomings of the text and photograph as research and presentation tools, we explore the use of sequential art as a third, possibly under-utilized, mode of representation with a unique set of semiotic mechanisms.

Andrew Irving (Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, University of Manchester) “Into the Gloaming: A Montage of Vision, Memory and the Senses”

This presentation uses photography, painting and film to understand the phenomenology of vision and the senses, as well as their combination and disintegration, in relation to such things as truth, imagination, viruses, illness and artistic practice, and as determined by the physiological possibilities and constraints of the human eye and body. By way of a series of photographic, painterly and filmic images, the presentation will attempt to document certain sensory and corporeal transformations that take place in response to different qualities of light, including during episodes of illness and crisis, and explores how visual and sensory information is assembled, experienced and interpreted. It then uses this to present an understanding of montage, not as a property of cinema but as a continuous sensory exchange between body and world that encompasses different kinds of stabilising and destabilising effects. In doing so the presentation pays special attention to the interaction between different sense organs and changes in the visible environment, including how the particular quality of light that emerges after sunset but before night has descended—known
as the gloaming—introduces a series of phenomenological uncertainties into perception that recast the relationship between body and world, thus reshaping people's capacities for experience and expression. By drawing on a primary ethnography of blindness, conducted in New York and elsewhere, I argue there is a dynamic correlation between the physiological and imaginative reconfigurations that occur during the gloaming hour and those experienced at the onset of blindness.

Arjun Shankar, Leya Mathew, and Matt Tarditi (all from the University of Pennsylvania) “Towards an Anthropology of Self: Film as Method”

This presentation explores new methodological possibilities for the application of film to the ethnographic study of self (Biehl and Kleinman 2007; Harland 2004; Erchak 1998). The researchers will show three short filmlets, entitled ‘externalizing’, ‘tactility’, and ‘confession’. In showing the three clips together, the researchers depict a single individual's multivalent sense making process as a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania. ‘Externalizing’ juxtaposes narration with seemingly disjointed images, to convey the very real disengagement that a subject can feel while in the world. ‘Tactility’ follows with an experiential overload, conveying through sight and sound the idiosyncratic and sensual movement through space and time. ‘Confession’ dives into the world of affect, using visual and aural illusions in order to capture the struggles that remain buried during everyday interaction.

Through discussion we hope to examine how anthropologists can use visual techniques to strategically reveal phenomenological perspectives gathered during their research. How can the filmic reveal bodily habits? How can it allow subjects to articulate their affective and moral sentiments more clearly? How might these films reveal methodological innovations in interview technique, observational practice, and theory creation? Throughout the discussions we hope to extend each film's potentialities, by applying these techniques to other context-specific projects. One central concern that these films will engage is the relationship between the fictional and the real. Drawing primarily on experimental documentary work such as Orson Welles' F for Fake and Chris Marker's San Soleil, we explore the blurred line between that which has been staged and that which is spontaneous. We will begin to articulate a method by which anthropologists can use film editing techniques to ‘create’ new depictions and analyses of life.

Our research traverses the line between visual culture, knowledge production, and pedagogical practice. All three researchers work in international contexts, exploring the visual possibilities for development critique and community engagement. Our other primary focus is on film as a method to change our approach to teaching and learning in university classrooms. The researchers are
affiliated with the burgeoning research collaborative, CAMRA, whose guiding mission is to explore the possibilities for new research representation in the academy.

Mary Strong (Independent Scholar, New York, New York) “The Cosmic Box: Multiple Referencing in Retablos, Huamanga, Peru”

Retablos in Peru are small home altars in the shape of a box with shelves and enclosed by external doors. The shelves contain religious and everyday scenes represented by sculpted figures placed in front of painted backgrounds.

This presentation explores the question of how and why the same images in retablos (often employing multivalent symbols) communicate ideas about nature and religion to disparate audiences. In many cases these audiences have widely differing or even opposing sets of expectations.

The research flows from an issue in need of further exploration that became evident during work on a more general and long-term project. The researcher will present a brief Andean cosmological ethnohistory as it relates to this art form, and then show selected examples of relevant forms and images, utilizing a good number of hand-drawn illustrations and perhaps a few photographs.

This topic meshes well with this year’s AAA conference theme of Borders and Crossings because it deals with the intertwining and unwinding of multiple cultural and social ideologies over time and space.

Holly Wissler (Independent Scholar, Cusco, Peru) “Repatriation of 50-years of Audio-Visual Archives to the Remote Andean Community of Q’eros, Peru”

The Quechua community of Q’eros located in the southern Peruvian Andes is internationally known and respected for its continued practice of indigenous traditions -- including musical rituals, sacred offerings, and textile weavings -- that many Andean communities no longer practice. Because of this, the Q’eros were named “cultural patrimony” by Peru’s Ministry of Culture in 2007, the first ‘people’ to receive such status in Peru. I was principal author with the Ministry of Culture on the 2011 petition to UNESCO that Q’eros’ songs be nominated to the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Yet, for such national and international renown, the Q’eros have had little to no access to the numerous audio-visual recordings and documentaries produced by current and past researchers.
In 2007, at the request of some community elders, I turned two years of fieldwork research footage into a full-length documentary, “From Grief and Joy We Sing”, which focuses primarily on the yearly cycle of musical rituals, the expression of loss and grief through song, and aspirations and conflicts in this people’s processes of adaptation to urban society.

In 2010 I organized a two-week “ambulatory movie theater” across the Q’eros region, with horses carrying generators, projectors and a screen in order to show and return 50 years of audio-visual documentation about the Q’eros to the Q’eros. The archives include photos from the 1955 Cusco University expedition, filmmaker John Cohen’s documentaries from the 1970s and 80s, and my 2007 documentary. This expedition was a major feat since the community is dispersed over four river valleys separated by high mountain passes, and has no electricity.

This presentation will discuss the following issues: the ethics and challenges of filming, editing, and publicly showing footage of one family’s intimate grief-singing; Q’eros’ reactions to viewing a fifty-year span of visual archives about their community, and opinions about the importance of sound/video documentation, and how the introduction of moving and still images about their own past can and does influence current perspective and memory.

Katharine Young (Independent Scholar, San Francisco, California) “Uneasy Objects: The Body in Intercultural Cinema”

Film conjoins the audible and the visible. If what is heard is what is seen then their conjunction is naturalized, as if there were but one perceptual reality. But even if what is heard is not seen or what is seen is not heard, the conjunction of any audible with any visible interanimates them. Mona Hatoum’s 1988 video collage, Measures of Distance, conjoins two auditory realities with two visual realities, none of which, with the exception of a single specific but unlocatable moment, intersects any other. The film refuses to anchor its perceiver in any one perceptual reality that might draw the others into its wake. Measures of Distance belongs to a genre Laura U. Marks calls intercultural cinema, “characterized by experimental styles that attempt to represent the experience of living between two or more cultural regimes of knowledge” (2000: 1). In its unmooring of perceivers from realities, intercultural cinema replicates the unmooring of persons from places in postmodern formations of new cultural subjects. All film elicits in me, out of my body, a new perceiver whose perceptual acuities and obliquities are uniquely designed to appreciate the seeings and hearings it unfolds. The body the film constructs in me I call the film body. Measures of Distance affords the film body the vertiginous experience of placelessness, of unlocatability, of being at sea. How, then, does the film hold together its multiple realities? Where can I find anchorage among such uneasy objects?