

A RESPONSE TO JESSAMY PERRIAM'S

ETHNOGRAPHY, OBJECTS AND REFLEXIVITY: A CASE STUDY OF THE SELFIE STICK

Jessamy Perriam's contribution discusses the selfie stick as a challenging object of ethnographic research. At first glance, the selfie stick appears to be no less complicated, variable and entangled within its sociotechnical assemblage(s) than any other object commonly examined in Science and Technology Studies. Similarly, its fluidity becomes visible when we follow and compare the object's multiple appropriations – or “ontologies” as the author calls it. What is interesting about the selfie stick, then, are the ways it polarizes and disrupts as we observe its co-existence in various spaces. While public places are a common stage for posing with the selfie stick, galleries and other cultural institutions have banned its use on their property and, although the photographs produced with it prove popular on online platforms such as Instagram, the broader media environment responds with criticism. The question is how can we analyze and interpret its distinct properties when faced with these shifting meanings and controversial practices?

Perriam sets out to conduct (auto-)ethnographic research of the selfie stick but struggles to shake off her own discomfort with it in the process. In addition to her annoyance with selfiestick- users in London and hesitation towards conducting a breaching experiment in the National Gallery, she also questions the researcher's role as an involuntary supporter of her object under investigation. Beyond a mere interference, this self-reflexive approach draws attention to the notion of disconcertment as a suitable framework for the analysis of controversies surrounding objects. But what is the specific quality that disconcerts the author and her research participants with the selfie stick? Physically speaking, it is just an extendable pole with a clamp. As part of an ensemble of contemporary visual practices, media ecologies (Horst et. al., 2010) and the messy experience of everyday life, however, contextualized meanings and values are continuously ascribed and re-ascribed to its affordances.

While examining the varying engagements and negotiations of this technology, Perriam uncovers a “curious separation” between practice and discourse: “Conflicting ontologies” of the selfie stick, she argues, co-exist in different locations, yet they do not directly intersect with one another. Although this gap is not a unique characteristic of the selfie stick and its sociotechnical assemblages per se, it can become an interesting lens through which to view the object and its different ontologies as emerging in relations. Let us consider Perriam's breaching experiment, again. Despite being banned from the Gallery, the use of the selfie stick did not cause any of the anticipated difficulties except for “a few funny stares”. On one level, this observation implies a mismatch between the negative attributes ascribed to

the selfie stick by non-users online or removed from the actual scene and the experience of using it in public. On another level, the funny stares, nevertheless, affected the researcher in an interesting manner worth analyzing in greater detail.

Performing with the selfie stick in the Gallery has produced discomfort and intervened in the standard practice of a museum visit. Reflecting on that experience has revealed the stick's disruptive potential as it co-constitutes itself in an unfolding tempo-spatial subject-object constellation. As frequently demonstrated in anthropological scholarship on the senses, it can be fruitful to investigate one's own experience in order to better understand to what extent the experiences of others shape the multiple ways object properties are negotiated. Moreover, focusing on a disconcerting experience as a category for object-oriented ethnographic research might offer insights into how the usage of a certain object relates to configurations of other things and processes. As a result of Perriam's autoethnographic approach, the selfie stick's experiential qualities and atmospheres, which are often difficult to express or observe directly, became more tangible for the researcher. At the same time, usage in situ can serve to enhance immersion in the field and understanding of the sensory experience of selfie-stickusers in contrast to non-users' strong emotional responses.

Perhaps, it is in the habitual, tacit and sensory dimension of *doing*, then, that we gain access to some of the specificities that render the selfie stick controversial. To strengthen this approach, follow-up questions could include: What does it feel like to perform with the selfie stick? Which object components are relevant for this feeling and which other practices, things and atmospheric aspects come to matter in this situation? Are there any embodied practical skills required for a successful performance with the stick and how does a sense of achievement or competence affect the experience of using it in public? To what extent is it necessary for the ethnographer to become proficient (enough) with the technology as well as related practices such as sharing the generated image within a social network and what does this experience imply for the relationship between her and the object? Starting from this personal perspective and in conjunction with other methods such as participant observation, interviews, diaries or video reenactments (Pink & Leder Mackley, 2014), it would be possible to detect patterns amongst different situations the object participates in and further understand how these patterns contribute to making sense of what it does. Against the backdrop of studying local knowledge, the practical and symbolic properties of the selfie stick remain relational and fluid. Yet, within its wider sociotechnical context, the discrepancies between users and commentators become more graspable in the light of their varying experience and levels of literacy as the object is being inserted in roles and narratives constitutive for and disruptive of underpinning standards, values and ideologies.

REFERENCES

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