*Introduction*

# Engaging with Jolting Events in Art and Fieldwork

*Petra Rethmann and Helena Wulff*

## Approaching the Exceptional/Beyond Critique

In anthropology, so far, exceptional experiences are not the kind of experiences to which anthropologists have paid a great deal of attention. Staying close to the ground – with ordinary, common, usual, habitual, and the everyday also being synonyms for ground – the exceptional used to be treated with suspicion. Often situated in the neighbourhood of the extraordinary, serendipitous, wondrous, magical or enchanting (Goulet and Miller 2005), the exceptional seemed just too particular, idiosyncratic, uncritical or eccentric as to engage the social imagination. Yet a number of recent changes in institutional cultures and intellectual thought have opened up new paths to think about the luminous, sublime, artistic, aesthetic and affective.

It goes (almost) without saying that for a long time one purpose of anthropology was to produce critique (Marcus and Fischer 1986), and that one of the best ways to do this was to practise what Eve Sedgwick (2003) has called 'the hermeneutics of suspicion'. The expression captures the attitude of a critical, knowing, self-conscious and tirelessly vigilant attitude. To engage in critique is to expose ideology and the workings of power, encourage resistance, and generally contribute to social and political change. Practitioners of critique must therefore be fundamentally suspicious of anything that presents itself as exceptional, artistic and beautiful. To a suspicious anthropologist, then, art attaches itself to power that seeks to cover its tracks. The conclusion imposes itself: committed and critical anthropologists must analyse 'against the grain'.

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Is this really all we can say about the objects and artistic practices of our affection and admiration?

Although the reasoning behind critique seems impeccable, in the last few years it has become clear that critique has lost some of its status as the self-evident goal and method of anthropological and related studies (Latour 2004, 2010). This is so for a number of interlocking reasons. The high hopes identified with a critical moment that literary scholar Eric Hayot (2017) describes as Theory – in the sense of bringing together the diversity of Marxist, structuralist, deconstructionist, psychoanalytical, feminist, queer and postcolonial approaches in a historical and institutional moment – have not entirely worked out. As Wendy Brown (2017) has shown, under neoliberal regimes academic institutions are increasingly gutted, and especially humanist forms of knowledge are under pressure and in danger of being debased. Art historian and critic Hal Foster (2012) has even argued that academics have come to feel so bullied by economically structured and state forms of administration that they turn conservative themselves. All of this is to say that our contemporary moment does not appear to be a very opportune moment to leave critique behind (Ortner 2016). The question that thus forms itself is this: beyond insisting on the increased necessity of critique in bleak times, do there exist other ways to frame the historical and political meanings of current discussions of critique?

In dialogue and concert with others (Stewart 2007; Pandian 2019; Felski 2020; Watson 2020), in this introduction we argue that anthropology's – and this is also true for history, sociology, geography, political theory and other fields – turn to affect constitutes one active and purposeful response to the crises that plague our times. At a time when humanist thinking is under siege, it seems important to articulate compelling accounts of why literature, music, and the visual and performative arts matter. Mired in vocabularies of demystifying and dismantling, critique lacks the vocabulary and ability to support humanistic thought and art. If the exceptional is the affect that hammers, captivates, enchants, smacks, stops you in your tracks, takes away your breath, sets you on a path that you have not walked down before, and makes you look at things anew then it is just about time to do justice to such experiences by attending to the surprising, sensuous, serendipitous, haphazard and unscripted. This is one orientation this book seeks to provide.

## Contextualizing Exceptionality through Art

Habitually we think of the exceptional as what stands out from the ordinary, customary and everyday, but those attuned to its stirrings

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and effects have noted that it is also notoriously hard to categorize and describe (Taussig 2011; Lepselter 2016). This is so because the exceptional does not appear in continuity but in a sudden flash. In a strike of lightning, if you will, that illuminates things just for a second. In and as revelation.

Just look at the photographs by John Cliett of Walter De Maria's 1977 installation *Lightning Field*. Created in a remote area of south-western New Mexico's desert, *Lightning Field* – as Kosky (2013: 16) indicates – is one mile mile by a bit less than a mile long. Four hundred polished and sharpened steel poles, spaced at intervals of 220 feet, emerge from the earth, making a grid of twenty-five poles wide by sixteen poles long. The length of the poles varies with the surface of the earth, so that all rise to the same height above sea level. The grid is an attempt to install order in the desert, but also a powerful attractor of lightning strikes in an area that De Maria chose not only for its isolation, but also for the climatic power and energy manifested there. Extremes of atmospheric moisture, wind and temperature are accompanied by heightened electrical energy. Strong winds blow steadily for days; very little rain falls, and thunderstorms can be seen on the field on an average of one in six days throughout the year. Though not exactly common, lightning strikes are unusually frequent in the area, attracting visitors – 'disenchanted moderns' Jeffrey Kosky (2013) calls them – each year to see the light. What they look for is the 'unique' and 'unusual', the singular, capricious, rare and intermittent event of a lightning flash.

Like Walter De Maria's installation, John Cliett's photographs are magnificent. Commissioned by the DIA Foundation in New York, which also owns and manages *Lightning Field*, they show wild flashes of lightning: swerving, forking and bifurcating zigzags that bring into focus things only momentarily and refuse to be pinned down in one particular place. In the words of astronomer and spiritual seeker Camille Flammarion this jagged flickering is 'capricious. [It] is impossible to assign it any rule. [It] does not give any explanation; it acts, that's all' (quoted in Kosky 2013: 18). Or, to put it another way: we can speak of the effects of the exceptional with more certainty than of itself.

If Michael Taussig (2009: 45) is right, then the lightning is exceptional because it is rare, but also because our understanding of weather – and thus of light – has become so ordinary and banal. Often reduced to idle chatter about 'how it is out there', talk about the weather is a symptom of our boredom, a cliché that we talk about to avoid talking about anything else, and empty chatter. It is only when not-so-boring forms of weather appear that we attune ourselves to the cosmos (although to the media too), and speak about the weather in tones of profound anxiety or hope.

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Yet much remains to be seen when the Lightning will not reveal itself in a flash of lightning. Thought the Light itself might remain invisible, the object supposedly absent, light, is everywhere.

The lightning or exceptional can lead us away from the ordinary, but it can also lead us back to it. This is what Erin Hogan (2008: 124–25) has to say when the thunderstorm does not come and lightning fails to strike:

> The sun was thinking, and the relentless heat of the afternoon was starting to abate. … No longer were the poles static, dully lit rods effaced by the sun high above. They had come alive, reflecting every movement of the setting sun. They blazed with color that stirred, as the sun went down, in a slow wave across the entire field. …. The poles were singing. It was a chorus of soft hues. … Every single one of those four hundred poles was doing something: together they shimmered and undulated, like a cornfield stirred by a strong wind.

Clouds and shadows, winds and waves, undulations and pulsations: an eventful but not exceptional scene, as the poles begin to happen when the sun falls, its dying light held for a faint moment in the poles, which come alive with its passing and alive in a wave of light that passes through them like a shudder. It surely must be nightmarish to continuously live in a heightened state of awareness, so even the ordinary light of the poles may – at times – come as a relief.

## Art

In the last few years, anthropologists have worked hard to show that art is more than a derivative of other expressions of culture. In moving inquiries of art beyond matters of Kantian judgement (agreeable or disagreeable; good or bad), beauty or the sublime, they have moved art in the arena of collaboration (Schneider and Wright 2010; Strohm 2014), healing and the capacity to craft new accounts of the worlds. In leaping between disciplines and genres (Schneider and Wright 2006), *Exceptional Experiences* situates itself within a number of conversations on aesthetics and forms. On the first level, the volume addresses methodological and conceptual issues in anthropology and beyond. On the second level, it seeks to update the urgency of crafting new rationales (and updating new ones) for humanistic scholarship and art. And on the third level, it does not only take exceptionality as its theme, but also seeks to model and explore different tonalities of (re)presenting the exceptional as we see, for example, in the words of Kathleen Stewart (2007), Paul Stoller (2018) and Michael Taussig (2009).

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If joy, recognition, everyday experiences of the sublime, fragile experiences of dissent, attachment, and caring for what is not always calculable and measurable are articulations of what is exceptional, then the authors in this book address such experiences and affects. No longer always already suspicious of moods, tones, feelings and emotions, the contributors to this volume push beyond the debilitating effects of suspicion. In what the late Jose Munoz (2009) has dubbed the 'anticipatory illuminations of art', scholars do not wish to break with critical or sceptical modes of analysis, but insist on the inescapable entanglements of power with affective life. In insisting that affect can do serious work, they ask: why are we drawn to a painting or a piece of music in ways we struggle to explain while being left cold by others whose merits we duly acknowledge?

## Experiences

One experience tops all other experiences for an anthropologist. It is that of fieldwork. Even in this day and age, when 'fieldwork is not what it used to be' (Hannerz 2003; Marcus and Faubion 2009), with flexible forms ranging from multi-site and mobile to digital and collaborative fieldwork, it is still regarded as a rite-de-passage into the profession. Fieldwork provides experiences of immersive spells that unsettle one's taken for granted sensibilities. This can release not only new anthropological insights, but also revelations that can be formative for the fieldworker as a person. It was not long ago that fieldwork was surrounded by mystique, but with a massive wave of books and articles in anthropological method during the last few decades, the process and phases of fieldwork have been documented in detail, even hitherto untold stories from the field (Okely 2012). Fieldwork experiences, especially some of the exceptional ones, used to be shared among friends only, but now they tend to be included in the anthropological conversation.

Related to the traditional silence around some of the personal fieldwork experiences was the idea that fieldwork should focus on the experiences of interlocutors only. This started to change when Victor Turner took an interest in conveying also the experience of the ethnographer. This he did through narratives, which appear in his work on social drama from the 1950s. With the pivotal volume *The Anthropology of Experience* (1986), which Turner edited together with Edward Bruner, the notion of experience in anthropology was further conceptualized, including considerations of individual versus collective experience. In his introduction (written after Turner's death), Bruner (1986: 3–5) acknowledges that it really was Turner who identified an anthropology of experience,

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by developing the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey's concept of experience, *Erlebnis*, for 'what has been lived through' in a hermeneutical tradition. In line with this, 'the anthropology of experience deals with how individuals actually experience their culture, that is, how events are received by consciousness'. Bruner goes on to note that this does not only concern 'sense data, cognition … but also feelings and expectations'. While experiences had been understood as coming to us through verbalization, *The Anthropology of Experience* provides examples of how they happen through visualization, images and impressions, and that as active selves we can also shape an experience. Importantly, Bruner notes that when we talk about our experiences, we 'include not only actions and feelings but also reflections about those actions and feelings … the communication of experience tends to be self-referential'. This was later developed by Clifford Geertz (1973) in terms of 'thick description', which entailed absorbing accounts of his experiences as an ethnographer, relating human action to a larger level. Building on Turner and Geertz, the 1980s' 'writing culture' debate demanded more precise recollections about the research process, not least the role of the ethnographer, and his or her personal experiences, feelings and relationships. The idea was that such openness would ensure more accuracy, though it also generated critique for making the ethnographer the protagonist of the account at the expense of the people the study was about (Wulff 2021). Inspired by Roger Abrahams' (1986) reflections on the relationships between ordinary and extraordinary experiences, Moshe Shokeid (1972) eventually shared some extraordinary experiences in his own everyday life from childhood to adulthood.[1]

Before moving on to the following twelve chapters, let us recap and note that in accounts of exceptional experiences, whether artistic or ethnographic, or artistic in an ethnographic context, two issues stand out: affect and the senses. It is noteworthy that the affects are strong but not always of a pleasant nature: they can be both repulsive and uncanny, as well as a stroke of beauty. As to the senses, the centrality of the visual in Western thought comes up in understandings of experiences, but so does the aural and even tactility; more rarely taste and smell. With the upsurge in the anthropological attention to the senses, and sensorial experiences, comes the insight that they often appear together in teams, especially sight and sound, not always collaborating but sometimes in conflict. This would apply also to affects or emotions in exceptional experiences: they can take the form of very mixed emotions. Multi-sensorial experiences are probably more common than mono-sensorial experiences in the field and other situations. An investigation into exceptional experiences of interlocutors might even require learning a new indigenous sensorial system

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(Howes 2015). Exceptional experiences as scrutinized in this volume are in most cases recent memories. How the memory of an exceptional experience changes over the course of time, perhaps taking different shapes at different stages in a life cycle, is an issue to explore further.

For now, though, we have twelve chapters organized in three parts: they engage with exceptional experiences of a verbal, visual, aural or textual nature which came from listening to a story, looking at a piece of art, taking part in a performance, reading or writing a text, as well as drawing pictures. Many of the chapters combine several senses, such as visual and textual, most of them feature fieldwork experiences, some more explicitly than others. The first part, titled 'Experiencing and Conceptualizing the Exceptional', opens with a chapter by Deborah Reed-Danahay where she explores extraordinary things happening to her in fieldwork that lie beyond our comprehension, beyond our research topics, and even beyond our desire to 'look too far'. The chapter revolves around key moments of experience related to three different fieldwork projects – among farm families in rural France, among former Vietnamese refugees in north-central Texas, and among French migrants to London – that provoked a sense of wonder, and which she prefers to locate in the realm of the uncanny. In Thomas Fillitz's chapter we encounter exceptional experiences in the form of Pablo Picasso's sudden understanding of what it means to be an artist. This happened when he was looking at African masks at the Musée du Trocadéro in Paris. Fillitz points out that exceptional experiences in the art world are not only connected to notions of beauty, however, but may also be reactions of disgust, even vandalism. As Fillitz suggests, by applying Paolo Favero's (2018) concept of 'immersive images', we can capture the process of being attracted into a work of art triggering an exceptional experience beyond categories of the beautiful, the original or the good.

The visual is also in focus in the next chapter, teamed with the textual. Anthropologist Alisse Waterston and artist Charlotte Corden describe their collaboration in the making of *Light in Dark Times: The Human Search for Meaning* (2020), a graphic book rooted in nonfiction and comprised of fictionalized encounters with writers, philosophers, activists and anthropologists. Prompted by certain exceptional experiences in academic life evoking issues of collegiality, ethics and methodology, Moshe Shokeid's chapter moves on to an ethnographic episode where the interpretation of how to view a painting was at stake. This echoes Nigel Rapport's argument in his chapter that the otherness of art as an aesthetic form enables the individual viewer to use it as an entrance into an exceptional and critical perspective on everyday life as traditional cultural construction. Rapport's case is the work of the British artist Stanley Spencer and

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his own explanations of it, as well as how it was received by a general audience. This is exceptionalism of art as disclosure of deepest truth. Following the Kantian tradition, Rapport identifies art as truth, compensation and ethical guide.

In the next part 'Literary Realms of the Exceptional', Petra Rethmann considers the German writer Uwe Johnson's biography and writings, as well as his experiments with narrative form, through the lens of attunement. Johnson's escape from East Germany, which was a recurrent topic in his work, tied in with stories Rethmann had heard about her family members, also escaping from East Germany. Her take is that it was the aesthetic aspects of Johnson's writings that were so exceptional to her that they began to function as a kind of *Ersatz* or ancillary memory: a memory that acts *as if* it could have been true. In a similar vein, Paula Uimonen in her chapter takes us to exceptional encounters with water deities during fieldwork in Nigeria. Focusing on the Lake Goddess in the Nigerian writer Flora Nwapa's aesthetic worlds, she suggests that spirituality constitutes an exceptional source of creativity, a sacred power that can be released through literature. Starting by acknowledging the importance of art-based experiences, Ellen Wiles remarks in her chapter on live literature events in England that they are elusive, difficult to define and analyse. It was her background as a novelist that opened up her understanding of exceptional experiences at literary salons and festivals and how these could be applied to a wider audience outside academia.

In the volume's final section 'Exceptional Visual and Practice Experiences', Cathy Greenhalgh draws on long-term ethnographic fieldwork with feature film cinematographers. Her focus is on accounts of lighting faces and locations for specific scripts. At the *Camerimage* festival, which is an unusual environment, cinematographers share stories about creative collaboration, aesthetics and technique. These sometimes involve declarations of epiphany and revelation, and how specific conditions might have led to their occurrence. Such stories may impact their careers. Helena Wulff in her chapter analyses transformative exceptional experiences of art, drawing on the memories by Patricia Hampl's (2006) recollection of how she unexpectedly was 'hammered by an image', a painting by Matisse, despite not being a museum goer with any particular interest in the arts. Transformation through exceptional experiences also drives Ana Laura Rodríguez Quiñones' chapter on Palestinian contemporary dancers. She shows how certain experiences, whether physical, aesthetic or even social, can act as turning points in individual lives. In a context where the existence of the nation itself is denied by the occupant, and in which some actors are administratively and geographically excluded from the national project, diverse dance events – such as

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creation processes, performances or the singing of the national anthem in a festival opening – appear to be life-changing moments that release a sense of communality. The idea of exceptional experiences as transformative, as life changing, which stays with us forever, continues in Maxime le Calvé's chapter on a series of key creative moments during the rehearsal of the contemporary opera *Mondparsifal*, staged by the visual artist and performer Jonathan Meese in Vienna in 2017. In a short series of ethnographic stories, Le Calvé presents here some decisive aspects of the work within the team of this artist. The pervasive qualities which Meese instils in collaborative situations, positive and individually empowering, have been reported by the singers and by many collaborators as strongly impacting the way they perform their tasks – building an ephemeral environment into which personal growth is made possible within the frame of this music theatre production. Coincidentally, Le Calvé's documentation methods also underwent a significant metamorphosis during this period of fieldwork, as he switched to the use of watercolour drawings to put the observed situations to paper on the spot. If ethnographic drawings can picture atmospheres, they do not only convey a report of what happened in the field; they also bear witness to a transformation of the ethnographers in both their perceptive and expressive capacities. As Le Calvé notes, some ethnographic topics teach us so much that the memories of these moments stay with the aura of the exceptional forever. Some of these moments actually have a lasting effect on the way we do anthropology, as we are caught by an atmosphere and transformed by it.

To conclude, exceptional experiences, so it appears, are not the kind of experience to which anthropologists have heretofore paid a great deal of attention. While anthropologists tend to engage that which is extraordinary, serendipitous or enchanting, that which is beyond the fray of the customary, common and usual has received lesser attention. The chapters in *Exceptional Experiences* address experiences and encounters with what punctures, jolts and is unusual. In taking art, aesthetics and ethnography as its lens through which to register and understand exceptional experiences and encounters, this volume examines, firstly, the knowledge and affect of exceptional experiences; secondly, it stages, narrates and performs conceptual concerns with agency, ethics, creativity, enchantment and wonder; and thirdly, it makes art an integral part of anthropological inquiries. The volume also addresses the fieldworker's experience of unexpected events that can lead to key understandings, as well as revelatory moments that can happen during artistic creation *and* while looking at art, watching a performance: not only to specialists such as critics, art collectors and art dealers, but to members of a general audience, even a first-time visitor to an art event. By exploring exceptional

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experiences through art, we ask probing questions for anthropology, but does not do so in a narrow or confining way. In recognizing that art is capacious – including narrative, performance, dance, images and a host of other objects – and often has analysts spanning genres and disciplines, *Exceptional Experiences* situates itself among a number of conversations on aesthetics and forms. While the chapters address methodological and conceptual issues in anthropology and beyond, they are also meant for interested readers, students and former students: anyone wondering about the world and the objects and persons who inhabit it.

**Petra Rethmann** is Professor of Anthropology at McMaster University and Director of the Institute on Globalization and the Human Condition. She is the author or editor of three books, and the author of numerous articles that have appeared – among others – in *American Ethnologist*, *American Anthropologist*, *Anthropologica*, *Anthropologie et Sociétés* and *Sinij Divan*. She has held guest professorships at the University of St Petersburg, University of Cape Town and Aleksanteri Institute/Helsinki. She is currently working on an ethnographic memoir entitled *Less Than/A Dream*, a book on ethnography and form, and one preliminary entitled *Liberal Wounds*.

**Helena Wulff** is Professor Emerita of Social Anthropology at Stockholm University. Her research interests are in expressive cultural form – dance, art, images, text. Key engagements are now in the anthropologies of literature and writing, with a focus on migrant writing in Sweden. Among her publications are three monographs: *Ballet across Borders: Career and Culture in the World of Dancers* (1998), *Dancing at the Crossroads: Memory and Mobility in Ireland* (2007), and *Rhythms of Writing: An Anthropology of Irish Literature* (2017). Her edited volumes include *The Anthropologist as Writer: Genres and Contexts in the Twenty-First Century* (2016). There is also the entry 'Writing Anthropology' in the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (2021) http://doi.org/10.29164/21writing. Drawing on her research, she occasionally writes autofiction and creative nonfiction.

## Note

1. It was this article, 'Exceptional Experiences in Everyday Life', by Moshe Shokeid (1972) that sparked the idea for the panel at the European Association of Social Anthropologists in 2020.

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