The "Authentic Evocation" in Ethnographic Photography as Art: Taking Lau Pok Chi's Art Practice as an Example

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Abstract

This article emphasizes the disciplinary problems of anthropology after the representation crisis, and the connected phenomenon of the intersection of the disciplines of art and anthropology, considering the art practice of the Chinese American photographer Lau Pok Chi, mainly his *Cuban Chinese project*, as an instance for showcasing the authenticity of photographic art as ethnographic practice and its value for the development of anthropology. After assessing the important motivation of the artist's practice, which is rooted in his construction of self-identity, and the methods and principles of his "quasi-ethnographic" research, this paper recommends that the authenticity of such type of ethnographic photography also obtains from its exposure of reflexivity and the transcendence of the separation of "things" and "words", which may further motivate the multiple explorations of the two-way intervention between these two disciplines.

Keywords: Lau Pok Chi, ethnographic photography, diaspora Chinese, Cuban Chinese

1. Introduction

After the publication of *Writing Culture* and *Anthropology as a cultural critique* in 1986, there was a dramatic shift in the theoretical research of ethnography from ontology to epistemology, deeply exposing the link between representation and power. The discussion that followed is still going on today. Postmodernists consider that authenticity cannot be equivalent to objectivity anymore due to its dilemma, that is, "to be experienced as authentic it must be marked as authentic, but when it is marked as authentic it is mediated, a sign of itself, and hence, lacks the authenticity of what is truly unspoiled, untouched by mediating cultural codes" (Culler, 1988, p. 164). The denial from ethnographers that the gap between "words" and "things" (Note 1) can be closed by the self's approach to the other led to the creation of the new ethnography, which is free from the constraints of objectivity and scientificity.

The acceptance of photography can act as a prism to reflect such a kind of development. When visual anthropology initially emerged in the 1970s, photography, which had previously been an instrument for documenting reality, was much less influential than film, since the feature that it cuts the scene into slices could not fulfil anthropologists' higher needs for an authentic expression. It is clear that with the disruption of the myth of objectivity, photography has become a centre of attention again, acting as a form of evidence including quite complex nature (Edwards, 2015, p. 235). What is fascinating is that there was also an ethnographic turn in the contemporary art field in the 1990s, which refers that artists began to build participatory art by performing field work like ethnographers to de-materialize art. In this procedure, photography, as a sort of art form, can also create a bridge between the concept of "work" and conceptual art, and since it cannot reflect the timeliness as clear as a video with regards to recording the practice as well, it is also important to determine the nature of the function of the "bridge" and, in particular, the authenticity it represents. Thus, the respective developments of anthropology and art have led to an overlay of the subject area since a similar historical period, and the discussion of the authenticity of contemporary photography can showcase the potential and characteristics of this interdisciplinary field evidently from a specific side.

In order to vividly examine the reconstructivity of the appropriation of ethnographic photography in the art sector, this article will combine the basic research methods in art and anthropological studies, using the art practice of Lau Pok Chi, a contemporary Chinese American photographer, as an example, taking into account the visual analysis of images and the contextual analysis of artistic creation, focusing on the exploration of the

methodological and media characteristics of quasi-ethnographic photography, to describe the reconstructivity of the authenticity of ethnographic photography in the art field vividly. The first and second sections will mainly emphasize the photographer's conception of artistic creation and his art practice in Cuba respectively, and the final part will explore how the conversion of authenticity showcased in his artworks can motivate ethnographic photography. With the help of a case study in the art field, this essay seeks to offer further options for the growth of ethnography following the writing culture debate.

2. Flowing China: Ethnography as Self-Observation

For above 50 years, Lau Pok Chi, the Chinese American photographer, has photographed the living conditions of the overseas Chinese in 35 countries, in order to highlight a visual anthropological map. Unlike other photographers, like Wei Leng Tay, which only focuses on young ethnic Chinese, Lau gives focus on the first generation of immigrants in his early photographic career, while a large part of his later interest in the descendants of immigrants is about people in the areas with disadvantaged culture, like Cuba and Burma. It is clear that Lau focuses on the places where the Chinese culture with higher abilities to survive exists, that is, where the real Chinese diaspora occurs - where there are people who "dwell in a nation-state in a physical sense but travel in an astral or spiritual sense that falls outside the nation state's space/time zone" (Cohen, 1997, p. 95). In order to create a symbolic world of the Chinese diaspora across geographical regions, the artist frequently links different groups by demonstrating similar signs, such as Duke Guan (See Figure 1) and the portrait of Chinese leaders, in addition to exploring specific cultures and societies of overseas Chinese in various countries.

Figure 1. A scene inside a Cuban restaurant in 2009

Actually, Lau's commitment to documenting Chinese diaspora culture through ethnographic photography is clearly motivated by personal motives, thus the authenticity with which he portrays these people is first and foremost based on intense self-consciousness. Lau was born in British Hong Kong in the 1950s. His parents both came from Guangdong province, and his uncle committed suicide after being exiled due to the political unrest at that time. Facing the difficult family condition and the delicate interactions between mainland China, Hong Kong, and western countries, Lau cannot overlook his confusion regarding his identity since childhood (Lau, 2018). In 1969, Lau emigrated to Canada with his camera, beginning his immigrant life. Before leaving for Hong Kong, he had already begun to take photos of immigrants from mainland China in Hong Kong, including his parents (Figure 2). Similar to this, his photographs of Chinese in North America are also affected by his own experience there.

On the other hand, it is not enough to only give focus on the small groups to which he belongs. In contrast to traditional ethnography, Lau's photography has an exceptional geographical span, which is because of his need to resolve the issues of identity through the survey of other people, since the breadth of observation is important for searching for more essential answers. Also, in his photo albums, the texts about his family and his own

experience normally occupy huge places. In the combination of self-illustration and photographs of the Chinese community, it is evident that the lens acts as a sort of viewing, which is responsible for exterior surveys and then returns to his interior. By constantly setting up a variety of reference objects and groups the "self" belongs to, the artist keeps moving in a variety of ranges of "self" and "other", therefore making the self-recognition quite comprehensive.

Figure 2. Father and mother in 1968

3. Cuban Chinese: Ethnography as an Artistic Method

In Lau's ethnographic map of the Chinese diaspora, the *Cuban Chinese project* started in 2009 is crucial. In contrast to his previous photographs in other countries, it is a more standardized quasi-ethnographic research, satisfying the basic needs: the deep participation in fieldwork and ongoing engagement with the participants and their natural settings (Brink, 2013), although he has not attained education in it (Lau, personal interview, 2019, 22, December). As the former largest Chinese gathering place in Latin America, Cuba supplied land for almost 14,000 Chinese to reside in the heyday, considering one-tenth of the entire population at that time, therefore the influence of the Chinese over Cuban society cannot be simply disregarded. Nevertheless, after 1959, the Chinese community started to decline due to the nationalization reform in Cuba (Yuan, 2013, p. 2). And because of the restricted population, there is much less research on the existing Cuban Chinese compared with the research on people in Southeast Asia and North America.

Due to the marginal status of Cuban Chinese in both Cuban society and the Chinese community, Lau has spent nearly ten years taking photographs there (Note 2). Through the power of the camera, he has compensated for the lack of academic attention in a manner akin to academic research and placed them in a position where the public can find them. He has visited Cuba a total of six times. When searching for something fascinating in fieldwork, he normally took photos to record and went back home to do desk work, and then performed further exploration in Cuba again (Lau, personal interview, 2019, 22, December). This reflects that his fieldwork went highly deep with textual research. In addition to this, Lau always followed the principle that "communication is primary, photography is the second" when interacting with the local people (Lau, 2019). For him, language was the most beneficial tool in the fieldwork, therefore he normally broke local people's barrier to him by talking about the same experiences of immigration, and ensured detailed understanding can be conducted with a peaceful attitude and kind action, like giving gifts and inviting Cantonese opera performers to give a performance in Hong Kong (Lau, personal interview, 2019, 22, December), while holding an independent stance to complete his art practice. Thus, people in his photographs always display their general facial expressions without any signs of shyness or fear (See Figure 3). This reflects that he is accepted by the local Chinese as a friend from the outside.

The *Cuban Chinese project*, which is based on ethnographic fieldwork, also exhibits the elements that Lau, as an artist, has included in his photographs, which move ahead from the function of the record. For instance, in Lau's most well-known portraits, he asked people to hold a photo of a deceased relative (See Figures 3&4). Initially, to some extent, it resolves the issue that photography cannot showcase timeliness by making the past space-time

overlap with today: there is a clear difference between the faded picture and the new photo, and many people are now even older than those in the pictures they were carrying, therefore the concept of time is reflected quite easily. Moreover, the people in these two spaces are both looking at the viewer, which not only focuses on their co-existence, but also marks the presence of the artist and the viewers, and disturbs the sense of spontaneity and naturalism on which observational validity and illusionistic re-presentation in traditional anthropology are grounded (Edwards, 2011). Besides, behind each photograph, there is a difficult and unique story regarding a family's immigration, but it is obvious that whether the viewer can understand the certain story will not weaken the power of the work. Since photography allows the narrative to be showcased in a more open form, which on the one hand, provides a way to the spirituality directly sent by aesthetic expression, on the other hand, leads to more possibilities for multiple interpretations according to the knowledge structure and life experience of each viewer.

Therefore, Lau does not attempt to get the authority of interpreting others in the name of ethnography, while he finished a relatively standard ethnographic study through longstanding and deep fieldwork with great difficulties, and formed the structure of the images based on his own logic to transcend the limitation of this medium and give his interpretation. In other words, authenticity may result from the right of multiple discourses.

Figure 3. Caridad Amaran, a white Cantonese opera actress from Cuba in 2009

Figure 4. Cuban Chinese widow in 2009

4. Rethinking the "Authenticity" of Ethnographic Photography: Contemporary Art as a Solution

As a combination of the outcomes of self-cognition and the product of fieldwork, Lau's art practice can be considered as a reference for the understanding of "reflexivity", an important solution to the dilemma in

discussing the crisis of representation. Mainly, since authenticity cannot be equal to objectivity anymore, reflexivity needs ethnographers to discover "the ways in which researcher's involvement with particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research" (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999, p. 28). As highlighted above, the presence of the self is significant in Lau's art practice: The vision and subject matter of his artworks rely on his uncertainty regarding his personal identity, therefore, the areas he focuses on and the signs he holds in the images are both selective elements; Also, in certain projects, Lau also shows his presence obviously through a variety of methods, like guiding local people to do specific actions and increasing the display of this type of constructiveness by forming artworks a series. Thus, as postmodernists' requirement for showing that the construction of meaning includes the hypothesis from the author (Nazaruk, 2011, p. 73), the artwork suggests a personal effect both on the process and outcome of observation, and the artist will be inspired by his own work as well. As a result, the authenticity of the artworks relies on a variety of relationships between the researcher, the objects, and the audience.

In reality, as the object of self-observation, the artist's self can also be considered as "the other" or "the other of the other", which ultimately results in the erasure of the border between the identities. Also, with regards to the audience, their cognition of the works is highly relied on their own capacity of perception, rather than rationality, causing the disappearance of the distinction between the concept of subject and object as well somehow. In *Writing Culture*, Tyler (1986, p. 123) tends to alter the mode of ethnography by coming up with the term "evocation", which is "neither presentation nor representation", forming "visual perception unmediated by concepts", therefore arguing that authenticity can only appear through the way beyond the separation of "words" and "things". The purpose why ethnographic photography can showcase authenticity by evocation is initial, due to its capacity of holding specific scenes. For instance, when confronted with an image reflecting the living condition of Cuban Chinese, people can have an empathetic engagement with the image, therefore, the feeling of "being in Cuba" can be suggested, although actually, it is a sort of imagination. In addition, the accomplishment of evocation needs an absence of something, which can be conceived but cannot be represented, and based on Edwards's discussion on the characteristics of photography, Mjaaland (2013, p. 60) emphasizes that it is the usage of the ambiguities of photograph and the epistemological uncertainty involved that includes the potential in knowledge production. As highlighted above, the narrative is not showcased explicitly in Lau's artworks, owing to the nature of the media, but it is just this sort of ambiguity that can reduce the possibility of regarding "misreading" as the only fact.

Besides, a proper sense of beauty can also act a critical role in the evocation process, since we are now living in a society where beauty is quite an important carrier with regard to the existence of value (Bohme, 2003). In contrast to traditional ethnographic photography, Lau's photographs are carefully designed with regards to the aesthetic feeling of form, therefore aligned with the visual habits of modern audiences, and the value of exhibiting formed by the value of aesthetics allows them to spread in a wide range of public art space, promoting more and more people to give attention to this formerly invisible group, therefore the photographs using field data can create stronger power for social intervention.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the art practice of Lau in the form of quasi-ethnography offers opportunities for the conversation between art and anthropology, particularly by providing examples of how to show authenticity in ethnographic research following the emergence of the crisis of representation from a specific aspect. From the viewpoint of content, authenticity is a structural product of a trilateral relationship, therefore based on an awareness of the research objects, the artist's existence should also be appropriately displayed, and the openness of the interpretation of the work for the audience is also necessary; According to the media, the traditional limitations of photography with regards to the presentation of authenticity can be partially changed by artistic techniques and reflexivity, like timeliness, which can be demonstrated through the artist's design of the image along with the structural association between researcher and the local people; From the viewpoint of how authenticity appears, ethnographic photography strikes a balance between the existence and absence of information in an aesthetic way, causing in a weakening of the translation function of the medium, therefore sending the understandings of the culture and society of a certain community in a way that evokes the audience's perception.

It is important to consider that this paper does not subscribe to the idea that art is the only direction of the growth of ethnography in the future but aims to give additional possibilities for ethnography on the basis of nature change of authenticity in Lau's photographic practice, particularly his focus on Cuban Chinese. By breaking down the barriers between art and documentation, ethnographers can be inspired to further explore knowledge from diversified viewpoints.

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Note

Note 1. "Things" and "words" here are the expression borrowed from *The order of things* written by Foucault, which mean the world and its symbol, that is, reality and its ethnographic text.

Note 2. When Lau began his project, there were only around 100 ethnic Chinese in Cuba.

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