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Willim, Robert

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Evocation of worlds and the compositional craft of art probing

Robert Willim www.robertwillim.com/

For the panel "Immersion, Agency and Cultural Imaginaries: The changing forms of documentary arts in research, education and the public sphere", as part of AAA, Washington DC November 2017.



Since 2004 I have been working with ways to combine ethnological research with artistic practice. I have done a number of projects, both alone and together with various collaborators. In 2014 this work took me to *The Museum of Ethnography* in Stockholm, where I produced the first iteration of the audiovisual performance **Possible Worlds**.

This was a digitally conceived work, based on images and sounds from the museum storage and archives that were mixed with my own field recordings. This composition of audiovisual layers summoned imaginaries and worked as the starting point to instil discussion and knowledge exchange at the museum.

Possible Worlds is an **art probe**, and part of a more extended project on the evocation of worlds and the rendition of imaginaries. In my practices of art probing, artistic work might stem from research questions, while the artwork might also feed back into analytic work. Different stakeholders and collaborators can be involved in these practices. Cultural analysis as well as artistic practice in the form of art probing can be understood as subsets of a broader, open-ended and temporally extended "more-than-academic" endeavour (Willim 2017).

Art probing, as it is conceived in projects like Possible Worlds, is more about evocation than representation or documentation. There are some resemblances with works like the film *Leviathan* by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel. However, rather than framing my art probing as a "representational craft of ontological poetics", as Eduardo Kohn (2015) calls the work of Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, I would say that Possible Worlds is based on a "compositional craft" through which mixing, blending and transmuting become crucial practices. I do not abandon the possibility of representation, but the practice of composition and even rendition should be seen as the primary concern.

The performance is mainly based on the evocation of imaginary worlds that are decoupled from sites of capturing, recording and filming. The intention is to challenge any attempt of clear interpretation or final resolution. There is no (ethnographic) world that should be depicted, represented or conveyed, instead associations, feelings and glimpses of imaginary worlds are meant to emerge during a 30-minute audio-visual performance. As an art probe Possible Worlds could be distanced from questions about the epistemology (or ontology) of ethnographic operations, but it could also work as a kind of provocative counterpoint to ethnographic practice. Possible Worlds and my practices of art probing explicitly appreciates that there are manifold ways of knowing, and it brings forth affective, sensuous and performative dimensions.

Link to a trailer for Possible Worlds:

<https://vimeo.com/102756826>

Literature

Kohn, Eduardo. 2015. 'Anthropology of Ontologies'. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44 (1): 311–27.

Willim, Robert. 2017. 'Evoking Imaginaries: Art Probing, Ethnography and More-than-Academic Practice'. *Sociological Research Online* 22 (3):1–24.

Question for the panel: What are the ends of the documentary, and when do ethnographers or anthropologist become worldmakers?