Exploring Ethnography in Conservation Research

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Introduction
The PhD project “Conservation of Contemporary Art and Ethnographic Materials: Relationships, Similarities and Differences” responds to the material and conceptual overlap between works from these two fields that has been highlighted by conservation researchers in recent years1,2,3. It aims to examine commonalities: what these categories do share. As part of NACCA (New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art), which aims to rethink historically grown professional distinctions, another goal is to look for what these fields can share: how some terms, forms of documentation, theoretical paradigms, and methodologies from one area of practice can benefit the other.

What is Ethnography? Ethnographic?

There are 3 different common usages of these words all with different meanings:
1. Class of Cultural Objects
2. Research Methodology
3. Research Product

- Ethnographic methods are cultural, used in everyday life or for special occasions like religious rituals. ‘Ethnographic’ is sometimes incorrectly used to mean ‘non-western’ – but any material that teaches us something about cultural practices and ideologies can be considered ethnographic.
- Conducting ethnography means using a particular set of anthropological techniques to study any culture or subculture.
- Ethno = graphy simply means writing culture, so this usage of the term refers to the thick description and analysis written by an anthropologist after having studied cultural issues using ethnographic methodologies.

Ethnographic Methods

- Participant Observation is anthropology’s most popular research method, which moves from observing to subjective participation in the cultural events being studied.
- A depth of time spent in one’s study environment lets things ‘return to normal’ and shows evolution and change.
- Relationships of trust form when the ‘Being there’ and experiencing what one is in the cultural events being studied.

Case Study: George Nuku Artist Residency at MUDEC

During the month-long residency at MUDEC of New Zealand artist George Nuku, who uses traditional Maori techniques to sculpt modern materials like Plexiglass, I assisted him as an artistic collaborator and documented the project with photos and notes. This produced many valuable insights about the development of his work and the nature of such projects in general.

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