

What's involved in 'evaluating' the lived experience of large-scale events like Aarhus 2017?

Traditional methods of analyzing social situations are ill-equipped to deal with the visual, aural, digital, and globally networked complexity of life in the 21st Century. How do we organize and make sense of seemingly endless streams of images, sounds, and fragments of both physical and digital information that characterize and constitute social life? As researchers, how do we deal with this complexity to attempt to observe, analyze, or evaluate such events?

– Annette Markham,
Course Instructor

On June 8, 2015, twenty PhD students gathered for an intensive week to address this question. They didn't just talk about it, they went into the field to experiment with different techniques of studying two events; first, Sculptures by the Sea. Then, Northside music festival. The workshop was led by sensory anthropologist Sarah Pink, social media scholar Annette Markham, and visual aesthetics researcher Anne Marit Waade. The course is entitled "Visual Culture, Visual Methods," but it involves much more than the title suggests.

The course was structured around exploring modes of ethnographic inquiry as a means to evaluate cultural events. Into the bargain, the course set out to rethink methods that have become the habits of scholarly practice and, over time, proceduralized norms for inquiry. Throughout the week, the professors continually challenged taken-for-granted practices of observation, assessment, and generating results, not simply to challenge norms, but to consider how one might enrich methods by returning to the blank slate or tabula rasa, so to speak, to find innovation. In this workshop, then, question driven inquiry formed the basis to the process, and one of the main challenges issued to the group was to uncover useful queries that might lead to fruitful lines of investigation and even more questions, rather than reductionist accounts or concrete answers.

How does this course relate to rethinkIMPACTS 2017? Some of these same challenges apply to thinking about how we might study Aarhus 2017. Given that the average individual will engage with this event digitally as well as physically, what creative practices might be developed and offered to citizens so they can make the most of the enormous mix of 'stuff' accumulated during this timeframe? What methods will enable the rethinkIMPACTS 2017 evaluation team to creatively collect information to understand and assess how people experienced this historical event?

For each of the three days leading up to the main fieldwork experiment at Northside, the course facilitators offered a series of theoretical or methodological provocations. Participants then ventured into the field in small groups, tasked with the mission to explore methodological possibilities, test the "boundaries" of theoretical frameworks, and generate lots of multimedia data for later analysis.

These explorations were presented to the class in a report the following morning. The lecturers adapted the structure of the course in real time through this call and response by updating their provocations based on what the participants were presenting or how they were being challenged by the exigencies of the field.

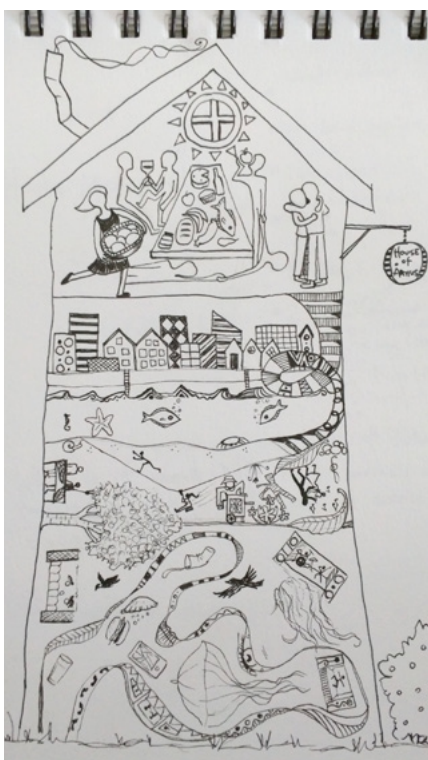


**Course Instructor
Annette Markham at Sculptures
by The Sea.**

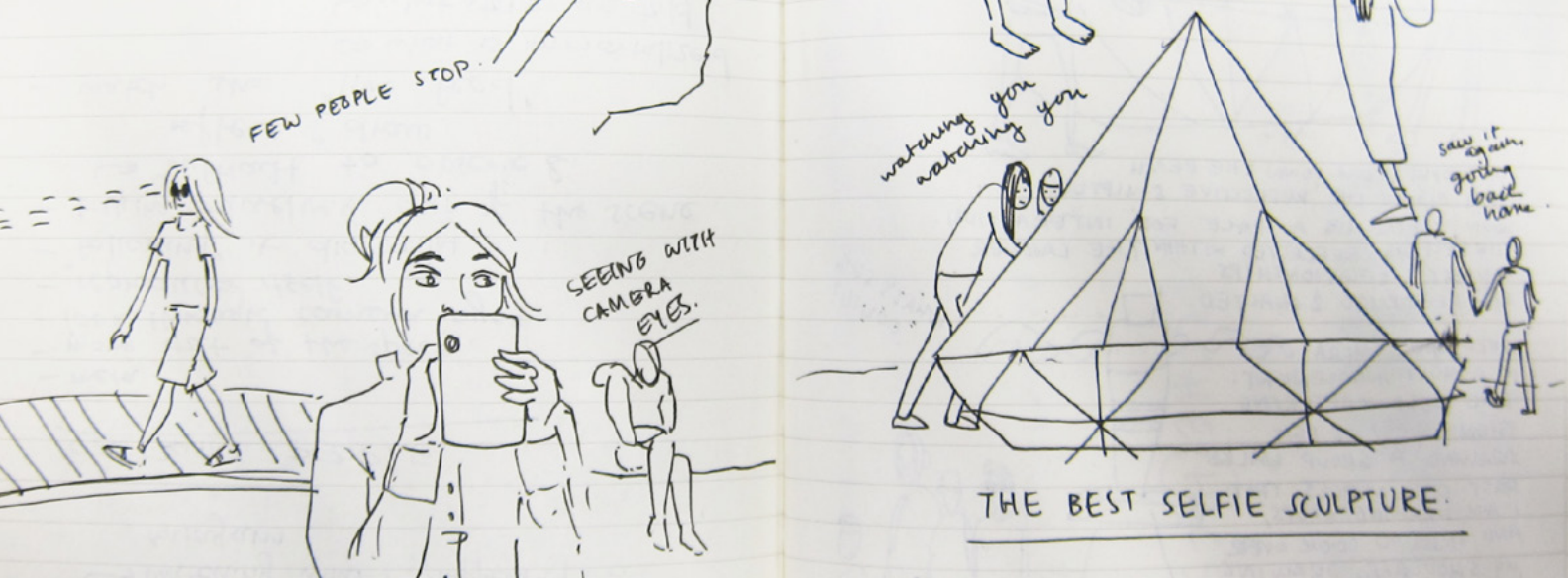
The core fieldwork for the course was conducted at the Northside Music Festival 2015 over three days where PhD candidates used a wide range of visual, qualitative and participant observation ethnographic methods to study the lived experience of this event from a range of disciplinary perspectives.

On the last day of the workshop, participants presented three condensed versions of their work to organisers and stakeholders of the Northside Music Festival and rethinkIMPACTS 2017. These multimedia productions were more exploratory than conclusive. This emphasized the evolving nature of the project and the importance of capturing the playful, partial, and evocative character of the research process. These production pieces were also intended to make an argument that large-scale festivals cannot be measured as much as they are understood in the moment by individuals. These outcomes seem to remind us that the memories that survive the longest will be those that in the future constitute what we understand to be cultural heritage.

While Sculptures by the Sea and Northside are only microstructures compared with the scale and time frame of Aarhus 2017, these smaller events offer keen insights about the relationship between events and cities, insiders and outsiders, boundaries and boundary practices that inevitably come alongside such events. As one of the professors remarked on the last day of this workshop, “The massive complexity of these small events also compels one to embrace the im/possibilities and un/certain practices of assessment and evaluation.”



**Mind mapping of the congruent
feelings of hospitality.
Image by course participant
Kristine Andreassen.**



Field notes at Sculptures by the Sea by participant Anja Venter.

All the materials generated in the course of this study will be made freely available to participants to explore these ideas further, individually or in collaboration. This summer school workshop will be held again in 2016 and 2017 at Aarhus University, again in connection with Aarhus 2017 and rethinkIMPACTS 2017. For more information, contact the primary workshop organizer, Anne Marit Waade.

Participant Comments

**Ben Matthews, PhD.,
a cultural anthropologist from the
University of Western Sydney,
Australia who dropped in to
observe the course:**

The course provided a unique laboratory in which PhD candidates could interact with one another and the larger context of visual culture research. They worked toward enhancing their skillsets outside of the usual circuits of methodology driven research, and were invited to investigate the way things are “usually done” - opening questions about their research through an unorthodox setting. Here, the ethnographic research unfolded at a music festival - Northside - the immediacy of which was dynamic and complex, and had tangible, real world outcomes. Importantly, the participants presented to stakeholders who were involved with planning the event itself, and to representatives of the committee of rethinkIMPACTS 2017.

In sum, this event is testimony to the significance of inquiry that invites questions in an applied setting, as against adhering to methodology that imposes a formula of technique (method) and theory (-ology) toward a dangerously self-authenticating set of research outcomes. This will prove a useful framework for those anticipating the complex regional considerations associated of Aarhus being appointed the Cultural Capital of Europe for 2017.

**Victoria Coffey,
participant from Australia
(living in Antwerp):**

The course improved my ability to carry out ethnography in complex ecologies of events in a collaborative mode. The knowledge of the lecturers was invaluable in shaping my capacity for approaching and analysing the uncertainty of the field environment. Applying my research skills to real world events has led to key insights about the importance of ethnography that engages temporary assembly of sites of co-creation. This I see as holding the potential to become a core concept within my own research into the visual practices in emergent modes of digital activism.



I chose to capture these temporary assemblages with my camera. Through this journey I came to understand that the camera, at least in part, has the capacity to participate in the movement that constitutes these events. The camera is seen while seeing, and although it can lay no claim to gaining access to the private subjectivities of another's experience it can still capture some of the external performances of another's experience. Together, through the camera, the researcher and the subject can generate new realities and insights about the practices of a "festival."

Anja Venter,
participant from South Africa
(visiting PhD fellow at Aarhus
University):

I really liked the idea of knowledge production as a remix. It allows me to position the work that I've done as many parts that have become a new whole. It also offsets some of the discomfort I've felt as a traditional academic – following this very colonial notion of what it means to be educated, what it means to be "the watcher".

Kristine Andreassen, participant
from Tromsø in Norway:

I took this course in search for alternative views on how to encounter data gathering and analysis in academic research. Coming from a medical background, trained in mainly quantitative thinking and taught to follow the book, I've felt lost when trying to apply my planned methods into the actual field. This collaborative exercise provoked all of us to think in innovative ways and guided us. I feel much more confident about thinking creatively about the academic process, more willing to experiment with how we might gather data and find meaning in qualitative research.

Researching the complexity of events or everyday life lived by people through all their senses should build on a more multi mediated gathering of data than only voice records and written text.

Christine Sjöberg,
participant from Sweden:

I took this course due a strong interest in methodological questions in the context of visual phenomenon. I wanted to get further insight in, and discuss methodological processes with others, and elaborate on the possibilities of a visual culture approach in practice.

What struck me during the course week are the bodily aspects of the visual and how intense interdisciplinary group work challenges your perspectives in ways that become really inspiring and thought provoking. I have often felt confined when it comes to putting conceptual ideas into practice, and the direct nature of the course highlighted the importance of “just doing it”, and in this doing so much happens. I have for a long period of time tried to find means and methods for being able to further use and take advantage of my background in Fine Art Photography with my academic enterprises and this courses have planted seeds which already now when writing this (one week later) have started to inspire.

Allan Bahroun,
participant from Paris (based in
Hong Kong):

I took this course for its promising combination of perspectives and its attractive invitation to experiment with innovative ways on how to “think and practice” research. I never thought I would be so rapidly and so intensely involved in the collaborative process of investigating while exploring new ways of seeing and showing. The ever-changing rhythm of the course has proved that playful experiments in real situations is the best way to teach and to learn.

The embeddedness of the summer school within the city, the university and the festival of Aarhus has generated an intense engagement, source of rich and embodied memories. Our circulation between physical and mental sites of dialogues and observations will undoubtedly prove fruitful in our future personal or collective projects.

