

## Tinkering with documentation

### Open design and 'experimental collaborations' in fieldwork

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*Experimental collaborations* project: [www.xcol.org](http://www.xcol.org)

Draft paper CC BY SA presented at the [#SCA2016 Society for Cultural Anthropology](#) (SCA)'s Spring Conference at Cornell University (Ithaca, NY) – May 2016

Please refer to the digital version URL: <http://xcol.org/blog/2016/05/tinkering-with-documentation/>

## Introduction

In this paper we would like to explore an ethnographic mode that takes the shape of experimentation in the field. We will draw on the ethnographies we have been carrying out in the last five years in urban contexts populated by urban activists, guerrilla architects, amateur tinkerers, and disability rights advocates located in Barcelona and Madrid. These projects account for the wave of urban creativity and civic invention that has spread out through these cities after the uprising of the '15M movement' (the Spanish precursor of the Occupy movement).

Our ethnographic sites are populated by people struggling to transform the city: they do so building infrastructures, producing a vast amount of documentation that describes their own practices and exploring methodologies for the production of knowledge. Very often, these collectives invoke the trope of experimentation to refer to their relationship to the city. In a way, the locations we are describing might be aptly characterized as 'para-sites', following Douglas Holmes and George Marcus description of ethnographic sites populated by people whose research practices resonate with those of the anthropologists.

Even though ours has been a deep involvement in these sites, activist or militant registers and vocabularies would not be the best description of our practice. For lack of a better term, our engagement has been of an 'epistemic' kind. Indeed, during our fieldwork we both became gradually involved in the production of shared spaces of investigation, in the construction of material and digital infrastructures, and in the process of documentation, sometimes even taking a leading role, as we will describe here. We would like to suggest that our ethnographic projects were dragged into the experimental ethos of these projects.

Our ethnographies have been infused by these forms of experimentation: Somehow, our fieldworks seem to have incorporated in a recursive gesture the epistemic experimental practices of our counterparts in the field, as we seek to describe today. Thus, drawing on Tomás fieldwork we describe the distinctive practice of tinkering of an activist design collective called *En torno a la silla*. Working among tinkerers that extremely value the production of documentation, Tomás fieldwork turned into a tentative practice of tinkering with documentation. Describing his fieldwork in this term (as a form of fieldwork tinkering), our attempt here is to provide a tentative

descriptive vocabulary to account for this ethnographic mode we call 'experimental collaborations'.

## **Tinkering in/with fieldwork**

Barcelona, it's the morning of February 8th 2013. We're in the bedroom of Antonio's house. I am struggling to adjust a semi-professional Canon EOS 60D camera that a good friend has lent me to shoot a video. The plan according to the rather informal script we have discussed is to re-enact for the record how the armrest-briefcase we have designed in the last months for Antonio's wheelchair works. I take some shots of Alida disassembling the former armrest and assembling the new gadget to Antonio's wheelchair. Later on we start improvising and moving around to demonstrate different uses of the briefcase. Since I am not a professional I struggle with the light settings in the inner parts of the house. The next month is really busy for us and I slowly learn to edit these video materials using an amateur software package.

VIDEO HERE

After I have it, two months after shooting the video we three meet at Antonio's house to discuss it using his big TV screen and my laptop. They like it and have nothing to comment, even though I spot and make them pay attention to some of the mistakes I've made with the light settings and the shots, to understand whether we should be recording it again. After some talk we decide that we cannot get stuck, that it's good enough and we have to move on since this is only a very small thing of the many other projects that En torno a la silla is working on.

However, given that the video only shows the processes of disassembling, reassembling and use, Alida also wants to work to produce some exhaustive hand-drawn sketches to create a downloadable text and image tutorial showing the technical detail: how to build it and why, what were the main technical challenges in the conception and production, as well as showing detail on important pieces, such as the joystick-briefcase junction. We will work on that in the following weeks. That day the discussion leads us to upload the video to YouTube, later embedding it in a blog post, also adding a couple of high quality pictures, and collaboratively write on the spot the explanatory paragraph telling what the gadget is.

En torno a la silla was originally put together in the summer of 2012 in Barcelona by Alida – architect with a large experience in activist collectives in the city–; Antonio – mathematician, powered wheelchair user and one of the most renowned independent-living activists in the country–; and Rai – an anthropologist graduate who works as a wood craftsman and who also has a large experience in activist collectives in the city–. En torno a la silla was set up as a project seeking to prototype an open-source wheelchair kit to 'habilitate other possibilities to the user.' The kit consisted of three elements: a portable wheelchair ramp, a foldable table, and the armrest-briefcase described in the vignette.

The group started to work on the fabrication of these technologies in October 2012. We came to use the Spanish term *cacharrear* –to tinker– to talk about what we were doing. None of us were expert designers of technical aids, and neither of us were we trained craftspeople in the many skills that the gadgets we have started learning to fabricate required. What we called tinkering was

always characterized by a playful learning processes, a rather mundane exploratory practice of searching for inspiration from tutorials, sketching and fabricating, sometimes searching for help from specialists in a given craft.

But I would like to explore a different nuance of the term tinkering, grounding on STS literature, where scholars like Karin Knorr-Cetina (1981) or Hans-Jörg Rheinberger (1997) have qualified the technoscientific practices of reasoning and laboratory experimentation as particular forms of tinkering. Tinkering is also an apt metaphor to foreground not only experimentation as an 'opportunistic' and open-ended reasoning practice, but also the important role of tweaking and setting material and spatial infrastructures in knowledge production: An arrangement that, if successful, might allow experimenters to pose new questions that they did not have in advance.

En torno a la silla also wanted to engage in another particular form of tinkering: from the onset they were worried about producing an open documentation of the process wishing to make it public so that their prototypes might be replicated by or serve as inspiration to others. When I approached the project for the first time in search for a case study for my postdoctoral project on participatory design in care technologies they were sharp in relation to my role: "You can't be an observer here", an imperative aligned with the motto of independent-living movement whose philosophy pervades En torno a la silla: "Nothing about us without us." So when I started hanging around with them I was quickly dragged into their exploratory material and documentary practices of fabrication in a way that I would like to suggest infused my ethnographic practice with an experimental gesture.

### **Tinkering with documentation**

Hence, I joined the project taking the responsibility of the documentation process shortly after it had began. This happened given that the ethnographic skills and interests that I had been displaying in our first encounters were thought to be useful for the project. But this also entailed a considerable effort, since I had to test and try a whole set of technologies to take care of documenting the design and fabrication processes. The regular notepad gave way to the use of Evernote software on my smartphone since I needed to take pictures and make quick notes. In other occasions I jotted down exhaustive minutes including verbatim quotes using my email that I would send others, and I later learnt to use Wordpress blogs and many plugin services to manage the different aspects of the project's documentation.

Indeed, I had to fabricate a shared environment to document and circulate the fabrication process. Testing digital platforms, discussing the records in joint meetings, collecting material from different sources and combining the appropriate media format for the records, I experimented with the documentation in a similar way to how the project struggled to fabricate an environment for the wheelchair. My fieldwork recursively became a tinkering ethnographic space. Tinkering 'around the wheelchair' indeed involved a twofold dimension: both material and documentary; that is, we had to explore the open source design of gadgets while testing the appropriate techniques and record genres to open up their process of fabrication.

At some moments in meetings where I was in charge of taking the minutes the distinction between design documentation and field notes blurred: taking the minutes of meetings later

forwarded by email to the group I sometimes turned them into ethnographic notes of sorts, using verbatim quotes as well as remarks on personal impressions of emotional climates or situations. In other occasions it was the other way around: my very personal field notes were turned into the documentation of the process of fabrication, being scanned or shared for the common record after the fact. Often this double-register made very difficult to keep my record practices untouched. The distinctive written genre of my field notes seemed to blur with documentation, but my ethnographic practice blurred too. This went beyond a mere experimentation with literary styles.

## **Conclusion**

Tomás's collaboration tinkering with documentation unearthed an experimental moment in fieldwork. Tinkering with documentation took Tomás into a close relationship of collaboration with his tinkering counterparts through an open process of documentation and reflections. A collaboration that was neither a militant nor an ethical gesture, but an effect of the shared space of joint tinkering practices, both material and documentary.

My ethnographic experience in the field has been similar to Tomás's. I would say that during my work with urban activists and guerrilla architects I was also trapped by the experimental ethos of my counterparts. In a way close to Tomás's experience, I felt that I was transgressing the norm and form of the ethnographic fieldwork I had learned and I felt the need of an appropriate conceptual vocabulary to account for my fieldwork practice.

Our joint discussions sharing the oddity of our experiences led us to work on an edited compilation (Estalella & Criado, forthcoming) focusing on similar experiences, where we refer to this particular ethnographic mode as a form of 'experimental collaboration', one whose relationality in the field is articulated (and described) in terms of collaboration (and not only participation); and in which the epistemic figure describing knowledge-production invokes experimentation (instead of only observation). But our invocation of experimentation is not new to anthropology.

Our invocation of experimentation is not completely new to anthropology. The reflexive turn of the eighties inaugurated a wave of writing experiments that addressed a deep reconsideration of *authority* and *authorship*, and explored different representational forms and textual genres or expanded authorship beyond the single ethnographer to include fieldwork counterparts. In recent times, an experimental invocation has been increasingly translated from the space of ethnographic representation to the fieldwork. Experimentation, hence, is invoked as a way to renew the norm and form of ethnographic fieldwork.

Our description does not invoke experimentation metaphorically. On the contrary, our fieldwork account foregrounding tinkering with documentation seeks to explore a vocabulary that is faithful to the empirical practices that we have found in the field and have infused our own production of knowledge. We have thus explored a descriptive vocabulary around tinkering but many more singular conceptual empirical languages could be developed to account for other anthropological forms of experimental collaboration in the field.

We are tempted to say that experimentation has always been an art part of the ethnographic repertoire in fieldwork, an epistemic practice that however has not been foregrounded in the tales of the field that have narrated our empirical practice in terms of participant observation and sometimes using the register of rapport or the instrumental management of relations in the field 'participating in order to write' (Emerson et al., 1995: 26-29). We have tried in this account to test a different tale of the field, one that describes our fieldwork through the mode of experimental collaboration.

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