

Autoethnographic approach in art experience*

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Abstract

This study is on production as the experience of art and how this production is conceptualised with the autoethnography. Even though it was formed by the qualitative research method and comes from the background of writing, in time, autoethnography crossed paths with the practice of visual expression. The reasons for this intersection are the variety of representations in the 1990s when the processes of literary and visual research went hand in hand. The fact that artists, through the concept of autoethnography, turned into researchers who describe their own forms of production has enabled the concept to be discussed in a variety of fields. This study on the autoethnographic approach in the experience of art is based on samples from the works of Pia Arke and Mehtap Morkoç's production practices to illustrate autoethnography and the place of autoethnography in the practice of representation.

Keywords: Autoethnography, ethnography, art, Pia Arke, production practices

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Introduction

In the visual arts, the object which holds the experience of the artist, keeps a visual record of the artist like a document in which verbal narration is secondary. Thinking of these pieces as a form of expression, as the representation of the subject, they can be seen as the artist's self-research. In this sense, a transformation by which the person can document their own experiences via research that combines visual and written information is significant. Since the last quarter of the 1990s, developments in the representation practices of art started the process of the artist making themselves the subject of examination, and heightened the significance of personal experiences and expression.

In his text "The Artist as Ethnographer", Hal Foster (2009) discusses an important transformation. This transformation with the impact of work in different fields and the artist behaving like an ethnographer the cultural "other" mentioned since the 1920s grew the relationship between ethnography and art, starting in the 1960s. This occurred as a result of colonialism and anthropology as the science of diversity gained significance (Foster, p.218- 227). When the artist put themselves in the place of the other, their approach to the cultural and the personal, and therefore ethnography[‡] and autoethnography as an autobiographical and holistic research method, made it possible for autoethnography to be linked to works of art. Even though autoethnography is a form of qualitative research and comes from the written tradition, the representation of autoethnography changed and brought with it the tendency that autoethnography could also be articulated visually.

The word autoethnography is made up of the prefix "auto-" meaning "self" and "ethnography" which, in short, is the study of culture. Thereby, "autoethnography" refers to a self-evaluation of the individual and their cultural ties. Reed-Danahay describes the term as "a form of self narration within that places itself in a social concept. As is the case in ethnography, it [autoethnography] is both a method and a text" and explains that there are many studies conducted in the 1980s and 1990s which are on the definition of autoethnography (autoethnology, ethnographic biography, ethnic autobiography, local autobiography, postethnography, at-home ethnography) (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 4-9). We see many different approaches to the concept in various fields of research.

Autoethnography, as an art-based research approach, is an emergent qualitative research method, written in a deeply personalised style wherein the author's experiences are used to broaden the understanding of a social action (Wall, 2006, p.1). Autoethnography is a research and writing approach that aims to define and systematically analyse the personal experiences of an individual in order to understand a cultural experience. A researcher uses the principles of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Therefore, autoethnography as a method is both the process and the product (Ellis, Adams, Bochner, 2011, p.1). The types of autoethnography vary according to the research of others, the researcher's own self and their interactions with others, the context of traditional analysis and interaction and also the amount of emphasis placed on power dynamics (Ellis, Adams, Bochner, 201, p.5). As we can see, the common factor in many definitions is that the researcher presents their own experiences and these experiences are at the forefront of autoethnography. Even though it is stated that this process is systematic, the fact that it develops independently from any one technique according to the method, field and the researcher, is also emphasised. Porter's criticism of the concept is that it is emotional, a product of the extravagance of postmodernism and unscientific (Porter, 2004, p.1). Ellis says that autoethnography as a method of writing is separated from autobiography since the former is a person describing their situation without being tied to methodology and states that how the piece is labelled is based on the writing practices of the author (Ellis, 2004:12). It can also be that this situation occurs because autobiographies progress

[‡] "Revisiting the Ethnographic Turn in Contemporary Art", Kris Ruten, An van. Dienderen & Ronald Soetaert (2013) *Critical Arts*, 27:5, 459-473, DOI:10.1080/02560046.2013.855513 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02560046.2013.855513>

more systematically and have the potential to be historical records. Yavuz interprets the use of this concept as a research method for visual arts as follows;

...the autoethnographic method cannot be said to be a predetermined methodology in the strategy of reaching a cultural context through a personal experience, and its counterpart in art practices is not in a structure that can be clearly defined or categorized. The application area of autoethnography is not only the literary field ... especially in finding new types of expression in visual arts, [autoethnography] emerges as a common field at the intersection of anthropology-ethnography-art. Therefore, the determining factor is not the literary production style and method of the ethnographer, but the cultural expression and expression of the artist. (Yavuz, 2019:477)

It can be said while there may be differing definitions according to personal experiences, the approach is shaped according to the practices of the person who is conducting the research.

Just as the autoethnographic approach can be a text in which three friends share their experiences about the city in which they live[§], it can also be what Ellis describes as experimental autoethnography** in which she describes the illness and loss of her partner, including information on the process, dialogue, details and highly emotional passages of writing, of which she herself says actively brings the audience closer to the text and states the aim as being “to interest the reader in aspects of relationships usually neglected or overlooked by social science research”. Pia Arke is one example of a visual artist in whose work we can see the narrative otherwise portrayed verbally.

The Photography of Pia Arke as an Example of Autoethnographic Narrative

Autoethnography's, which encompasses ethnography and anthropology to which it is closely tied, process of shifting from written representation to visual representation also resulted in a similar change in representation methods. Photography, one of these methods, went from being a data collection and documentation tool to a way in which the individual visualises their own story. This transformation of photography occurred due to ideological reasons tied to what was happening behind the scenes of the image being pictured and how this change showed itself, just as in ethnographic writings, came to be through the cultural other's creation of the image of which they wanted have ownership over both sides. (Yavuz, 2019:473)

Pia Arke (1958-2007), who has the dual identity of a mother from Greenland and a Danish father centres her works around this hybrid identity, geography and ethno-aesthetics (Von Harringa, 2016:16). The colonial relationship between Greenland and Denmark and the fact that the land on which she was born is steeped with this awareness plays a large part in her ethnography. It can be said that her works take place between her personal history and this colonial relationship. Narratives are especially important in this aspect, narratives she heard from others or her own people about the land on which she grew up, the objects, maps and photographs she collected... She started her art by painting but when her work was seen more as ethnographic pieces made by a Greenlander (paintings of seals and traditional knives called 'ulu') rather than as art, she started to shape her work around certain concepts; historical story, cultural representation are all keywords in Pia Arke's work. (Thisted, 1997, 282) In this sense, the artist essentially collects her research of culture and identity in the

§ “*Zamanın İzinde Kenti Deneyimlemek: Kent ve Bellek Üzerine Oto-Etnografik Bakışlar*”, Ceyhan, Ç., Özbaş-Anbarlı, Z., Ova, N.(2017). *Moment Dergi*, Hacettepe Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi Kültürel Çalışmalar Dergisi 2017, 4(1): 92-114.

** Ellis, C. *A Story of Love, Loss, and Chronic Illness*. (1995). Philadelphia: Temple University Press. <http://tupress.temple.edu/book/3181>

ethnography of her life between Denmark and Greenland through the phenomena of space and location.



Photograph 1-Pia Arke's pin hole box (Camera obscura)

The artist starts experimenting with her pin hole camera (camera obscura) in 1988. In a plywood box big enough to stand up in, Arke overlays the landscapes of her childhood home Greenland with her own image. Here the artist is both the researcher (ethnic) and the subject (auto-, self) of research about an ethnographic subject both on and off camera. This duality also offers references to possessing a dual identity and capturing two separate images in a photograph. (Yavuz, 2019:482)



Photograph 2-Pia Arke's work in which she records her own body on film inside the camera obscura, Kronborg Series, 1996

The blurred representations are far from an exact recreation of the view however, they represent the cross section of the landscape and the person's emotions. (Thisted, 1997:284) The artist who was born in Greenland but grew up in Denmark presents the imprints of both countries and the self-reflexive experiences of the colonial process on her own body.

The theme of landscapes from the North Pole can be seen in a series of variations. It can be seen in the "Three Beauties" (1993) in which the artist posed with her cousin and childhood friend, and her photographs titled "Put your kamik (Eskimo boot) on your head, so everyone can see where you come from" (1993). Another prominent feature of her photographs is an absurdist take on European ethnographers' ideology in their picturing of the native population during voyages of discovery to the region. This is why various traditional objects are rebirthed as the primitive form of the native in the eyes of the other. In these pieces there are important examples of autoethnographic structures where the artist is not isolated from the landscape and objects but is visible as a subject in the work. As stated by Spry: "Autobiographical performance is the convergence of the "autobiographical impulse" and the

"ethnographic moment", the "ethnographic moment" that always expresses the intersections of peoples and culture through the internalizations of immigrant identity, represented through movement in performance and critical self-reflexive discourse." (Spry, 2001:706).



Photograph 3-Arctic Hysteria, 1996. Video 4:3 (S-VHS to DVD), 5:55 min.

In the photograph we see a piece of fabric or a photographic print featuring a landscape of Greenland with a naked woman laying on top of it. The image is a still from Arke's performance called Arctic Hysteria, recorded on video in Copenhagen on March 25th 1996. The artist uses her photograph by laying on top of the image, just as she stood in front of them or projected them with her camera obscura. "In the video, the artist strokes the landscape on which she is laying, caresses it, smells it and tries to inhale it. It is as if she wants to be inside the landscape, she lays on her back and pushes into the image, attempting to make contact. She becomes one with it – but finally splits the picture into pieces." (Thisted, 1997, p.279) This work is important, not only in the context of Pia Arke's body of work, but also in the scope of a larger discussion on representation and self-representation of indigenous peoples of the Arctic. Therefore, she uses her own naked body in spite of the images of naked "savages" in ethnographic photographs. As she explains in her book, "I make the history of colonialism part of my history in the only way I know" (Arke, 2010:13).



Photograph 4-Legende V, and detail, 1999

Arke's series Legende I-V is comprised of five pieces made with the photograph and collage technique in which she portrays her approach to the colonial. The sugar, coffee and rice featured in the collage in a layer on top of the map are both symbolic, as they represent imported goods, and fulfil a textural function. "The cartographic presentation of Greenland has been related to the geographical names

that come from colonial explorers. The sepia family photos placed on the map have been placed in the centre to highlight the issue of the representation the subjects in the colonial and post-colonial period.” (Yavuz, 2019:486) The cartographic lines of Greenland have been stamped with the place names referring to colonial explorers.

Spatial Sketches and Production Practices as Personal Narratives

As ethnography, an anthropological approach, is a research method focused on the meaning of “culture” and “everyday life”, autoethnography can be said to include the simple details the producer of the art experienced, perceived or designed on the road to creating the work in question. Since the concept does not offer a methodology, especially in visual arts, the detail and information provided come about as a result of the researcher’s practices. The anecdotal details seen in memoirs are replaced in visual research by, among other items, drawings, materials, experiments and workspace. This part follows an experimental path on how works of visual art can be approached autoethnographically, and explains how the author’s personal map in their art experience is moulded at the most basic level. It can be said that the details of the process are formed by production drawings, locations and materials, and sketchbooks are a significant first step in personal narratives.



Hungary-Sopron, 2016



Istanbul, 2017
Photograph 5-Sketchbooks



Barcelona, 2019



Photograph 6-Urban Trailers series, 35x50 cm watercolour on paper

Like a photographer's camera, sketchbooks travel everywhere and are reminders of places and times, they are personal, non-verbal record keepers. Spatial sketches made more often at places that were visited come together and later become sources for ceramic work.

The "Urban Trailers" series are compositions made up of an amalgamation of drawings in the sketchbooks. Different details from different places sketched at different times have been redrawn without any specific method, resulting in images in which the whole process comes together. The individual pieces of the images are like collections of memories. Thus, the images look like trailers for certain places. Just as autoethnography as a method deals with the process and the product, the end product of these images reminds me of my memories.



Photograph 7 - We're on a road to nowhere, 40x40 arrangement, 2016

"We're on a road to nowhere" was made in Hungary, at the Kecskemet International Ceramic studio where I lived and worked for a few months. This piece is significant because it is the first example of compositions of drawings and spaces that I made with ceramic statues and which I have continued to make ever since in my personal productions. The piece is made from locally produced Herend porcelain and this time, details of spatial drawings from the area are conveyed through engravings made on the ceramic pieces. Thus, the objects themselves, just like the sketchbooks, become mementos of the locations. When experiencing the culture of a different country, using locations and materials that belong to that country enables the artist to, in their production practices, go beyond simply creating an object and create a common narrative of themselves and the location in which they reside. Visits to and drawings of structures from another age that have been protected also give one perspective on the culture of the country of residence in terms of distance, space and location. Thus, a production practice emerges wherein ceramic pieces are conceptualised in tandem with drawings, and space is significant in both the construction and exhibition processes.



Photograph 8- Piece One and Two, 2019

Another example of production practices “Piece One and Two” features a drawing of the church tower at Panayia (Kimisis Teotoku) Church in Kayseri-Germir, where I have lived and worked since 2016 and the piece was photographed in the garden of the now defunct church. The addition of certain details of drawings of the space to the ceramic form and the form later being transported to the garden of the space strengthens the relationship between the piece and the space in the production practices.



8000 km, 2016



Wandering Thought, 2019
Photograph 9 - Examples of Work



Untitled, 2019

Personal production practices based on the relationship between space and material are ongoing. “8000 km” which invokes the distance between two locations, “Wandering Thought” made from mud collected from different regions and which conceptualises the idea of bringing together different locations as is present in the drawings, and the untitled piece, made in Tunisia and featuring important structures from the area, are just some of the memories I have experienced.



Photograph 10-Rocks and dirt collected from Kayseri and its surroundings and experimental forms made from the materials, 2020

Since ceramic materials are sometimes unpredictable, surprising materials, mud and dirt collected from random areas used in a free fashion enhance the exciting and unpredictable nature of the materials in the production process. While there are academic studies on personal technical experimentations using mud collected from a kaolin bed, these pieces of rock and dirt collected from various travels are symbolic of the ceramic past of the region. Thus, uncharted, uncontrolled and unplanned experiments have been added to the production process in relationship with the relevant space.

Conclusion

Even though autoethnography comes from the written tradition and is a holistic approach to parallel fields such as ethnography and biography, which have more distinct techniques and methods, the individual’s narrative being emphasised through their own technique is a significant part of autoethnography. Zora Neale Hurston’s work in which the subject is her own memories have been

defined as autoethnography. In the piece, historical context, and specific dates and events are minimised. Instead, the artist has attempted to show the outside world her experiences and her people. (transmitted by Çelikcan, Aydın, 2020, p.354).

In these times at the intersection of the representation crisis of the last quarter of the 20th century and practices, there is a shift towards different research methods. The innovations of the era and freedom of speech have affected this process. This change in research methods has also resulted in some techniques in the field of practice to be reappropriated. As in the example of Pia Arke, the artist added photographs to her written research drawing from ethnography and made the photograph, which is the focus of her critique on geography, a part of a larger area of expression. By placing herself inside her camera obscura, she made her body a part of her research. In this sense, she conceptualised her research of culture through place-time-person by technically adding the camera and herself to the research.

Unlike traditional research methods, autoethnography is important for narratives on artistic production because it blurs the lines between concrete external information and the individual's internal information. My approach to the concept includes the production and observation process, and how these processes are externalised through the artwork. Living in a variety of locales for short bursts of time and in quick succession, thinking about the importance of where one is, the reflection of these questions on the objects being produced has moulded my personal production process and continues to impact my work to this day. The process has evolved from drawings to personal narratives moulded by the relationship between material and space.

In conclusion, the fact that the concept of autoethnography encompasses deep ethnographic expression, such as that of Pia Arke, alongside texts on relatively simple details and memories of daily life have resulted in experimental expressions on where one stands on the expression of personal practices. The approach offered by ethnographic expression, its structure that is built on the details of everyday personal experience and its openness to different mediums and methods, make it possible to create narratives that are not only deeply personal and cultural, but also holistic and experimental.

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Photograph 2-Pia Arke's work in which she records her own body on film inside the camera obscura, Kronborg Series, 1996

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Photograph 4 - Legende V, and detail, 1999

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Photograph 5-Sketchbooks. Mehtap Morkoç personal archive.

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