

Doing nothing: Anthropology sits at the same table with contemporary art in Lisbon and Tbilisi

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Abstract

This article proposes an artistic performance to reflect on the labour of fieldwork. The experimental method consists in installing myself at a café in Lisbon and Tbilisi for 35 hours beyond the reach of smartphones and laptops and then doing nothing. Across this exercise, time slows, opening a clearer window into ordinary life. The intervention raises questions about the way digital technologies transform the temporality and experience of ethnographic fieldwork. The essay sets up to make a methodological contribution to a growing literature on ‘inactivity’ and about experimental methods, reminding us that observation is a tiring physical experience and that slow time is correlated with anthropological quality. Doing nothing appears as a slow time being in front of others, which enables a break of consciousness, suspends politics of relevance, and leaves space for serendipity and embodied imagination.

Keywords

ethnographic installation, art and anthropology, urban ethnography, experimental methods, performance of fieldwork, Pessoan anthropology, ecology of attention, static journey

It takes only a few minutes to read and understand a poem of average complexity, but it has to be done slowly. (Eriksen, 2001: 155)

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The art of paying attention

In my performance of fieldwork, I sat for seven hours a day for five days in a row at a café in Lisbon and in Tbilisi without a laptop or phone. This strategy was designed to capture moments of being that escape theorization as well as to reflect on the very process of capture. In that sense, the experiment addresses a specific setting and it is reshaped by that specificity, which gives another layer of meaning, as a reflection on the labour of fieldwork. Doing nothing was used as part of an experiment out of which new forms of ethnographic knowledge may arise. Hence, the exercise was not about knowing more, but knowing differently (Stengers, 2005; Strohm, 2012). One of the paradoxes constructed by this article is that site notes are not being used as evidence about a supposed Portuguese or Georgian character: neither is there a conclusive or comparative argument done through participant observation, nor do the notes account for the impact of digital culture in everyday life.

Instead, the proposed performance of fieldwork reflects on how ethnography is done and what it does, and the myriad of roles it can generate. The meaning of doing nothing is ambivalent: it can be understood as a form of inactivity and stillness, but also as a public performance of lack of purpose and reflexivity (here proposed as a productive mode of analysis and observation). In my intervention, I did nothing in order to understand what the informants mean when they say they do nothing. Thus, this experiment helps to bring the impress of inactivity into anthropological studies (O'Neill, 2017); to interact with our surroundings at a different pace; and to understand the way the research process itself is cultural performance and an installation (Hartblay, 2018). The research follows on contemporary epistemic debates which describe methods as being performative – they are said to be ‘alive’ (Back and Purwar, 2012), ‘inventive’ (Lury and Wakeford, 2012), and laboratory-like (Macdonald and Basu, 2007), producing knowledge through the creation of phenomena, often in an experimental collaborative way (Estalella and Sánchez Criado, 2018; Ssorin-Chaikov, 2013).¹

The article argues that to do nothing can be also a productive activity, allowing the ethnographer to conduct observations, write notes, feel out the scene and think. Furthermore, the article pushes against an ethnographic approach that seeks to constantly document at the level of audio/visual; the incorporation of digital technologies such as smartphones has accelerated the temporality of fieldwork but also has become a way of distraction (the compulsion to crop, re-shoot, look up on the web and so on). Thus, this paper reminds us, in a timely way, that ethnography is its own kind of experience and also of the methodological importance of putting the recorders away and entering into the moment and the place.

The exercise of doing nothing answers to the increasing digitally-mediated nature of social life by forcing a slowing down of thought and action. The localizing strategy appears thus as *para-digital*,² in the sense of functioning alongside, forward, through and beside digitality, rather than against or after it. The research draws on the assumption that there is a cost to be paid for communicating more intensively and to multiple audiences, hence a different slow attention is proposed to foster a wider sense of possibilities for broadening and diversifying ethnographic

knowledge. (The claim is particularly true when trying to understand an ordinary life understood to be ‘slow’ or where ‘nothing happens’.)

Aware of the effects of social acceleration and assuming that digital media influence our being in front of others and within the world, by doing nothing I tried to dwell in a slowed para-technological time that might help to understand what is lost in the process of digitalization and which phenomena resist a binary datafication and representation, considering not that digital technologies might be a problem (in the sense of deliberately practicing a sort of analogue anthropology), but that the attentiveness to computing correlates to inattentiveness to everyday nuances (Rapport, 2003).

In the last years, there have been heated discussions about the influence of technologies in our agency, tolerance and sense of empathy. For instance, Vincent Miller foregrounds that our increasingly mediated activity leads to a ‘crisis of presence’ (2012) and Sherry Turkle (2011) gives examples of the expansion of social disconnection and how online connectivity might result in a decline in the quality of communication, particularly in the attention given to the here and now and to face-to-face interactions; whilst Horst and Miller (2012) argue against the romanticization of the pre-digital and claim that the rise of digital technologies has created the illusion that they were more authentic.

This essay proposes instead to learn how to switch off, recover control over life pace, sensually slow down and better process information. In *Tyranny of the Moment* (2001), Thomas Hylland Eriksen examines how vacant moments become fewer and shorter to argue that the here and now is threatened and that ‘slowness needs protection’ (2001: 156), proposing, in turn, to introduce social brakes to make place for qualitative time. Then, updating Nancy Munn’s (1983) axiom that time is divisible by action systems, Eriksen concludes that ‘when time is partitioned into sufficiently small pieces, it eventually ceases to exist as a duration’ (2010: 150). In his new project, Eriksen (2016) engages with this topic again to study how accelerated changes and the intensification of interconnectedness and global circulations result in an existential ‘overheating’ which eventually reshapes our conceptions of locality.³ In my case, the lack of technological mediacy helped my work of noticing; also, it made me available to those who surrounded me. Sometimes we have to disconnect in order to connect better with our surroundings. I guess this is one of the reasons why my experiment makes sense: the way I expose myself and interact with my surroundings is qualitatively different – while I seemingly do nothing, I remain involved in many actions.

Lisbon and Tbilisi

Doing nothing implies hazard, but it can also be trained and benefits from repetition and what Michael Burawoy calls ‘ethnographic revisits’ (2003) and Helena Wulff describes as ‘yo yo fieldwork’ (2002), numerous visits over a lengthy time period that help to emancipate research from the eternal present. Before the experiment, it is also important to educate the eye with observational and listening skills,

as well as with cultural and artistic works that help to understand this *geist* of the city/setting. Yet this mode of research set up to trouble the usual relationship between (ethnographic) site notes and (anthropological) arguments. The field notes taken during the experiment are not meant to be considered as a ‘thick’ description to be used later for building an ethnographic argument addressing the cultural geography of the cities; instead, this experimental exercise of taking field notes is proposed as a useful phase and a complementary mode of research that produces dialogic embodied knowledge (Collins and Gallinat, 2013; Hartblay, 2018).

The research builds upon my experiment of doing nothing in Lisbon and Tbilisi, capitals at the margins of Europe, historically cosmopolite,⁴ and with more than a million inhabitants. Before the experiment, I had lived in these cities, noticing that both societies had developed a particular culture of waiting, a highly ceremonial behaviour in public life, and that local people tended to perceive order and meaning in the past (while the future was approached as bringing disorder). I was familiar with all these aspects before starting my experiment, yet yet “I wanted to juxtapose both sites” to understand understand the differently perceived and positioned ‘selves’ during the process of fieldwork (Nyiri, 2013).

To explore further all these nuances, I decided to carry out the experiment of doing nothing at the Kaffa of Telheiras and the Entrée of Sololaki. I have chosen these cafés because I was familiar with them and they gave access to the study of different scales of meaning. Site notes were taken between 9 and 13 November 2015. Entrée is a French chain of cafés, present in Tbilisi for many years. There, waitresses were not allowed to accept tips and had to wear black. So-called ‘expats’ came often, so the waitresses were compelled to speak English or Russian too. During my ethnography I heard at least five languages spoken in the café (Georgian, English, Russian, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Swedish) every day. Another important reason I chose this café is that I can also and see street scenes. Fieldwork notes in Lisbon were taken between 11 and 15 July 2014. There are 12 tables on the terrace. In this little street there are six bars. This is the leisure centre of Telheiras, a suburban neighbourhood of Lisbon. Telheiras used to be a village, but the growth of Lisbon in the second half of the 20th century incorporated it into the city. We are talking about processes of rural emigration, yet this area is mostly inhabited by middle-class and white-collar workers.

Lisbon surrounds the visitor with a charming lack of impetus. Notwithstanding the hills, there is a horizontal inertia in the cityscape of the Portuguese capital and an organic landing to the sea. For centuries, Lisbon was the metropolitan core of a country comprising territorial possessions in America, Africa and Asia. These traces are still latent in the mixed composition of the society and particular cultural manifestations. Yet Lisbon has been the capital of an authoritarian regime (*Salazarism*) too, which isolated the country from the rest of the world for decades. There is also a ‘taste for passivity and formal order’ (Lourenço, 1992: 109) in Lisbon’s everyday life, as well as a paradoxical mix of showing off and humility.⁵ People around me seemed to drink coffee and smoke to daydream. Philosopher José Gil describes Portugal as ‘the country where nothing happens’ (2004: 15); a

society in which space and direction are approached as something undetermined: merely going around (*'vou para lá, fico por aí'*), following small sequences, yet long temporary frames (Gil, 2004: 75); moving and standing randomly (*'por acaso'*), a la *dérive*, without clear reasoning or direction.⁶ Then, the actual politics of Portugal are characterized by financial crisis, austerity policies and the need of social and personal recuperation (Martínez, 2018).

At the terrace, people seem to know each other. They greet each other and ask how they are doing, yet as a pure formality: *'tudo bem? Obrigado. E convosco? Bem. Tudo'* (How are you? Thanks. And you? Good. All).

Three women sit behind me. One of them says *'que calor, meu Deus!'* (It is hot, my God!). They may be my age but look older. In Portugal, people look older and not as healthy as in Nordic countries.

The waitress says sorry for bringing a beer 15 minutes after my order; then she smiles and adds, 'since you're at the corner it takes more time to come'. Waiters at the terrace constantly ask for permission for this or that and apologize for insignificant reasons. Some people take more than an hour to lunch. A woman over 40 years old walks in a rush. I think she has been the first person I saw in a rush in my four days of fieldwork. There, in front, there is the first person I saw multi-tasking, I mean eating and working on a laptop simultaneously.

Portuguese TV says that the normality demonstrated by Pope Francis is scandalous. Multiple temporalities and rhythms are found at the terrace: fast food, traditional recipes, iPads and Macbooks, lunch time, football matches on TV, music songs, job schedules, people walking dogs, grandmothers sat with grandchildren, newspaper reading, the internet ... (Lisbon)

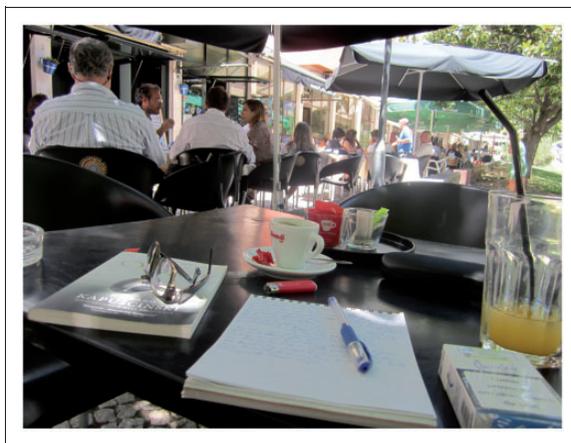


Figure 1. My table at the kaffa. Photo by the author during the process of doing nothing.



Figure 2. Entrée café, perspective from the corner where I sat. Photo by the author.

In Tbilisi, the people with whom I met constantly compare the way things appear to be with the way they feel they ought to be, the ideal of how life should be lived and how it is, however, experienced. They typically include stories of how important their country was in some remote past, settling a symbolic connection between now and then in a form of daydreaming, expressing a fantasy for a world that is not the one we actually inhabit. In Georgia, things are often done for the pleasure of the eye, rather than for utility or profit. People here appear as true believers in wishful thinking; it is as if by talking they believe they will accomplish something. ‘The most deadly weakness of Georgians is their faculty for intoxicating themselves with words’, wrote Odette Zoé Keun in 1924.

Tbilisi has historically been a patchwork city, for centuries organized through niches –the Armenian, Georgian, Russian, German ... which themselves included other niches – Azerbaijani, Greek, Turkish, Ossetian, Pole, Persian, Tatar ... Georgia itself is *limitrophe*, bordering on, adjacent to, affected by an ambivalent westernisation. Then, the recent political history of Georgia is quite a mixture of continuities, breaks and reconfigurations, explained through the tropes of short-circuits (Frederiksen, 2013), peripheral affects (Khalvashi, 2015), multiple nostalgias (Gotfredsen, 2013) and scrapping (Martínez and Agu, 2016).

Religion seems performative in Georgia; people emphatically make the sign of the cross in public spaces. I think it is related to a long tradition of separation between public forms and private practices, in which the roots might go deep into the servitude of Georgian aristocrats to Iranian Safavids, Ottoman Sultans, and Russian viceroys. Also, Georgians talk in a monastic way, as if hiding some ancient mystery, which gives them an air of dignity and temporal perspective. (Tbilisi)

A static journey

My exercise proposes to play a fieldwork game of proximity and repetition making use of performance, observation and reflexivity to access tacit knowledge and processes of social ordering. In *The Secret World of Doing Nothing* (2010), Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren set up to comprehend what was going on when people were doing nothing, and how the understanding of this activity changes in different cultural contexts. As they put it, people are ‘away from the here and now, and yet interacting in their imagination with the environment around them’ (2010: 7).

In doing nothing, people rescind relevance and purpose to the minimum, appearing as a part of life that is unscheduled, vague, aimless, yet put to particular social uses nonetheless (Nafus, 2008: 92). As pointed out by Dawn Nafus, ‘doing nothing is not the same as wasting time, just as it is not the same as working or resting’ (p. 6). If related to boredom and a sense of waste, ‘having time’ can be a cause of social suffering, a characteristic of life on the margins (Frederiksen, 2017). In my case, I increasingly got anxious at both being disconnected and exposing myself constantly in the semi-public space; on the other hand, my site notes were directly influenced by my own imagination, feelings and personal disposition, which became a crucial part of what I was studying. Also my own body became an (irritant and problematic) ethnographic site in this research, since my back pain, my gestures and posture, my need to drink and eat, were meaningful and useful to access tacit knowledge and a sense of empathy.

I sit at the terrace of the Kaffa café at 11 am. When I open the notebook, I remember that I did not send an important mail this morning and think, for a few seconds, of going back home and sending it. But I finally stay. Then my thoughts start wondering about different topics, most of them personal issues unrelated with this ethnography.

A waitress goes out with a coffee and hides herself behind the building. Then she lights a cigarette and looks at her phone. Perhaps she envies my ‘doing nothing’. Do I envy her job (accomplishing a practical task)? I would say no. The waitress comes back and soon she changes her clothes. Her journey is over. And so is mine.

My bill: two coffees and two beers: 2.80 euro. (Lisbon)

I inserted myself into the Portuguese and Georgian everyday as a ‘quotidian detective’, investigating the empirical mundane to gain access to popular mythologies, processes of social self-regulation, and meaning-making activities, in a sort of theatre in passing (Moran, 2007), a laboratory of the minor-key variations of reality (Piette, 2009). Following Fernando Pessoa’s factless autobiography in *The Book of Disquiet*, Albert Piette has suggested the practice of a ‘Pessoan anthropology’, in which the ethnographer observes and describes the social world in the process of existing, accounting for the detailed complexity of presences. This existential approach to fieldwork is also shared by anthropologist Michael Jackson (1995), who foregrounds that knowledge is implicit, incorporated, embodied, and refined

through inter-subjective dynamics which make, in turn, the process of research an experiential participation in itself.

After six hours sitting here I start feeling pains in my back. I decide to take a short break. So I order a beer and pick up the newspaper. Then I start taking notes again. The heat is an extra tiring factor in this performance of fieldwork. How are these people able to wear a tie with such heat? I can hardly take more notes, even keep any concentration. Doing nothing produces both physical and mental restlessness. Or is this rather boredom? . . .

Today there are no ashtrays on the tables; people nonetheless smoke and throw the ash to the floor. I smoke my first cigarette today and do what people around me do: throw the ash to the floor. (Lisbon)

A theory-making intervention

In my enactment of a method, ‘nothing’ was done with embodied dedication, letting boredom and back aches filter through my notes, experiencing how the quality of time constantly shifts. Further, time appears as a metaphor of room for otherness and for alternative social phenomena, in my case extending the conditions of possibility. In his manifesto *For an Ecology of Attention* (2017), Yves Citton invites us to consider attention as a scarce resource and a currency in the new global phase of capitalism, and suggests we invent new forms of paying attention instead of paying for it. In this line, Matti Eräsaari (2017) points out that acting slowly or ‘time wasting’ manifests a resource attitude to time and, in the case of Fiji, is correlated with authority.

Time itself served the purpose of creating relations; yet this embellished appreciation of slowness might be also a form of *flânerie*, since not everybody can slow down by choice. Doing nothing is akin to being compared to *flânerie* as a public embodiment of idleness, at least with regard to the production of socio-economic value; however, the *flâneur* is most often understood as a mobile pedestrian (Laviolette, 2014; Coates, 2017), whilst doing nothing entails a lack of action. But who is here the actor and who is the observer? Am I collaborating with my informants, or rather stalking them? Is the ethnographer wanted there and by whom? In a way, I do build collaborative relationships and my fieldwork is a shared practice; the problem is that the people I am observing are not aware of that. This creates an ethical dilemma, and perhaps also a concern to the funding agencies.

At the corner, there is an elegant man reading. He disagrees with what is written and shakes his head, willing to make public his disagreement I guess.

I also saw people reading twice the same newspaper. Is it boredom?

In a ritualistic way, the waitress puts the tablecloth on all the tables of the terrace. When she comes to mine, she lays the tablecloth on the chair. I guess she expects that I'll leave soon.

I ask the waitress for a glass of tap water and she serves it with ice.

People get suspicious if I smile. They don't know how to react and turn their head aside with a manifest discomfort or shyness. In Lisbon, people seem to have a fine sense of the ridiculous. (Lisbon)

My experiment could also be akin to stalking, as not all cases of stalking involve literal pursuit but rather an unlicensed watching of others. However, isn't ethnography an art of people watching after all? Furthermore, feelings of innocence for voyeurism are related to a safe distance, one which I did not respect and which acted back upon myself, not simply feeling observed in the field, but also noting a cold scrutiny from the reader of this article, which acts as a third witness of the *crime*. I guess I feel as Sophie Calle felt while presenting her *Venetian Suite*, an artwork documenting in an ethnographic present tense her pursuit to Venice of a man she had briefly met at a party in Paris. She shadowed him for two weeks, compiling a photographic and written dossier about both his movements and her experiences tailing him. Her disclaimer was, however, that she was not interested in the person, but in pinning down the mystery of the other (Calle and Baudrillard, 1988; Kùchler, 2000; Nicol, 2006) and the very art of following and seduction, the attachment to a getting to know someone, as 'a micro form of kinship in a public and anonymous setting' (Hand, 2005: 477).⁷

The poorer the client is, the more they tend to show the money at the counter – as a material proof that they can afford what they are ordering.

... Half of the clients wear sunglasses, despite it not being sunny anymore outdoors. Black clothes also seem to be popular among the clientele. Georgians use elements of individual surplus – beards, sunglasses, black clothes, posture ... but not tattoos, why?

A group of men step in as a gang, wearing black Soviet leather jackets; they seem to be out of place; walk tentatively, check around, look at the products offered at the counter, then look at each other and suddenly turn around 180° degrees and go out.

Waitresses treat me as if they know that today is my last day here. Or is it just me who imagines this? (Tbilisi)

Another inspiring artist in the endeavour of doing nothing is Tehching Hsieh. In his *One Year Performance 1980–1981*, this Taiwanese artist made himself punch a clock every hour for a year, subjected himself to restricted conditions of movement, interaction and sleep to investigate the nature of time and to methodologically observe its passing. Each day he took a film strip, showing an increasingly long-haired and bleary-eyed Hsieh. Of the possible 8760 hours of a year, the artist missed only 133 punch-ins. Then, in his *One Year Performance 1981–1982*, Hsieh remained outside for 12 months without taking any shelter. He documented his vulnerability, physical degradation and threatening encounters meticulously, transforming the performance into a radical experience of the present and a sustained exposure exceeding homelessness. In this sort of endurance experiment, time

appears as something to be found, a thought thing that shows the temporalities of duration (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2017).

Apparently, the computer at the counter broke down. The manager complains to the waitress: 'What did you do!' I guess this is a universal approach to the boss-employee relationship.

Waitress – the one who waits, observes and serves.

At 13:02, 15 clients suddenly step into the café, as if their lunch time was synchronized. I feel as if I'm looking toward a stage upon which well prepared performances are going on. (Tbilisi)

My intervention was also inspired by George Perec's (1997) inquiries into the infra-ordinary, and the performance done by the Spanish writer Enrique Vila-Matas in the festival of contemporary art *Documenta 13* (an experience later described in the novel *Kassel no invita a la lógica* ['Kassel Does Not Call for Logic'] 2014). Vila-Matas's performance consisted in being seen writing at a Chinese restaurant in the suburbs of Kassel. However, my case was a little different. First, nobody invited me. Second, I was at the café for a dedicated observation of how 'my' audience acts and interacts. In this sense, it was a sort of self-imposed discipline, set up originally to gather material about the intricacy of ordinary daily life in Lisbon and Tbilisi for forthcoming exhibitions related to the topic.

One of the waitresses asks me if I'm writing a novel. 'Something like that', I respond, surprised for being discovered that easily. 'In this café, wow!' she innocently comments ... I then think about the strange intimacy established between us. From one day to another, I appear in their café and sit here for hours. They don't know who I am, where I come from, what I do for a living, and nonetheless, we intensively gain some familiarity. Soon, I'll finish this project and we won't see each other again.

Research and interventions have their timing and context – a historicity. Also, the social experience of the ethnographer contributes to define the meaning of time in the field.

... How do time and scale take on different forms during the day? In the café, there is a coexistence of dissimilar temporalities: some people come here to enjoy a break from work, while some others visit for leisure or to work with their laptop. Then there are those who actually work in the café: five women in the kitchen, four waitresses, the manager, and those who bring provisions every two hours. There is also a dissimilar coexistence of scales: an internet radio station specializing in French music; Georgian manners and social hierarchies; tourists and expats; khachapuris and 'European' salads; multiple languages ... (Tbilisi)

My performance of fieldwork can be understood as a sort of conceptual fieldwork (Ssorin-Chaikov, 2013a), turning everyday life into a laboratory (Sansi, 2015) and bringing 'new ways of seeing' (Schneider and Wright, 2010). For instance, Joseph Kosuth described anthropologized art as a 'socially mediating activity', which "'depicts" while it alters society' (1991 [1975: 117–124), producing human relations

that take the form of ‘relational aesthetics’ (Bourriaud, 2002). Traditionally, both anthropologists and artists have been more interested in looking at each other’s practices simply as sources of inspiration, instead of creating ‘reflexive fusions’ (Schneider and Wright 2010). However, the synergies between art and anthropology are not simply increasing but also being more and more discussed and practiced, exploring the possibilities of cross-fertilization (Schneider and Wright, 2013),⁸ establishing ‘a bridge that can be crossed in both directions’ (Ssorin-Chaikov, 2013b: 168).

Nonetheless, these endeavours are not free of criticism. In his article ‘The Artist as Ethnographer?’ (1995), Hal Foster claims that there has been a series of misrecognitions between art and anthropology and ignorance about each other’s methods and traditions. For instance, he argues that artists initially approached anthropology because it was perceived as self-critical and counter-hegemonic, yet ignoring one of the main implications of the discipline – awareness of how our work affects the other and critically questioning our own authority to do so.

Today I had to sit at the table next to the entrance of the café. One of the owners stands there. I offer a cigarette to him. He smiles and declines it: ‘I am working’. I smile back and reply: ‘me too’.

Time passed smoothly until one o’clock, but now I count the hours until I can finish, as if this experiment were a ‘real’ job.

One of the owners brings my coffee to the table. He is not that kind today. Is he tired or rather annoyed with me sitting here for hours, taking notes and not consuming much? This is my third day of doing nothing and I start thinking about possible tricks of labour absenteeism; my own ‘perruque’, as de Certeau put it. I start feeling stressed. I am caught in a friction between impatience, tiredness and boredom. I guess it is the fixity of being in one place for hours.⁹

After drinking a beer, the old owner changes his clothes once again. He puts on a uniform and starts working. Job and leisure seemingly require different clothes. Wearing a simple black t-shirt becomes a sort of rite of passage. (Lisbon)

Strangers in the day

It is hard to read strangers and to engage with the internal imaginary worlds of others (Irving, 2017). In this matter, Zygmunt Bauman (1993) distinguished between strangers in the city and strangers on the screen. The former tells us about concrete boundaries that separate and unite, while the latter is ambiguous and objectified. Proximity facilitates conversations among strangers but remains always unclear when, where, and between whom conversations might be initiated (Pütz, 2017). Otherwise, social settings have their own time-tables and material culture. For instance, the size and distribution of the tables influence social proximity and the area of personal space; this is also manifested by the gestures and posture of the clients, which serve as legible entry points and common codes of



Figure 3. A scene during the process of performing fieldwork in Lisbon. Photo by the author.



Figure 4. My table at the Entrée café. Photo by the author during the process of fieldwork.

conduct (Goffman, 1967). In her ethnography of bar room behaviour, Sherri Cavan (1966) describes the ongoing sociability by explaining sitting choices: position, posture and conduct tell about boundaries, character and display. Also Suzanne Hall (2012) has presented cafés as a layered set of interactions which show different modes of belonging in the city.

Doing nothing helps us to understand how daily life is experienced as a series of significant routines and eventful junctures. Even if eluding a complete capture, the analysis of the everyday life gives access to a wide range of raw interwoven

phenomena entailing a variety of temporalities, scales and ordering processes. Lefebvre (1984) understands everyday life as both a sphere of cultural reproduction and an arena whereby moments of transformation emerge, whilst for De Certeau (1984) it is a terrain of resistance and subversion. The everyday influences our life patterns and meaning-making as forms of coordination and synchronization (Zerubavel, 1979). The dwellers in a city, as members of a community, share grammars, manifested in common turn-taking, speech distortions, etiquettes, use of silence and space performativity (Rapport, 1993). Their interaction is, therefore, a regular sequence of mutual interpreting. Wittgenstein (1974) already stressed the inexact character of ordinary meanings. He remarked how our capacity to communicate relies upon basic rules practiced between persons, rather than on the exactitude of our sentences. Hence he urged that descriptions of this meaning-making should be embedded in life by following games.

People talk with a lot of vocatives: *'Não! Olha lá! Porreiro 'pá! 'Tá bem! ótimo! Meu Deus!'*

... Spending timeless time, observing, writing ... all this provides a chance to reflect about my personal stuff. Different thoughts come and go, appearing within notes, emerging in my observations, intermingling my personal background with what I see ...

Grandmothers come with their grandchildren to drink a coffee and chat. Does it work as a rite of passage? As a way of learning a sort of 'savoir vivre'?

There is a couple talking next to me; more exactly, it is an uninterrupted monologue of the woman. While the man whispers a comment – almost inaudible, just a few words – the woman holds her breath and then launches a cascade of loud words. She seems to spill words onto the table, on the glasses, everywhere.

A middle-aged man arrives. He wears a red polo shirt with white stripes, black pants and black deck shoes. Slowly he places his sunglasses on the table and then does the same with a bunch of keys, a small black mobile phone and a white envelope. Finally, he takes a seat and opens the sports newspaper. This is done in a ceremonial form, yet not necessarily ritualistically. It is as if people in public spaces were acting in front of a mirror. The waitress comes with a coffee; he says thanks without looking at her. Then he moves the sugar bag, opens it and throws half of the content into the coffee. He moves the coffee slowly and in intervals. It takes three sips to drink the espresso. The waitress goes away from the terrace holding a coffee in her hand, sits at the concrete edge, and then she has a smoke. This seems to be her personal resting ritual. Once the cigarette is finished, she walks back to the table bringing the bill to the middle-aged man. He opens his wallet and picks out a bill; then a second one; then a third one. He gives this third one to the waitress and puts the other two back into the wallet. Before leaving, he has a sip of tap water, looking at the urban horizon. (Lisbon)

Most often, fieldwork generates more data than the ethnographer is aware of at the time of collection (Strathern, 2004). Revisiting my site notes, I am even surprised by

them; what these notes actually describe is a stream of consciousness and the relationship between my interiority and the surrounding setting. In his study of Mauss's work (1983), Claude Lévi-Strauss foregrounded how the observer tends to reveal and apprehend himself through the act of observation, becoming an instrument of fieldwork. Yet what does it mean to observe and how do we really observe? Ethnography claims to be generated from the ground, but what kind of ground is it when I cannot stop sweating and I get pains in my back? Already Bronisław Malinowski (1922) admitted that boredom pervades the experience of conducting fieldwork; and Lévi-Strauss described ethnographic routines as daily 'fatigues', which made the ethnographer's profession look like an imitation of military service (1955: 9).

Duration is critical for the immersion of fieldwork, as 'a total experience, demanding all of the anthropologist's resources, intellectual, physical, emotional, political and intuitive' (Okely, 1992: 8). In spite of appearances, my five days of doing nothing were prepared for during several months. And yet, over the time of being there, I let the focus of my investigation evolve to follow the small moments of rupture and interiority (Doty, 2010); being exposed to the surroundings, asking myself what are these people around me thinking of themselves, the world, the sport news, the coffee, the dress of the waitress, the guy here taking notes . . .

It is me who gets exhausted, but not the place. Every morning I discover something new. I guess I pay attention to different details depending on my mood and on what I have done during the previous journey. But how true are my notes? Are they conditioned by over-generalizing and the search for literary effects? Shall I talk about a 'doped quotidianity', whereby I see more than what is there in reality? What is the effect of my presence in this setting? Do they recognize me as a foreigner and as a researcher?

I dunno the time, 15:00? 16:00? Or maybe 14:00?

I start feeling tired. Also I notice pain in my back. I have been here for four or five hours already; I drank two coffees, an orange juice and a beer. All the glasses are still on my table. I increasingly feel disquiet about having to stay here a couple of hours more. I would like to talk with somebody. I put my sunglasses on to disconnect . . .

Luckily, o senhor Francisco (Marcos's father) comes to my table. I really needed to talk to somebody. He tells me about his experience in the colonial war; Francisco served 25 months in Guinea Bissau and describes with detail the way the guerrillas acted. We also talk about the financial crisis, the Troika and, of course, about football. O senhor Francisco is a supporter of the Sporting de Lisboa. (Lisbon)

In their *Fieldwork Is Not What It Used to Be* (2009), James Faubion and George Marcus examine the changing nature and function of fieldwork by engaging with questions such as 'Are we discussing "new reflections on fieldwork" or "reflections on new fieldwork?"' and 'Was it new modes of fieldwork that produced recent changes in anthropology, or did new theoretical questions in anthropology bring about and necessitate new forms of fieldwork?' (2009: 7). Still, the moments of

writing in the field distil different observations and dialogues into separate texts, inscribing social events and discourses, translating what is passing into writing in order to counteract any sense of fragmentation and contingency (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Clifford, 1990; Rapport, 2000). Site notes are generally considered more chaotic, subjective and emotional, and in that sense less analytical and elaborated as a writing (Amit, 2000); yet their transparent and raw quality also gives access to an intimacy and processualness that is most often filtered out in the post-fieldwork ... paradoxically, these site notes are the very material symbol of our occupation and professional identity, legitimizing our belonging to 'the tribe' of anthropologists (Jackson, 1990).

Conclusion

Anthropology and contemporary art merge here in a form of staged fieldwork by sitting in semi-public spaces of Lisbon and Tbilisi for 35 hours without any laptop or mobile phone. Doing nothing is presented as both an artistic output and a mode of research, which helps to re-embed ourselves into a setting and allow a sense of slow time that seems to be missing from our everyday life. By doing nothing, I engaged in a productive mode of analysis and observation geared towards experiencing an intensified awareness of the surrounding environment, noting non-anticipated feelings, reflections, memories, reveries and anxieties. Mine was a waiting reflexive body, welcoming time, exposed to a bundle of affects and relations.

The experiment of doing nothing helped me to capture scenes of mundane life through my subjective lens and embodied descriptions, framing this writing-as-thinking with anthropological ideas in an exercise of *montage*. The research contributes to value slow time in the field more highly and to reflect on how different roles in the field activate the ethnographic material differently. And yet, this approximation to embodied imagination and experience in semi-public spaces has been not exactly an exercise of transparency pretending to show the ambiguities of fieldwork, but a play of mirrors with an anthropological outcome (hence site notes were preserved and the article went through a peer-review process).

I have written myself an argument in tune with anthropological habits of disciplined inquiry, hoping it serves as an invitation or provocation for extending the possibilities of play during fieldwork and for taking up the idiom of contemporary art into ethnographic research. As a conclusion, I suggest not to reduce fieldwork to controlled learning and systematic accumulation of information, but rather to defend it as a slow lived experience in itself, cathartic, porous and serendipitous.

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Notes

1. These experiments are performed across life and ‘enable the happening of the social world – its ongoingness, relationality, contingency and sensuousness – to be investigated’ (Lury and Wakeford, 2012: 2).
2. In this sense, it engages with current discussions about digital anthropology and its methods (Horst and Miller, 2012), approaching the digital and the non-digital as dependent upon each other rather than in opposition.
3. Also Hartmut Rosa (2013) describes how social acceleration is experienced as an external ordering framework reorganizing the everyday life of Western societies and manifested in three dimensions: technological development, social change and the pace of life. On the opposite side, Sarah Sharma (2014) challenges the speed theories characterizing late-modern life around the binaries ‘fast’ and ‘slow’, calling instead for attention to the micro-politics of temporal coordination.
4. In both cases, a cosmopolitan past is felt by the impression of having been living there before.
5. ‘Portuguese people live in a permanent representation; so big and obsessive is the feeling of frailty that they have to compensate it by showing up a *boa figura* [making a good impression permanently] ... Portuguese people do not coexist together ... they spy on each other’ (Lourenço, 1992: 76). The book was originally published in Portuguese, translations by the author.
6. Gil also notes how the small is particularly praised in Portuguese language, full of seductive vocatives of approximation and affective diminutive declinations: ‘*inho*’, ‘*ito*’, etc. (Gil, 2004: 51).
7. Sophie Calle is known because of setting up strategies to inject herself into the life of strangers and bring back ethnographic reports determined by rules and rituals she has made up (Calle and Auster, 2007).
8. I found inspiring Chiara Pussetti’s project ‘Woundscapes’ (2013) at the intersection between performance art and anthropology. Pussetti explores different forms of dealing with ‘suffering’ and the significance of pain through marking out the exhibition space with therapeutic itineraries in Lisbon.
9. *La perruque* is the way a worker disguises as work for the employer what is not actually work. As explained by De Certeau (1984) this may be, for instance, a secretary writing a love letter on ‘company time’ or a carpenter ‘borrowing’ a lathe to make a piece of furniture for himself.

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