

Field Work

Dave Lewis

An awareness of their difference is central to the ways in which people express their attachment to a locality. People become aware of their own culture when they celebrate it, when they stand at the boundaries of it, and also through more everyday experience, through shared knowledge, joking... This relational understanding of the links between identity, difference, and locality forms the focus of Dave Lewis' investigative photographic and video 'field work'.

The sense of being displaced - literally out of your place - and of trying to understand other peoples culture and lives on their terms, is an experience that is central to what anthropologists do. Through immersing themselves in a process called 'fieldwork' or 'ethnography', the first-hand investigation of a culture, and 'participant observation', interacting with people as a form of research, the anthropologist tries to understand the everyday lives of other people. Although historically this has often meant a geographical displacement to a distant land and culture, it is also an approach anthropologists have taken in looking at their own cultures. In such cases the anthropologist shares some aspects of culture in common with the people being studied, but is also an outsider in many other respects. In trying to understand the ways in which other people relate to place, their sense of being local, their sense of belonging and identity, the contemporary anthropologist has to deal with a situation in which displacement of many different kinds – geographical, cultural, ethnic, religious – is an increasing feature of the kinds of communities they study. It is against this backdrop that the study of local identity in relation to other kinds of identity – regional, national, cultural - becomes important.

These tensions and boundaries between local identities and allegiances and those outside, are central to Lewis' 'Field Work', an investigation in which he combines his role as an artist with that of an ethnographer trying to understand the experience of a different culture. Taken in Sway in the New Forest, Hampshire, and Newtown in mid-Wales, the photographs and video form an ethnography of locality; an account of how people experience and express their differences from others, and of how this sense of difference affects other areas of their life. The works also confront the gap between seeing and understanding – Lewis records events and conversations, but it is the relations between them, apparent only in comparison, that allows their meanings to become clearer. In this sense Lewis himself – like an ethnographer – is a kind of catalyst, someone who initiates conversations, and in eliciting views and opinions confronts people with their boundaries and their sense of belonging (or it's lack).

These narratives of locality and belonging are maintained in opposition to an outside – 'local' is a relative rather than an absolute category – and Lewis represents several kinds of 'outside'; he is a particular kind of catalyst. The works

reveal his attempts at understanding what he sees, but also the relational processes at work in defining any sense of 'local'. He shows us the degrees and kinds of separation between himself and what he encounters, but there are also moments when he is no longer judged on differences, but on similarities. In reminding people of their own position as locals (or outsiders) and the complexities of those definitions and roles, he shows the ways in which 'local' has shifted its meaning. We are now, as we always have been, bound into patterns of defining ourselves in relation to others, but those patterns have new elements to them.

Despite his outsider status, it is the willingness to put himself in a difficult situation, to ask sometimes awkward questions, that gives Lewis' work a strong sense of the relations and commonalities that do exist between people even in the face of significant differences. The photographs and video move between closeness and humour, and a disturbing sense of displacement, a movement that characterises many peoples' contemporary experiences of belonging. As the project has developed over time, so Lewis' relationships to the people he worked with have shifted and become more complex – as they do for anthropologists. Attachments form, and the ability to generalise or sum-up diminishes in the density of detail and a deeper understanding. But, as a way of investigating the relationships between people and place, the role of this kind of innovative work – between art and anthropology – is increasingly important. Not only does Lewis' work remind us all of our relative sense of belonging, but in revealing some of the complexities that are involved, he argues for the continuing importance of belonging and locality to how people define themselves.

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