The Art of the Game: Visual Methods, Artistic Engagement, and Playful Ethnography

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It all started with a joke, just to annoy my husband and son, who was sixteen at the time. We were walking in Prague across Old Town Square on a warm spring day in 2018, on our way to see some friends. ‘I know what would be a great art project’, I said, waiting for them to roll their eyes in unison. ‘You begin at this square at seven in the morning and make your way through Prague, alternately turning left and right, taking one photograph in each street for twelve hours, until seven in the evening when the project ends’. As I had anticipated, both sighed a deep sigh, made some tongue-in-cheek comments about the ‘arty-fartiness’ of the performance artists I was investigating at the time, and, referring to my student days at Art Academy Minerva in Groningen, bantered about ‘the old hippoid, returning to her roots’. Neither my husband nor my son saw any aesthetic value in works that did not demonstrate conventional artistic skills. They jointly detested most conceptual art, in their eyes ‘feeble, quasi-intellectual dribble’. To them, what I had suggested was just that.

I was not at all planning to execute the project at the time, but somehow, the idea of a scripted walk stuck in my mind. I liked its playfulness. It reminded me of the ‘adventures’ I had embarked on with my son when he was five or six years old, randomly walking through the town of Bangor where we lived, asking him at every street corner which direction to take. At his young age, the opportunity to take such ‘grown-up’ decisions visibly empowered him, and the changed rules created a sense of exploration. The thought of passing through random streets to an unknown final destination appealed to me, especially in a larger city like Prague. I knew the city well, and this would give me a completely new perspective on the urban environment. My growing determination to realize the walk was also inspired by a recent interview conducted with the Czech artist Jiří Kovanda. In March 2018, I had asked him to show me various locations in the Czech capital where he had created actions and installations in the 1970s and 1980s. At the time, he had scripted all his actions, carefully following his own instructions and photographically documenting them as ‘action art’ (Svašek forthcoming a).

Over several weeks, the idea of a walking adventure crystallized into a concrete plan. I thought of it as a joyful game that I now aimed to realize with other ‘players’. I first approached Milah van Zuilen, my twenty-year-old Dutch niece who studied photography at the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam. In the past few years, she has explored nature and its intervention in the built environment, including a land art intervention in the Belgium Ardennes in 2017 entitled ‘sporen’ (‘traces’; see milahvanzuilen.com). I assumed that she would be drawn to a project in the streets of Prague. By now I had given the action the tentative title ‘Left/Right/Left’, and had added another element of randomness: the throw of a dice that would decide which direction to take at the starting point, Old Town Square. ‘Even’ would mean ‘first left’, and ‘uneven’, ‘first right’, and then for the following twelve hours we would have to take alternative turns. I had also further developed the photographic dimension of the project. My task was to take four pictures in each street, exploring the materiality of each site. As I walked from one street to the next, this was of course also an investigation into physical movement through urban space. The first photograph in each street, of the corner where I had to turn, highlighted the main rule of the game: go left or right. The second, of a chosen spot on the ground,
investigated the texture and materiality of the road. The third photograph, of the sky directly above the second picture, explored the relation between the light, specific to the weather conditions and the time of the day, and the ground below. The fourth, of chosen shadows, accentuated the passage of time as their difference in length and intensity would illustrate spatio-temporal movement: from the city centre to an unknown endpoint, and from early morning to early evening. My fascination with shadows was partly nostalgic as, throughout my youth and adult life, my mother had often drawn attention to ‘beautiful’, ‘strangely-shaped’, or ‘interestingly-moving’ shadows. I also remembered picturesque shadows of street lamps in Prague during our frequent visits to my father’s country of birth at the time of the Cold War, an iconic image that appears in most tourist guides.

I decided that potential co-players would also have to select what kind of pictures they would take in advance of the journey. Milah reacted enthusiastically and came up with her own plan for the day, consisting of three activities per street. Her first task entailed making a quick, basic sketch of the street situation. Secondly, using a small compass, she planned to take four photographs standing on one location in each street, capturing a 360-degree view in combined north-east-south-west directions. This nicely resonated with the camera directions of my ground and sky pictures, offering a complementary spatial perspective. Her final mission was to find an object in each street, photograph it, and take it along for further, as yet undecided, use. The objects-trouvées concretized the physicality of the street environment and indexed Milah’s presence and interaction. As a collection, they reminded me of early scientific attempts to find and classify natural and artefactual objects to create a better understanding of the world.

**Playful Ethnography**

During the planning stage, it dawned on me that the action could potentially serve as a participatory case study, to be used in my long-term research on the Czech art world. For this, I needed to find a Czech artist as a third player whose activities and outputs I could observe and analyze. The additional possibility turned our project into an ethnographic method, reframing it as playful, participatory research, and art.

My work on Czech art had so far has resulted in an unpublished PhD (University of Amsterdam, 1996); various publications (Svašek 1997, 2018b, 2019, forthcoming b); about six months of fieldwork and archival research in 2016, 2017, and 2018; and several planned publications. The latter included two books, both at this stage still work in progress. The first, *Politics of In/Visibility: An Ethnography of the Czech Art World*, drew heavily on my PhD research but also included new research. For the second, *From the Zoo to the Jungle: Exploring Czech Art in a Global Context*, my research was ongoing. The case study could be incorporated into this latter book.

I emailed Jiří Kovanda to ask if he wanted to join us. I felt he was the right person for two reasons. First, his actions and interventions in the 1970s and 1980s resonated with our project, as they had aimed to destabilize strict oppositions between ‘art’ and ‘life’. Second, I knew Kovanda as a kind, approachable person, who, despite his international success, had been willing to perform with young local art students at a performance festival in 2017. When Kovanda kindly declined, but expressed his willingness to meet up with us at some point and give his feedback on our outcomes, I began to rethink the need for his (or another Czech artist’s) participation to make this a viable case study. As Czech art worlds were interlinked with other art worlds across the globe, and foreign art students studied at the
art academy in Prague, so as long as we would get some attention or advice from local artists or art teachers, their reaction would produce valuable insights into local dynamics.

To create an additional ‘view from inside’, a common goal in anthropology, we aimed for an exhibition. Our first-hand attempt to find the opportunity to exhibit the work would confront us with the challenges early career artists face in the Czech setting, something that had come up in various recent interviews I had conducted with art students. It might also be worth mentioning that the aim to exhibit was not completely alien to me. Prior to becoming an anthropologist, I had completed a degree in painting and graphics at Academy Minerva in Groningen in the Netherlands. Initially aspiring to make it as an artist, I had participated in a few exhibitions in the early 1990s, and knew about their importance. For Milah, who was at the start of her artistic career, an exhibition was a natural progression to the project.

The additional goal of a display also linked me to recent developments in visual anthropology that stimulate the use of creative methods in ethnographic research and public engagement. Visual methods, especially the use of photography and film, have of course been used in the social sciences from the start, initially to reinforce claims to the objective, scientific validity of anthropological and sociological research, but later also in more reflective ways, acknowledging the mediating force of the technologies (Sekula 1975; Pink 2001; Bal and Smith 2006; Rose 2006). The common idea that cameras don’t lie must be countered by the fact that it is the researcher who decides what is to be recorded, for what reason, and how the scene is framed. As Elizabeth Edwards (2006: 241) argued in relation to photographs, it is ‘in its stillness’ that ‘the photograph contains a moment within its frame, fracturing time, space, and thus event, separated from the flow of life, from narrative, from social production’. To acknowledge and investigate the wider contextual processes of politics and production that do not (at least not at a first glance) visibly appear within the frame, means to open ‘the possibilities of extending the medium’s indexicality, not only in terms of reading the inscription but also in using photographs as tools to think with’ (ibid.: 240).

In the case of the photos produced during our walk through Prague, I used them as tools to reflect on taken-for-granted anticipations concerning practices of playing a game, doing visual research, and creating works of art. As will become clear, the processes of framing drew on different expectations related to traditionally separate fields of knowledge, perception, and experience, namely that of (playful) scripted practice, (serious) social science, and (art-oriented) creative performance. This multi-dimensional orientation created a sense of liberation, not confusion. Our use of a visual method also aimed to contribute to a growing trend amongst artists to appropriate ethnographic methods, including interviewing, mapping, and cartography, in their creative productions, a theme too large to properly discuss here. Readers interested in this theme can, for example, explore consecutive Documenta catalogues since the late 1980s, and read recent publications by Arnd Schneider (2017) and Arnd Schneider and Chris Wright (2006, 2010, 2013). Tellingly, the latter authors have called for ‘more experimentation in the fields of practice between art and anthropology’ (Schneider and Wright 2010: 21).

The remaining part of this article offers an analysis of the project as developed so far, asking the following questions:

1. How did the rules of the game create opportunities for ethnographic engagement?
2. What kind of knowledge, affects, and modes of creativity did the multi-dimensional method produce?

3. How did concrete spatial and material settings afford specific interaction, aesthetic engagement, and visual production?

**From ‘Left/Right/Left’ to ‘Right/Left’**

On Monday, the ninth of July 2018, Milah and I wake up at 6.30am. We leave home and walk across Charles Bridge towards our starting point, Old Town Square. This early in the day, the bridge is almost empty, a relief from the usual tourist crowds. As we head through the early morning light, Milah wonders why we are about to start on that specific square. ‘It seems appropriate’, I say, ‘not only because it is located in the old centre of the city, but also because it was an important site of political activities at the time of the establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918’. Not long after independence, Czech nationalist citizens pulled down a tall Marian Column that had dominated the square since 1650. Celebrating the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, they regarded the column as a deplorable sign of centuries of domination by the Catholic Habsburgs. By contrast, they took pride over another statue on the same square, the monument for Jan Hus that was unveiled in 1915 to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Hus’ violent death in 1415.¹ This statue depicts triumphant Hussite warriors and mourning Protestants who were forced into exile 200 years after Hus had been publically burnt on the stake. Today, many Czechs regard Hus as the embodiment of resistance, so it is no surprise that it has remained a proud marker of Czech independence.

In my view, the story of spatial domination and disagreement embodied by the square suited our project as it resonated with our family history. The affective possibility of adding shared personal meaning to the day had come to the fore since we had decided to embark on the journey as a duo, without a Czech artist. My Czech father, who was Milah’s maternal grandfather, had left Czechoslovakia in 1948 after the Soviet-supported Communist coup. For many decades, he had not been able to return to his homeland. In the course of the day, we increasingly felt that our footsteps and the images we were capturing somehow allowed us to re-inscribe our joint family presence into the Czech landscape. Our pictures, however, did not visualize these personal and political details, but presented the ‘resonant active presence’ of spatial and material realities, in this article further interpreted through textual commentary (Edwards 2006: 247). Evidently, the interpretational possibilities of photographic products cannot be ‘reduced solely to the action in the frame alone’ (ibid.).

When we arrive at Old Town Square, our thoughts are not on questions of interpretational potentiality, but rather on the practicalities of the task ahead.² We take out our cameras and mobile phones and decide to stand on a spot not far from Jan Hus. We are ready to roll! Milah takes her first photograph as the dice hobbles over the stones, landing in a groove on number three. ‘To the right!’ we proclaim. This is when the preliminary title ‘Left-Right-Left’ changes to ‘Right-Left’.

¹ Roman numeral I

² Roman numeral II
After my first picture (Figure 1), I walk a few steps, and look through the lens to the ground. Materiality stares into my face. Immediate questions come to mind that refer to life outside the frame. I see irregular, rectangular stones (from which quarry? who laid them? how long have they been here? who walked here?), a cigarette butt (whose lips touched it?), tiny pieces of paper (who tore them?). I move the frame so that one grey stone, marked with a delicate white diagonal line, is slightly off centre. That looks good... Click! (Figure 2). I turn upwards, bow backwards and take the next shot. Here I cannot make a choice, according to the script I have to stand in the same location. The rules have to be obeyed, as in a rigorous scientific exploration. I see a clear blue sky, a breath-taking colour, and a thin cloud in the right hand corner. Sunlight and water molecules are of course also matter in movement. Click! (Figure 3). Now onwards to hunt for a shadow. A Chinese bride and bridegroom are posing for a photographer a few meters away. I move my camera so that only a slip of the bridal dress is visible through the lens (Figure 4). When I click I realise I have made a mistake, having unconsciously turned my camera 45 degrees so that the image orientation is ‘portrait’. When given the choice, however, Milah decided earlier that all our pictures should be in landscape orientation. I have to follow the instructions as defined by the game and the method. Since the picture has been taken, I cannot take a new one, so I just have to make sure not to repeat the mistake.
Figure 2: Old Town Square, ground picture. Photograph by the author.

Figure 3: Old Town Square, sky picture. Photograph by the author.

Figure 4: Morning shadow in Old Town Square with a slip of a bridal gown visible in the right hand corner. Photograph by the author.
On to the first street corner (Figure 5). This is where we have to turn left into Železná street. Coincidentally, the building on the corner is an art gallery, and two traditional gas lamps are attached to its outer walls. I would have liked to photograph a shadow of one of them, as mentioned earlier an iconic picture with personal relevance, but the one in Železná does not catch the sun light. I am not allowed to return to the square to check the other lamp. Again, the script forces me to improvise within a field of allowed possibilities. Strikingly, my self-imposed restrictions do not feel as constraints, but rather produce a sense of adventure, not unlike the mixture of excitement and anxiety I often feel when embarking on ethnographic fieldwork. What else can I find? Plenty of options! I turn to the wall on the right hand side. High up, four window ledges project dark shapes. The symmetry, enhanced by a single metal pole topped by a ‘W’ placed in a circle, is arresting. What would this symbol stand for? No time to find out, just take the photograph (Figure 5).

For the ground picture in this street I select another iconic feature of old Prague: irregular grey cobble stones (Figure 7). Capturing the scene, I see that they are smaller than those on the square. The comparative perspective emerges almost automatically. Looking up, a rectangle of pure lapis lazuli stares back at me. No clouds this time (Figure 8).
The next turn into Kožná takes me past a pizzeria through a romantic passageway into a dark, narrow walkway (Figure 9). Again I walk over cobble stones. A round, metal cover, inscribed with the word *vodovod* (water supply), draws my attention. It wants to be placed centre stage in the photograph (Figure 10). The shape pulls me in, an affective material force determining the composition. The accompanying sky picture offers a fascinating configuration that takes my breath away: irregular lines of roofs that carve sharp outlines into the blue (Figure 11). I had not expected to see such beauty. The ethnographic adventure truly produces a new perspective. I have walked through this street many times, but have never studied the magic of these roofs. I go for simplicity in the next shadow shot, responding to the visual pull of a horizontal groove in a wall (Figure 12). The time pressure, not to take too long over each photograph, is liberating. Just get on and do it. The experience somehow reminds me of participant observation, the need to go with the flow and follow other people’s rhythms. Only now, the rhythm of the movement is influenced by the shapes, colours, and textures of the urban environment.
Another left turn, past light green graffiti, takes me to Melantríchová. When I find a patch of cobble stones littered with rubbish, I immortalize a few empty milk containers, a cheeky looking cigarette butt, and a scattering of ripped-up pieces of paper (Figure 13). Will Milah select one of them as her found object? I turn and see her just appearing around the corner. Throughout this journey, we will work alone-but-together, playing from different player-positions, frequently catching each other by chance in our photographs.

![Figure 13: The ground in Melantríchová. Photograph by the author.](image)

While most of my images do not show people, human traces are present in all. My thoughts go back to the objects that I have just captured. What do they tell about urban life, the social lives of people and things? Days later, zooming in on the photograph on my computer, I detect a letterhead. ‘Prážská Energetika’. Was this an electricity bill? Who printed it? Who delivered it to whom? Why was it torn up, and thrown on the ground? Was the amount ever paid? The questions reflect another unexpected outcome of our visual experiment: we can use our over one-thousand photographs for further study, noticing elements and connections we did not spot before. Again there is a parallel to conventional ethnography, where, post-fieldwork, an abundance of notes, recordings, sketches, and photographs present a rich treasure to be further explored.

I bend backwards for an arbitrary sky-shot. The lens offers me a jazzy skyline that makes me smile, a rhythmic sequence of frilled window frames and gutters (Figure 14). I look again at Milah, who is taking pictures in four directions. I wonder how what she sees through her lens is related to the things I have framed.

![Figure 14: The sky in Melantríchová. Photograph by the author.](image)
After four series of photographs, I feel the urge to compare, both synchronically (all pictures taken in the same street placed in columns) and diachronically (pictures in subsequent streets, placed in rows) (Figure 15). How do the street corners, the skies, the grounds, the shadows compare? To what extent can their presentation on a single page create a sense of geographical and temporal movement? I assume that, having been told that these pictures are related to a walk, informed viewers will use their imagination to construct a sense of movement and fill in the absent in-between steps and sights.

![Figure 15: Overview of the first four series. Photographs by the author.](image)

But what other kind of knowledge is produced by acts of movement and taking turns? I already mentioned the playful sense of discovery, produced by the predictable unknown of our journey. In addition, the task of visual documentation also affects the physical knowledge produced by sensorial engagement. Trained as an artist, my body is quickly taken over by a familiar mode of perception, not really seeing ‘people, places, and things’, (my usual anthropological outlook), but rather noticing colours, lines, shadows, and shapes (a return to my previous artistic self). Whether or not the pictures taken are captured at random, in all cases I instantly judge and spot ‘more’ and ‘less’ aesthetically attractive compositions.

Of course my ethnographic interest in human interactions is not completely absent. It pops up when we turn into Kožná Street and have our first unplanned ‘encounter’. Two drunken men, leaning on each other, approach me. One of them, a tall guy, asks me in English if I speak Czech and English. His accent sounds Eastern European, Russian perhaps? Coincidentally, they are also addressing the theme of photography. ‘Tell my Czech friend here’, he says as he sways slightly, ‘that he should become a photographer. He has an interesting view on people!’ I turn to the other man, who listens politely to my translation. The first man tells me with a sense of urgency to repeat what he just said. ‘He could
really become a professional photographer and make lots of money!’ The Czech man is impatient and tells me to translate that he ‘won’t mind meeting this guy another time, for another drink, but I really have to go’. His friend is waiting for him, I see him in the distance. After agreeing to appear in one of my photographs (a product arising outside the focus of the project), they all take their leave. We have only three more encounters that day when passers-by actively engage with us: a middle-aged couple that I suspect may be homeless, an elderly lady about to enter her garden, and a man in a hunting shop. We also interact with waiters and waitresses when we have something to eat in a café and two restaurants on our way, and, more importantly, get the opportunity to charge our cameras and phones. I otherwise hardly notice the pedestrians and drivers who pass us. Interestingly, we later discover them as arbitrary appearances that we have unintentionally framed, a detail that inspires further reflection and comparison.

After crossing the river Moldau and walking through the district of Anděl, we enter quiet suburban areas, pass through leafy parks and, unexpectedly, walk at around 4pm through a just finished new housing and shopping development. Since leaving the old city centre at around 10am, in most neighbourhoods we find vegetation growing between stones, and grasses that peep through cracks in the warm tarmac (Figure 16).

![Figure 16: Vegetation in suburbia. Photographs by the author.](image)

There are other ways in which the expanding photo-series indicates our spatio-temporal movement. As the day progresses, the changing position of the sun affects the impression made by each location. By the middle of the day, it is hard to catch shadows, as they are hidden directly under objects, including our own bodies. In the early evening, shadows once again stretch out, and in the last picture of the day, we project the shapes of stick-legged giants on the road (Figure 17).

![Figure 17: Shadow pictures throughout the day. Photographs by the author.](image)

The sky-pictures also mark temporal movement as the weather changes. The morning starts with a bright sky, but after an hour or so, clouds start to come and go. In the early afternoon, my lens reveals dramatic cloud formations, and a few hours later, two drops of rain fall on my head. By five, the sky breaks open, and at the end of our walk, all clouds have disappeared (Figure 18).
We are reminded that time-space experiences can be circular when, for a number of streets, we have to walk back the way we came. ‘Look’, says Milah. ‘We’ve been here before!’ Prior to our departure, we actually joked about the possibility of being eternally stuck in a loop, a singular network of roads. When that seems to happen, we decide not to cheat as an easy way out. Thankfully, the logics of ‘right-left’ help us to legitimately escape after about ten minutes.

Wishing to end up in a forest, we sigh whenever we see a path leading into the woods but are forced to head back into the built environment. Then finally, at around 5.30pm, we are directed into a forest that clings to the periphery of the city. It is a joy to follow long, winding footpaths under the tall trees and leave the tarmac behind us. Our ‘street corners’ are now made up of shrubs and branches, and, under the canopy, shadows are toned down and hard to find. We walk on for about half an hour, when, after a short steep climb, a giant cornfield waits for us to be photographed (Figure 19). What a nice surprise, to once more have a completely different view!
For twenty minutes we walk along the edge of the field, until signs of recent human presence appear: the ashes of an open fire, a plastic bottle, and, somewhat worryingly, empty pill containers. It is not too long before 7pm when decide to turn left instead of right, reaching a motorway that we have spotted in the distance. This seems a natural end to our journey.

‘12 Hours’

When I recently asked Milah why she had decided to participate, she wrote that

*I always prefer making work that involves being outside. Also, I’m interested in exploring the history of my grandfather, and with that, the different landscapes of the Czech Republic. The spontaneity and adventurous aspects of the idea excited me. It felt like a playful game, but with an investigative, almost scientific undertone, because we would be capturing every part of the route with such attention.*

Having taken over one hundred right and left turns, we have harvested around one thousand photographs. In addition, Milah has made more than one hundred sketches and collected a similar number of objects, that range from plastic straws and bottle tops to feathers and flowers. We start to think about possibilities for ‘postproduction’, a term used in the art world to refer to installations and assemblages, made of elements created during the first phase of the artistic process. When I show some of our pictures to the Prague-based art historian Ludvík Hlaváček he is intrigued, but rightly says that the question of presentation is crucial. What kind of installation can turn these materials into an aesthetically and conceptually interesting work? How can we go beyond ‘photo documentation’, the display of a straightforward series of photographs? And what kind of gallery would be interested the exhibition of our work? Neither Milah nor I have a name as artists, so we cannot rely on reputation. I ask a few befriended Czech artists what they would do. Tellingly, two refer to my existing contacts (as a researcher) with Czech curators. ‘Won’t they be able to help?’ Others suggest specific gallery spaces that are interested in young or early career artists, for example a small gallery where artists display their work for a few days (Berlinskéj Model), or one that forms part of an art studio complex (Pragovka Gallery). In any case, we will be required to come up with a concept, apply for a slot, and see if we get selected.

We begin brainstorming and have many ambitious, long-term ideas (‘let’s do this in various cities around the world’, ‘let’s interview a person in each street and collect life stories of spatial movement’, ‘let’s create a catalogue, a board game, a series of postcards’). For now, these have to be put on hold. We have to be realistic and produce smaller, more easily realisable works. We start with the basics, creating computer folders of the pictures we have, and sending each other sketches for possible installations. The various ideas include selective series of specific photographs, presented in various ways; sets of ground and sky photographs, stuck on the floor and ceiling of an imaginary exhibition space; large projections of the north-east-south-west series in four directions; found objects, stuck to, or hanging from, a huge map of our walk; a Cabinet of Curiosities, containing the found objects combined with pseudo-scientific labels; and so on. At some point, I ‘walk’ the whole route again, using Google Streetview, to find out which streets we actually took. Using my mouse to move around in digital space, zooming in on specific locations, I can’t resist taking new corner pictures. Spotting similarities and difference with the original ones, and recognizing some of the exact locations where I
took my ‘real’ shadow photographs, it becomes clear that this is not just a search for our ‘factual’ past movements. It simply provides an opportunity for another exploratory game.

In Belfast, I print all ground and sky pictures as posters in A3 format and lay some out on the floor of my house, trying out different combinations. There are so many photographs, to see them all we need a large space. Then quite unexpectedly, in March 2019, Milah and I get the opportunity to create an installation in the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo. I am invited to give a talk on a new publication in the anthropology seminar at the museum (Komarova and Svašek 2018). My humble request to use the museum space after closing time to lay out all the photographs is met with the enthusiastic suggestion from the seminar organisers to present the installation as a public event. This amazing opportunity urges us to produce our first work.

The intervention, entitled ‘12 Hours’, consists of a trail of ground and sky photographs, laid out as connected pairs on the museum floor. At some locations, we add images of found objects that have been scanned by Milah onto small squares of cotton cloth. Arriving at the museum a few hours before the opening, we have limited time to finalize the work, first finding an actual space to lay down the thirty-metre long path. The museum architecture forces us to break the trail up into in eight sections, starting in a large space between stairwells, and using two display rooms that house ‘Egyptian’ and ‘American’ collections (Figures 20 and 21). We decide not to use shadow photographs (originally planned) as this turns out to be a visual overkill.
At the opening, we invite the audience ‘to join us on our journey in an unnamed, much-photographed city’. To see the whole installation, visitors need to walk along the laid out series, their pedestrian movement mimicking our own at the time of the action. In an attempt to ‘reproduce’ Milah’s experience of the search for objects, we encourage them to bend down and lift up the white cloths that bear the imprints of her findings, revealing photographs of the items on location. To illustrate our ‘game-like’ method during a short speech at the start of the opening, we point at a mini-dice that we have placed on the first ground picture, and explain how its casting started our journey. To increase the element of play, we ask the audience to guess which city is central to the work, telling them to search for visual clues. Tellingly, photographs of street surfaces and skies do not reveal much about the location, even when taken close to recognizable tourist spots. But one of Milah’s objects, a tram ticket, is an easy give-away.
Unintentionally, our project continues to undermine distinctions between ‘art’, ‘ethnography’, and ‘life’ when a group of museum visitors, unaware of our installation, ignore the work as they get close to the ‘actual’ exhibits: mummies, feathered clothing, and other typical ethnographic artefacts. Soon, various photographs have shifted, the track starts to look messy, and, unexpectedly, some streets photographs begin to show actual shoe prints. Milah and I end up running around to restore the photographic route just ahead of ‘our own’ audience. The moment is highly ironic. Our hasty attempt to recreate the illusion of an orderly aesthetic structure, an order that aims to temporarily destabilize the logics of the existing collection, reveals the ambiguities that inspired us in the first place: tensions between regimes of scripted and unscripted action, the paradox of clearly set-out concepts and tentative improvisations, and the instability of clear-cut oppositions between artistic, photographic and ethnographic modes of representation.

Conclusion

Returning to the three questions posed at the start, it is clear that, while 12 Hours created opportunities for ethnographic reflection, the action was quite different from typical anthropological fieldwork. We were not engaged in long-term, people-focused research, and the project was not informed by theoretically informed research questions. Instead, we were led by the rules of a game that compelled a process of repetitive visual exploration, resulting in a series of drawings, found objects, and photographs. Furthermore, while photographic and graphic products are commonly used in ethnographic studies for visual analysis, they do not usually end up as elements in ‘artistic’ postproduction. The scripted action itself also produced a kind of embodied engagement that was closer to an artistic approach, as it prompted detailed attention to specific characteristics of materiality: colour, lines, contrasts, and compositional alternatives.

As a close-up study of materiality, spatiality and movement, the project produced a poetic world of shadows, textures and unexpected finds. At the same time, it created an awareness of what can be theorised as ‘affective relatedness’, a push and pull between all sorts of human and non-human forces. Defined by Jan Slaby (2016: 1) as ‘affective interactions in relational scenes, either between two or more interactants or between an agent and aspects of her material environment’, I have used the approach in earlier work to explore the use of communication technology amongst distant kin (Svašek 2018a), and to investigate art curatorial practices (Svašek 2018b, 2019). In 12 Hours, what was specifically highlighted were interactions between physical, material, spatial, temporal, and meteorological forces. In reflection, the action highlighted moments where we, as ‘players’, were the active, affecting agents, for example when throwing the dice, projecting shadows on the roads, walking, and picking up different items. In the process, the affected objects were moved, surfaces were darkened by shade, and grass flattened by footsteps. The action also included moments when all sorts of phenomena affected our own being-in-and-moving-through-the-world, something we were often unconscious of. The movement of a cloud formation, for example, affected our body temperature, vibrant colours drew our attention, the existing infrastructure forced us into a specific route, and, at one point, a particular constellation of roads trapped us in a loop. We were also confronted with limitations related to the passage of time: we had to switch between cameras and mobile phones whenever battery power ran out, and be lucky enough to pass a café or restaurant at the right time. And at the end of the day, having walked for almost ten hours (we rested for about two), our bodies were tired and ready to stop.
Certain forces were also felt through a dynamics of memory, imagination, and anticipation. Personally, I was not particularly burdened by the need to produce a specific art form, since I had conceptualized the project most of all as a light-hearted visual experiment that could possibly be used as an ethnographic case study. The scripted nature of the action and the partial randomness of the framing process also removed the pressure to produce beautiful photographs, even though I was often amazed at the powerful compositions offered by the changing surroundings. The need to keep going and not take too much time over each shot was similarly liberating. While being meticulous in following our own rules, we were not interested in sampling a ‘representational’, ‘scientific’ data base, even though, when looking at the photographs the next day, we became aware of the project’s value as a historical snapshot of Prague’s urban, suburban, and forest environments. As noted earlier, the practical and conceptual movement across existing regimes of framing was liberating, generating a sense of adventure and discovery. This process of criss-crossing and confusing categories of ‘game’, ‘research’, and ‘art’ has in my view contributed to current discussions in worlds of art and science that undermine strict distinctions, not only by questioning oppositions between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’, as has been done by many academics, but also by adding another ‘f-word’ to the debate: that of ‘fun’.

References


Notes

1 The memorial was paid for by public donations and designed by the sculptor Ladislav Šaloun. Born in 1369, Hus was critical of what he saw as religious moral decay of the Catholic Church and argued that mass should be given in the vernacular, or local language, rather than in Latin. He was inspired by the teachings of John Wycliffe.

2 One of the parameters we have to deal with is the battery power of our devices. Having to take so many photographs, none will work for twelve hours so we will have to alternate between them. We intend to stop at cafés to charge them up, but are constricted by our route and may not pass a charging point at the right time. This of course all adds to the excitement! Milah decides to first use her mobile, and I hang my camera around my neck.

3 ‘The Berlinskej Model (Berlin Model) was established in September 2011 by Richard Bakeš, Daniel Vlček and Matouš Mědílek. The exhibitions took place in what was originally a small business space, later it has expanded to a second room. The original impetus for the choice of this space was the unique
social and geographic context as well as a parallel to similar galleries concentrated in Berlin quarter Mitte with their focus on progressive and intelligent culture of fine arts. Gallery program originally started off with one-day exhibitions with weekly regularity. Currently the program consists of usually four exhibitions per month that last several days with the opening still playing a significant role as the artists do not only present their work but also has to prepare refreshments. Fine arts, music and gastronomy are understood here as complementary disciplines.

The gallery is focused on contemporary Czech and foreign art. It presents mainly the young and the youngest artists as well as established authors across the media. Emphasis is on the site-specific projects created directly for the atypical space of Berlinskej Model. In addition to showcasing fine art the gallery participates in the event “We are open”, when the opening hours of the gallery is synchronised with other significant events in the area’ (http://myartguides.com/art-spaces/non-profit/berlinskej-model/, last accessed 25/04/2019).

4 ‘Pragovka Gallery focuses on the presentation of contemporary young artistic scenes, beginning artists, art groups, studio exhibitions and also individual exhibitions of new artists’ (http://www.findglocal.com/CZ/Prague/321538718345150/Pragovka-Gallery, last accessed 25/04/2019).

5 I am reminded of a phase in all my anthropological research projects, when having to decide that not all collected and produced materials can enter the ethnography.

6 Kayla Rush (2018: 162) has used the term ‘cyber-pedestrian’ to refer to ‘the virtual flâneur who interacts with physical, geographical space through online means’ and argued that ‘Google Maps’ ‘Street View’ feature, for example, allows the user to ‘travel’ virtually up and down city streets, viewing the city from “down below” (de Certeau 1988: 93), from the same perspective as the physical, non-virtual pedestrian’.