

Doing nothing: Art and anthropology sit at the same table in Lisbon and Tbilisi

Journal:	<i>Ethnography</i>
Manuscript ID	ETH-17-0084
Manuscript Type:	Original Research Papers
Keywords:	Ethnographic Installation, Art and anthropology, Urban ethnography, Experimental methods, Conceptual fieldwork, Performative site noting
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Abstract

In this article, anthropology and performance merge in a form of ethnographic installation by sitting in semi-public spaces of Lisbon and Tbilisi for 35 hours without any laptop or mobile phone. The experiment captures scenes of mundane life through the subjective lens of the observer, framing the site notes with anthropological ideas in an exercise of *montage*. Doing nothing is presented as a slow time being in front of others, which suspends politics of relevance and leaves space for serendipity and embodied imagination. Through the repeated effort of doing nothing, the author reminds us that observation is a tiring process and shows how different roles in the field activate the ethnographic material differently. The article contributes to rethink how our virtual activity is transforming the temporality of ethnographic methods and proposes the inclusion of similar ethnographic installations as a phase of contemporary anthropological research.

Introduction

This article builds upon my experiment of doing nothing in Lisbon and Tbilisi, capitals at the margins of Europe, historically cosmopolite,¹ and with more than a million inhabitants. In my time living in these cities before the experiment, I noticed that the everyday was not simply lived but rather performed in a sort of ceremonial public life. Likewise, both societies seemed to have developed a culture of waiting and coping with decay and loss. Also I noted that local people tended to perceive order and meaning in the past, while the future was approached as rather bringing disorder and failure. I was familiar with all these before starting my experiment. Indeed, doing nothing implies hazard, but it benefits strongly from returning,

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3 repetition, and what Michael Burawoy has coined as ‘ethnographic revisits’ (2003), a way of
4 layering data that helps to emancipate research from the eternal present. Before the
5 experiment, it is also important to educating the eye with observational and listening skills, as
6 well as with cultural and artistic works that help to understand this ‘*geist*’ of the city/setting.
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11 Then I sat for seven hours a day for five days in a row of a café of Lisbon and of
12 Tbilisi without a laptop or phone. This strategy was designed to capture moments of being
13 that escape theorization as well as to reflect on the very process of capture. In that sense, the
14 experiment addresses a specific setting and it is reshaped by that specificity, which gives
15 another layer of meaning, as a reflection on the processualness of fieldwork. The experiment
16 intends to reflect on the myriad of actions fieldwork can involve and the roles it can generate,
17 as well as to answer to the increasing digitally-mediated nature of social life. The site notes
18 taken during the experiment were not meant to be considered as a thick description to be used
19 later for building an ethnographic argument; instead, my installation is proposed as a useful
20 phase and a complementary mode of research that produces dialogic embodied knowledge
21 (Hartblay 2017).
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36 Doing nothing forces a slowing down of thought and action, and is here used as part
37 of an experiment in order to enable a break from consciousness and create a state of
38 suspension and indeterminacy (Stengers 2005). The juxtaposition of my performative site
39 noting in Lisbon and Tbilisi helps to understand the differently perceived and positioned
40 ‘selves’ during the process of fieldwork, rendering situations comparable across place and
41 time (Nyiri 2013). For instance, the everyday in both cities combines a sense of measure and
42 dispersion. People seem to be performing public life, following a highly ceremonial behavior.
43 Otherwise, dispersion takes the form of complacency and distancing with the surrounding
44 environment (manifested for instance in expressions such as “but it could be worse”, “if it
45 happens” and “God willing” attitude).²
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3 Lisbon surrounds the visitor with a charming lack of impetus. Notwithstanding the
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5 hills, there is a horizontal inertia in the cityscape of the Portuguese capital, a sort of constant
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7 landing to the sea. For centuries, Lisbon was the metropolitan core of a country comprising
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9 territorial possessions in America, Africa and Asia. These traces are still latent in the mixed
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11 composition of the society and particular cultural manifestations. Yet Lisbon has been the
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13 capital of an authoritarian regime (*Salazarism*) too, which isolated the country from the rest
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15 of the world for decades. There is also a “taste for passivity and formal order” (Lourenço
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17 1992: 109) in Lisbon’s everyday life, as well as a paradoxical mix of showing off and
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19 humility. The result is that:
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23 Portuguese people live in a permanent representation, so big and obsessive is the
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25 feeling of frailty that they have to compensate it by showing up ‘a boa figura’
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27 [making a good impression permanently] ... Portuguese people do not coexist
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29 together ... they spy each other ... they do not enter into dialog, or discuss, in a
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31 horizontal plane, enriching the conversation; never will a Portuguese confess that
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33 they have learned something from another one ... (ibid: 76).³
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36 Ceremonial are the gestures, silences and monologues of the people around me. They
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38 seem to drink coffee and smoke to daydream. To venture deeper into the nuances of
39
40 contemporary Portuguese culture, I draw on the philosophers Eduardo Lourenço and José Gil
41
42 (being aware nonetheless that their theses are far from consensual in Portugal). According to
43
44 Lourenço, “Portuguese people tend not to pay attention to the empirical reality, they just
45
46 accept it” (1999: 94). They avoid the discontent with the present by dreaming simultaneously
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48 about the future and the past, indeed “it is difficult to conceive that the confusion between
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50 dream and reality can be that far” (Lourenço 1992, 22-23), eventually creating a fiction of
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52 greatness (ibid, 19) and compensatory spaces, such as Brazil, India, Africa (ibid, 41).
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56 Otherwise, Gil notes how the Portuguese society is affected by “quotidian micro-
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3 terrors” (ibid, 126), which produces a high sense of the ridiculous and a culture “afraid of
4 separations” (2004, 51). Gil also describes Portugal as “the country where nothing happens”
5 (2004, 15); this society “is a system organized around non-action and un-written rules” (ibid,
6 84-87), in which space and direction are approached as something undetermined: merely
7 going around (“vou para lá, fico por aí”); following small sequences, yet long temporary
8 frames (Gil 2004, 75); moving and standing randomly (“por acaso”), a la *dérive*, without
9 clear reasoning or direction.⁴
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18 In Tbilisi, the people with whom I met constantly compare the way things appear to be
19 with the way they feel they ought to be, the ideal of how life should be lived and how it is
20 however experienced. They typically include stories of how important their country was in
21 some remote past, settling a symbolic connection between now and then in a form of
22 daydreaming, expressing a fantasy for a world that is not the one we actually inhabit. In
23 Georgia, things are often done for the pleasure of the eye, rather than for utility or profit.
24 People here appear as true believers in wishful thinking; it is as if by talking they believe they
25 will accomplish something. “The most deadly weakness of Georgians is their faculty for
26 intoxicating themselves with words”, wrote Odette Zoé Keun in 1924.
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38 Tbilisi has historically been a patchwork city, for centuries organized through niches
39 –the Armenian, Georgian, Russian, German... which themselves included other niches
40 themselves –Azerbaijani, Greek, Turkish, Ossetian, Pole, Persian, Tatar... Georgia itself is
41 limitrophe, bordering on, adjacent to, affected by an *ersatz* and ambivalent Westernisation
42 that mixes contemporaneity with untemporaneity, always in the making. After King
43 David (the builder) and his great-granddaughter the Holy Tamar, Georgia has been occupied
44 by Mongols, Persians, Ottomans and Russians, developing a keen sense of social
45 manoeuvring; a sort of negotiated subservience, capable of keeping various options open at
46 the same time. The recent political history of Georgia is quite a mixture of continuities,
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3 breaks and reconfigurations, explained through the tropes of short-circuits (Frederiksen
4 2013), peripheral affects (Khalvasi 2015), multiple nostalgias (Gotfredsen 2013) and
5 scrapping (Martínez and Agu 2015).
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10 To study all these nuances as well as the underlying disorder that seems to pertain to
11 everyday life in Lisbon and Tbilisi, I decided to carry the experiment of doing nothing at the
12 Kaffa of Telheiras and the Entrée of Sololaki. I have chosen these places because of their
13 proximity to where I was staying in the city; and also because the site appeared to me as a
14 vantage point from which to observe inter-generational, inter-classist, and local-global
15 dynamics. Site notes were taken between the 9th and 13th of November 2015. Entrée is a
16 French chain of cafés, present in Tbilisi many years. There, waitresses were not allowed to
17 accept tips and have to wear black clothes. So called 'expats' came often, so the waitresses
18 were compelled to speak English or Russian too. For instance, during my ethnography I
19 heard at least 5 languages spoken in the café (Georgian, English, Russian, French, German,
20 Italian, Spanish, Swedish) every day. Another important reason is that in this café I can also
21 look at the street and see street scenes. Fieldwork notes in Lisbon were taken between the
22 11th and 15th of July 2014. There are 12 tables in the terrace. In this little street there are 6
23 bars. This is the leisure center of Telheiras, a suburban neighborhood of Lisbon. Telheiras
24 used to be a village, but the growing of Lisbon in the second-mid of the XX Century
25 swallowed it into the city. We are talking about processes of rural emigration, yet this area is
26 mostly inhabited by middle-class and white-collar workers.
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50 **The plenitude of being there**

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52 The research draws on the assumption that there is a cost to be paid for communicating more
53 intensively and to multiple audiences, hence a different slow attention is proposed to foster a
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3 wider sense of possibilities for broadening and diversifying ethnographic knowledge, open to
4 unexpected encounters, juxtapositions and research questions to be followed (Greverus
5 2002). Also it assumes that the here and now of everyday interactions requires rather eclectic
6 methods, as this object of study is inherently vague, without any clear boundaries. So I
7 decided to set up my own ethnographic installation in order to be present differently and
8 weave fragmented observations through a game of proximity and repetition.
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16 My experiment of doing nothing is meant to trouble the usual relationship between
17 (ethnographic) site notes and (anthropological) arguments. One of the paradoxes constructed
18 by this article is that site notes are not being used as evidence of whatsoever: neither is there
19 a conclusive argument done through them, nor do they represent the places they refer to, nor
20 they account of the impact of digital culture in everyday life. By doing nothing, I do not
21 simply illustrate a supposed Portuguese or Georgian character or address the cultural
22 geography of the cities, neither I do compare them through field descriptions. Furthermore,
23 doing nothing is not participant observation; neither collaboration between art and
24 ethnography (Foster 1995; Sansi 2015), nor relational aesthetics (Bourriaud 2002).
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36 Doing nothing is a performance of fieldwork, set up to reflect on how it is done and
37 what it does. This localizing strategy appears as *para-digital*, in the sense of functioning
38 alongside, forward, through and besides digitality, rather than against or after it. Furthermore,
39 doing nothing is a strategy beyond action that implies a lack of ultimate purpose, reflexivity
40 and public performance. This ethnographic installation helps for instance to interact with our
41 surroundings and bring the impress of inactivity into anthropological studies (O'Neill 2017);
42 yet it is also useful to understand the way the research process itself is cultural performance
43 (Hartblay 2017) and how the relationship between ethnography and the production of site
44 notes is changing with digital technologies.
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56 The research follows on contemporary epistemic debates which describe methods as
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3 being performative – they are said to ‘alive’ (Back and Puwar 2012), ‘inventive’ (Lury and
4 Wakeford 2012), and laboratory-like (Macdonald and Basu 2007), producing knowledge
5 through the creation of phenomena. These experiments are performed across life and “enable
6 the happening of the social world – its ongoingness, relationality, contingency and
7 sensuousness – to be investigated” (Lury and Wakeford 2012: 2). Also it engages with
8 current discussions about digital anthropology and its methods (Horst and Miller 2012),
9 approaching the digital and the non-digital as dependent upon each other rather than in
10 opposition to each other.
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21 Aware of the effects of social acceleration and assuming that digital media influence
22 our being in front of others and within the world, by doing nothing I tried to dwell in a
23 slowed para-technological time that might help to understand what is lost in the process of
24 digitalization and which phenomena resist a binary datafication and representation,
25 considering not that digital technologies might be a problem (deliberately practicing a sort of
26 analogue anthropology), but that the attentiveness to computing correlates to inattentiveness
27 to everyday nuances (Rapport 2003). In the last years, there have been heated discussions
28 about the influence of technologies in our agency, tolerance and sense of empathy. For
29 instance, Vincent Miller foregrounds that our increasingly mediated activity leads to a ‘crisis
30 of presence’ (2012) and Sherry Turkle (2011) gives examples of the expansion of social
31 disconnection and how on-line connectivity might result in a decline in the quality of
32 communication, particularly in the attention given to the here and now and to face-to-face
33 interactions; whilst Horst and Miller (2012) argue against the romanticization of the pre-
34 digital and claim that the rise of digital technologies has created the illusion that they were
35 more authentic.
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54 Often, it seems to me that we have to learn how to switch off, recover the control over
55 life pace, sensually slow down and better process information. Slowness seems to need
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3 protection, to make place for it (Eriksen 2001). In his latest project, Thomas Hylland (Eriksen
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5 2016) notes how accelerated changes and the intensification of interconnectedness and global
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7 circulations resulted in an existential ‘overheating’ eventually reshaping out conceptions of
8
9 locality. Also Hartmut Rosa has described how social acceleration is experienced in three
10
11 dimensions: technological development, social change and the pace of life (2013).
12
13 Nonetheless, Sarah Sharma (2014) challenges the speed theories characterizing late-modern
14
15 life around the binaries ‘fast’ and ‘slow’, calling instead for attention to the micro-politics of
16
17 temporal coordination.
18

21 22 **Pessoan Anthropology**

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24 My ethnographic installation proposes to play a fieldwork game of proximity and repetition
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26 making use of performance, reflexivity and flexible writing to access to tacit knowledge and
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28 processes of social ordering. The project coincides with a growing interest in practice-led
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30 research. Different qualitative methods have been developed in a variety of anthropological
31
32 traditions, fusing research practices in an expansive way. Answering to Bourdieu’s (2003)
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34 call for renewed objectivity via structural reflexivity (claiming that observing oneself
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36 observing should be more than a discursive game or a pretext for text), this article aims at
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38 showing how fieldwork unfolds in time, within a social context, and through a tiring
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40 embodied activity.
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47 *I sit at the terrace of the Kaffa café at 11 am. When I open the notebook, I remember*
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49 *that I did not send an important mail this morning and think, for a few seconds, of*
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51 *going back home and sending it. But I finally stay. Then my thoughts start wondering*
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53 *about different topics, most of them personal issues unrelated with this ethnography.*

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56 *A waitress goes out with a coffee and hides herself behind the building. Then she*
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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: 2 coffees and 2 beers: 2.80 euro. (Lisbon)

In my enactment of a method, 'nothing' is done with embodied dedication, letting boredom and back aches filter through my notes. 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" (2008: 6). 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 (ibid: 92). Martin Demant Frederiksen has recently shown (2017) how "having time" can be a cause of social suffering, turning "doing nothing" into a characteristic of life on the margins. In my case, I increasingly got anxious of both being disconnected and exposing myself constantly in the 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 (Greverus 2002), since my back pain, my gestures and posture, my need to drink and eat, were meaningful and useful (tool-like) to access to tacit knowledge and a sense of empathy.

After 6 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.

This fieldwork is becoming a sort of therapeutic exercise, and as such it is emotionally tiring. The heat is an extra tiring factor. How are these people able to

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3 *wear a tie with such heat? I can hardly take more notes, even keep any concentration.*
4
5 *Doing nothing produces both physical and mental restlessness. Or is this rather*
6
7 *boredom? ...*
8

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10 *Today there are no ashtrays on the tables; people nonetheless smoke and throw the*
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12 *ash to the floor. I smoke my first cigarette today and do what people around me do:*
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14 *throw the ash to the floor. (Lisbon)*
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19 *Religion seems performative in Georgia; people emphatically make the sign of the*
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21 *cross in public spaces. I think it is related to a long tradition of separation between*
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23 *public forms and private practices, in which the roots might go deep into the servitude*
24
25 *of Georgian aristocrats to Iranian Safavids, Ottoman Sultans, and Russian viceroys.*
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28 *Also, Georgians talk in a monastic way, as if hiding some ancient mystery, which*
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30 *gives them an air of dignity and temporal perspective. (Tbilisi)*
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35 I inserted myself into the Portuguese and Georgian everyday as a ‘quotidian
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37 detective’, investigating the empirical mundane to gain access to popular mythologies,
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39 processes of social self-regulation, and meaning-making activities, in a sort of theatre in
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41 passing (Moran 2007), a laboratory of the minimal elements of everyday life (Sansi 2015)
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43 and the minor-key variations of reality (Piette 2009). Following Pessoa’s factless
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45 autobiography in *The Book of Disquiet*, Albert Piette has suggested the practice of a ‘Pessoan
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47 anthropology’, in which the ethnographer observes, describes and analyses the social world
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49 in the process of existing, accounting of the detailed complexity of presences. This existential
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51 approach to fieldwork is also shared by anthropologist Michael Jackson (1995), who
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53 foregrounds that knowledge is implicit, incorporated, embodied, and refined through inter-
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3 subjective dynamics which make in turn the process of research an experiential participation
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5 in itself.
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10 *At the corner, there is an elegant man reading. He disagrees with what is written and*
11 *shakes his head, willing to make public his disagreement I guess.*

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

17 *In a ritualistic way, the waitress puts the tablecloth on all the tables of the terrace.*
18
19 *When she comes to mine, she lays the tablecloth on the chair. I guess she expects that*
20 *I'll leave soon.*

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

26 *Today is Saturday, a day of reading press. Many people hold a plastic bag with*
27 *papers, take a seat at the terrace and order a coffee. It is 'O Espresso', a weekly*
28 *publication composed of several newspapers.*

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

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

40 *Local Georgian clients display arrogance while ordering at the counter, as if needing*
41 *to show off a pretended social status. Half of the clients wear sunglasses, despite not*
42 *being sunny anymore outdoors. Black clothes also seem to be popular among the*

1
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3 *clientele. Georgians use elements of individual surplus –beards, sunglasses, black*
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5 *clothes, posturism... but not tattoos, why?*

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8 *A group of men step in as a gang, wearing black Soviet leather jackets; they seem to*
9
10 *be out of place; walk dubitatively, check around, look at the products offered at the*
11
12 *counter; then look at each other and suddenly turn around 180° degrees and go out.*

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

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22 But who is here the actor and who is the observer? Am I collaborating with my
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24 informants, or rather stalking them? In a way, I do build collaborative relationships and my
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26 fieldwork is a shared practice; the matter is that the people I am observing are not aware of
27
28 that. This obviously creates an ethical dilemma, and perhaps also a concern to the funding
29
30 agencies. Doing nothing is akin to be compared to *flânerie* as a public embodiment of
31
32 idleness, at least with regard to the production of socio-economic value; however, the *flâneur*
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34 is most often understood as a mobile pedestrian (Lavolette 2014; Coates 2017), whilst doing
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36 nothing entails a lack of action.

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40 My experiment could also be akin to stalking, as not all cases of stalking involve
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42 literal pursuit but rather an unlicensed watching of others. However, isn't ethnography an art
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44 of people watching after all? Furthermore, feelings of innocence for voyeurism are related to
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46 a safe distance, one which I did not respect and which acted back upon myself, not simply
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48 feeling observed in the field, but also noting a cold scrutiny from the reader of this article,
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50 which act as a third witness of the *crime*. I guess as Sophie Calle felt while presenting her
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52 *Venetian Suite*, an artwork documenting her pursuit to Venice of a man she had briefly met at
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54 a party in Paris. She shadowed him for two weeks, compiling a photographic and written
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3 dossier about both his movements and her experiences tailoring him. Her disclaimer was
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5 however that she was not interested in the person, but in pinning down the mystery of the
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7 other (Calle and Baudrillard 1988; Nicol 2006) and the very art of following and seduction,
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9 the attachment to a getting to know someone, as “a micro form of kinship in a public and
10
11 anonymous setting” (Hand 2005: 477).
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17 *Apparently, the computer at the counter broke down. The manager complains to the*
18 *waitress: “What did you do!” I guess this is a universal approach to the boss-*
19 *employee relationship.*
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23 *At 13:02, fifteen clients suddenly step into the café, as if their lunch time was*
24 *synchronized or staged. I feel as if looking toward a stage upon which well prepared*
25 *performances going on.*
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30 *Some of the clients, after lunch –I guess on the way back to their offices– buy*
31 *something extra (usually sweet). (Tbilisi)*
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38 *Spending timeless time, observing, writing ... all this provides a chance to reflect*
39 *about my personal stuff. Different thoughts come and go, appearing within notes,*
40 *emerging in my observations, intermingling my personal background with what I see.*
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45 *Grandmothers come with their grandchildren to drink a coffee and chat. Does it work*
46 *as a rite of passage? As a way of learning a sort of ‘savoir vivre’?*
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50 *This morning I went to Espigasol, the bakery at the corner, to get a piece of bread*
51 *and a ‘pastel de nata’, as I do every morning. In spite of not having been here for two*
52 *months, the seller remembered me and said “Tudo bem rapaz?” (Are you good,*
53 *boy?). It is the familiarity of the strangers.*
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3 *Most of the sweets displayed at the bakery are name after religious motives (toucinho*
4 *do céu, bolachas do bom Jésus, pasteis de São Francisco, cavacas de Santa Clara,*
5 *pitos de Santa Luzia, Bolo de São Vicente ...)* (Lisbon)
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12 (See FIG 1)
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17 **Conceptual fieldwork**

18 My experiment was inspired by George Perec's (1989) inquiries into the infra-ordinary,
19 Sophie Calle's strategies to inject herself into the life of strangers and bring back reports
20 determined by rules and rituals she made up (Calle and Auster 2007), and the performance
21 done by the Spanish writer Enrique Vila-Matas in the festival of contemporary art
22 *Documenta 13* (an experience later described in the novel *Kassel no invita a la lógica*
23 [*'Kassel Does Not Call for Logic'*] 2014). Vila-Matas' performance consisted in being seen
24 writing at a Chinese restaurant in the suburbs of Kassel. However, my case was a little
25 different. First nobody invited me. Second I was at the café for a dedicated observation of
26 how 'my' audience acts and interacts. In this sense, it was a sort of self-imposed discipline to
27 gather ethnographic material about the intricacy of ordinary daily life in Lisbon and Tbilisi.
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43 *One of the waitresses asks me if I'm writing a novel. "Something like that", I respond*
44 *surprised for being discovered that easily. "In this café, wow!" She innocently*
45 *comments... I then think about the strange intimacy established between us. From one*
46 *day to another, I appear in their café and sit here for hours. They don't know who I*
47 *am, where I come from, what I do for a living, and nonetheless, we intensively gain*
48 *some familiarity. Soon, I'll finish this project and we won't see each other again.*
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3 *Research and interventions have their timing and context – a historicity.* (Tbilisi)
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7 My ethnographic installation has been a sort of conceptual fieldwork (Jarillo de la
8 Torre 2013; Ringel 2013; Ssorin-Chaikov 2013), turning everyday life into a laboratory
9 (Sansi 2015) and offering “new ways of seeing” (Schneider and Wright 2010). One of the
10 pioneers in this matter, Joseph Kosuth described anthropologized art as a “socially mediating
11 activity”, which “‘depicts’ while it alters society” ([1975] 1991, 117–124). Both
12 anthropologists and artists have been rather interested in looking at each other practices
13 simply as sources of inspiration, instead of creating ‘reflexive fusions’ (Schneider and Wright
14 2010). However, the synergies between art and anthropology are not simply increasing but
15 also being more and more discussed and practiced, exploring the possibilities of cross-
16 fertilization.⁵ Nonetheless, these endeavors are not free of criticism. In his article ‘The artist
17 as ethnographer’ (1995), Hal Foster claims that there has been a series of misrecognitions
18 between art and anthropology and ignorance about each other methods and traditions. For
19 instance, he argues that artists initially approached anthropology because it was perceived as
20 self-critical and counter-hegemonic, yet ignoring one of the main implications of the
21 discipline – awareness of how our work affect the other and critically questioning our own
22 authority to do so.
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44 *Today I had to sit at the table next to the entrance of the café. One of the owners*
45 *stands there. I offer a cigarette to him. He smiles and declines it: “I am working”. I*
46 *smile back and reply: “me too.”*
47
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51 *I count the hours until I can finish, as if this ethnography were a ‘real’ job. One of the*
52 *owners brings my coffee to the table. He is not that kind today. Is he tired or rather*
53 *annoyed with me sitting here for hours, taking notes and not consuming much? Also I*
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3 *think about a lot of stuff I have to do on my laptop.*

4
5 *This is my third day of doing nothing and I start thinking about possible tricks of*
6 *labor absenteeism; my own 'perruque', as de Certeau put it. I start feeling stressed. I*
7 *guess it is the fixity of being in one place for hours.⁶*

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11
12 *After drinking a beer, the old owner changes his clothes once again. He puts on the*
13 *uniform and starts working. Job and leisure seemingly require different clothes.*

14
15
16 *Wearing a simple black t-shirt becomes a sort of rite of passage. (Lisbon)*

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22 **See FIG 2**

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30 Doing nothing is presented as both an artistic output and a mode of research. In my
31 case, it helped to enhance the effect of an embodied presence, re-embedding myself into the
32 place and allowing a sense of slow time that seems to be missing from our everyday life. The
33 experiment has been thus practiced as an intensified awareness of the surrounding
34 environment, noting the non-anticipated feelings, reflections, memories, reveries and
35 anxieties that different presences surrounding me express and awake in myself, influencing
36 therefore my analytical process and understanding. I suggest therefore not to reduce
37 fieldwork to controlled learning and systematic accumulation of information, and rather
38 defend it as a lived experience in itself, cathartic, porous and serendipitous.
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52 *The lack of technological mediacy helps my work of noticing; also, it makes me*
53 *available to those who surround me. Sometimes we have to disconnect in order to*
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3 *connect better with our surroundings. I guess this is one of the reasons why my*
4 *ongoing experiment makes sense: the way I expose myself and interact with my*
5 *surroundings is qualitatively different.*
6
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9
10 *A laptop and a smart phone are distracting devices, in the sense that one is not open*
11 *to conversations, and neither that attentive to the surrounding environment. While I*
12 *seemingly do nothing, I remain involved in many actions. (Tbilisi)*
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18
19 *At the terrace, people seem to know each other. They greet each other and ask how*
20 *they are doing, yet as a pure formality: “tudo bem? Obrigado. E convosco? Bem.*
21 *Tudo. (How are you? Thanks. And you? Good. All)”.*
22
23

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25
26 *Three women sit behind me. One of them says “que calor, meu Deus!” (It is hot, my*
27 *God!). They may be my age, but look older. In Portugal, people look older and not as*
28 *healthy as in Nordic countries.*
29
30

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32
33 *The waitress says sorry for bringing a beer 15 min. after my order; then she smiles*
34 *and adds “since you’re at the corner it takes more time to come”. Waiters at the*
35 *terrace constantly ask for permission for this or that and apologize for insignificant*
36 *reasons.*
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42 *Some people take more than an hour to lunch. A woman over 40 years old walks in a*
43 *rush. I think she has been the first person I saw in a rush in my 4 days of fieldwork.*
44
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46
47 *There, in front, there is the first person I saw multi-tasking, I mean eating and*
48 *working on a laptop simultaneously.*
49
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51
52 *Portuguese TV says that the normality demonstrated by Pope Francis is scandalous.*
53

54
55 *Multiple temporalities and rhythms are found at the terrace: fast food, traditional*
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3 *recipes, i-pads and Macbooks, lunch time, football matches on TV, music songs, job*
4 *schedules, people walking dogs, grandmothers sat with grandchildren, newspaper*
5 *reading, Internet ... (Lisbon)*
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12 **See FIG 3**
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18 **Strangers in the day**

19
20 It is hard to read strangers and what is the empirical content of peoples' thoughts (Irving
21 2017). In this matter, Zygmunt Bauman (1993) distinguished between strangers in the city
22 and strangers on the screen. The former tells us about concrete boundaries that separate and
23 unite, meanwhile the latter is ambiguous and objectified. Proximity facilitates conversations
24 among strangers but remains always unclear when, where, and between whom conversations
25 might be initiated (Pütz 2017). Otherwise, social settings have their own time-tables and
26 material culture. For instance, the size and distribution of the tables influence social
27 proximity and the area of the personal space; this is also manifested by the gestures and
28 posture of the clients, which serve as legible entry points and common codes of conduct
29 (Goffman 1967). In her ethnography of bar room behavior, Sherri Cavan (1966) describes the
30 ongoing sociability by explaining sitting choices: position, posture and conduct tell about
31 boundaries, character and display. Also Suzanne Hall (2012) has presented cafés as a layered
32 set of interactions which show different modes of belonging in the city.
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50 *How do time and scale take on different forms during the day? In the café, there is a*
51 *coexistence of dissimilar temporalities: some people come here to enjoy a break from*
52 *work, while some others visit for leisure or to work with their laptop. Then there are*
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3 *those who actually work in the café. Five women in the kitchen, four waitresses, the*
4 *manager, and those who bring provisions every two hours. There is also a dissimilar*
5 *coexistence of scales: an Internet radio station specializing in French music;*
6 *Georgian manners and social hierarchies; tourists and expats; khachapuris and*
7 *'European' salads; multiple languages... (Tbilisi)*
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17 *People talk with a lot of vocatives: "Não! Olha lá! Porreiro 'pá! 'Tá bem! óptimo!*
18 *Meu Deus!*
19

20
21 *People walk slowly and seem to start crying any moment.*
22

23
24 *Rather than a "corner country", I see Portugal as an island. Indeed, Portuguese*
25 *people deploy an island mentality, characterized by eccentric manierism, existential*
26 *despair and mighty emotions.*
27
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31 *This seems to be a country of narrators, storytellers and charlatans.*
32

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34 *This terrace is the only spot of Lisbon where is not possible to notice the ubiquitous*
35 *sea.*
36
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38
39 *Around 11am, there are 25 people in all the 5 terraces of this little street. They all are*
40 *drinking coffee; 8 people smoking; 4 people sit alone. (Lisbon)*
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45 The experiment eventually shows how daily life is experienced as a series of
46 significant routines and eventful junctures, which appear interpreted according to the life
47 experience and frames of understanding of the ethnographer. There is much to be gained
48 from paying closer attention to the seemingly banal or mundane. Even if eluding a complete
49 capture, the analysis of the everyday life gives access to a wide range of raw interwoven
50 phenomena entailing a variety of temporalities, scales and ordering processes. Lefebvre
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3 (1984) understands everyday life as both a sphere of cultural reproduction and an arena
4 whereby moments of transformation emerge. Whilst for de Certeau (1984), it is a terrain of
5 resistance and subversion. The everyday influences our life patterns and meaning-making as
6 a subtle knowledge (Ehn and Lövgren 2010) and as forms of coordination and
7 synchronization (Zerubavel 1979). The dwellers of a city, as members of a community, share
8 grammars, manifested in common turn-taking, speech distortions, etiquettes, use of silence
9 and space performativity (Rapport 1993). Their interaction is, therefore, a regular sequence of
10 mutual interpreting. Wittgenstein (1974) already stressed the inexact character of ordinary
11 meanings. He remarked how our capacity to communicate relies upon basic rules practiced
12 between persons, rather than on the exactitude of our sentences. Hence he urged that
13 descriptions of this meaning making should be embedded in life by following games.
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30 *There is a couple talking next to me; more exactly, it is an uninterrupted monologue*
31 *of the woman. While the man whispers a comment – almost inaudible, just a few*
32 *words – the woman keeps her breath and then launches a cascade of loud words. She*
33 *seems to spill words on the table, on the glasses, everywhere.*
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38 *A middle-aged man arrives. He wears a red polo shirt with white stripes, simple black*
39 *pants and black deck shoes. Slowly he places his sunglasses on the table and then*
40 *does the same with a bunch of keys, a small black mobile phone and a white envelope.*
41 *Finally, he takes a seat and opens the sports newspaper. This is done in a ceremonial*
42 *form, yet not necessarily ritualistically. It is as if people in public spaces were acting*
43 *in front of a mirror. The waitress comes with a coffee; he says thanks without looking*
44 *at her. Then he moves the sugar bag, opens it and throws half of the content on the*
45 *coffee. He moves the coffee slowly and in intervals. It takes three sips to drink the*
46 *espresso. The waitress goes away from the terrace holding a coffee in her hand, sits*
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3 *at the concrete edge and then she has a smoke. This seems to be her personal resting*
4 *ritual. Once the cigarette is finished, she walks back to the table bringing the bill to*
5 *the middle-aged man. He opens the wallet and picks up a bill; then a second one; then*
6 *a third one. He gives this third one to the waitress and puts the other two back into*
7 *the wallet. Before leaving, he has a sip of tap water looking at the urban horizon.*
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13 (Lisbon)
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19 See FIG 4
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24 **Concluding considerations**

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27 What does it mean to observe and how do we really observe? Ethnography claims to be
28 generated from the ground, but what kind of ground is it when I cannot stop sweating and I
29 get pains in my back? Already Bronisław Malinowski (1922) admitted that boredom
30 pervades the experience of conducting fieldwork; and Claude Lévi-Strauss described
31 ethnographic routines as daily ‘fatigues’, which made the ethnographer’s profession look like
32 an imitation of the military service (1955: 9). Once we assume that fieldwork is what makes
33 anthropology distinctive from other disciplines, there is the imperative to always make
34 explicit the conditions of knowledge production (van der Port 2016), combining an
35 experiential description with a systematic effort to understand and contextualize a given
36 problematic (Sarró and Pedroso Lima 2006). The challenge however is that qualitative
37 research has its own temporal and spatial setting, as well as a particular mode of explanation,
38 which too often tends to ignore the complexity of presences, the subtlety of the unseen, the
39 unspoken and the absent, and how a thought occurs after experiential considerations.
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3 *It is me who gets exhausted, but not the place. Every morning I discover something*
4 *new. I guess I pay attention to different details depending on my mood and on what I*
5 *have done the previous journey. But how true are my notes? Are they conditioned by*
6 *over-generalizing and the search of literary effects? Shall I talk about a 'doped*
7 *quotidianity', whereby I see more than what is there in reality? What is the effect of*
8 *my presence in this setting? Do they recognize me as a foreigner and as a*
9 *researcher?*

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

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21 *I start feeling tired. Also I notice pain in my back. I have been here for 4 or 5 hours*
22 *already; I drank 2 coffees, an orange juice and a beer. All the glasses are still on my*
23 *table. I increasingly feel disquiet for having to stay here a couple of hours more. I*
24 *would like to talk with somebody. I put my sunglasses on to disconnect...*

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30 *People walking across are dressed up in a stiff way, imbued with a fake presumptuous*
31 *elegance. The clothing is kind of conservative; both parents and children wear it; I*
32 *read it as a sign of a stagnated mindset.*

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

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48 *In his view, Portuguese people are afraid of conflicts: "The Portuguese are mild*
49 *people. We don't take to the streets to protest so much". (Lisbon)*
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3 In this research, I have used myself as a device for showing how a priori
4 interpretations, field roles and my own in/ability to 'accurately' record what I see influence
5 my fieldwork. It shows thus that site notes occur too, revealing as much about the observer as
6 it does about the observed. Site notes are generally considered more chaotic and subjective,
7 and in that sense less analytical and elaborated as a writing; yet their transparent and raw
8 quality also gives access to an intimacy and processualness that is most often filtered out in
9 the post-fieldwork... and paradoxically, these site notes are a material symbol of our
10 occupation and professional identity, legitimizing our belonging to 'the tribe' of
11 anthropologists (Jackson 1990).
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23 The moments of writing in the field distil different observations and dialogues into
24 separated texts, inscribing social events and discourses, so translating what is passing into
25 writing, turning anthropology into a graphocentric discipline (Clifford 1990) and fieldwork
26 into an exercise of I-witnessing and being there (Clifford and Marcus 1985). However, the
27 claims to truth that anthropologists make are usually not based on the act of interpretation of
28 site notes but, rather, on the laying of groundwork necessary to get to that point (Fabian
29 2008).
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38 Revisiting my site notes, I am even surprised of them; what these notes actually
39 describe is a stream of consciousness and the relationship between my interiority and the
40 surrounding setting. In his study of Mauss' work (1983), Lévi-Strauss foregrounded how the
41 observer tends to reveal and apprehend himself through the act of observation, becoming an
42 instrument of fieldwork. In spite of the appearances, my five days of doing nothing were
43 prepared during several months. And yet, over the time of being there, I let the focus of my
44 investigation evolve to follow the small moments of rupture, disappearance and interiority
45 (Doty 2010); being affected by discovery; reshaping what I chose to describe; asking myself
46 what are these people around me thinking of themselves, the world, the sport news, the
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3 coffee, the dress of the waitress, myself.
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5 This has been not exactly an exercise of transparency pretending to show the
6 ambiguities of fieldwork, but a play of mirrors with an anthropological outcome (hence site
7 notes were preserved and the article went through a peer-review process, been eventually
8 published, making sense elsewhere and potentially referred or forgotten). I have written
9 myself an argument in tune with anthropological habits of disciplined inquiry, hoping it
10 serves as an invitation for extending the possibilities of play/perform fieldwork and taking up
11 the idiom of contemporary art into ethnographic research.
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40 Notes

41 ¹ In both cases, a cosmopolitan past is felt by the impression of having been living there before.

42 ² ‘mas ainda pode ser pior’, ‘se calhar’ e ‘se deus quiser’.

43 ³ These books were originally published in Portuguese. Translations by the author.

44 ⁴ Gil also notes how the small is particularly praised in Portuguese language, full of seductive
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46 vocatives of approximation and affective diminutive declinations: “inho”, “ito”... (Gil 2004: 51)

47 ⁵ I found inspiring Chiara Pussetti’s project ‘Woundscapes’ (2013) at the intersection between
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49 performance art and anthropology. Pussetti explores different forms of dealing with ‘suffering’ and
50
51 the significance of pain through marking out the exhibition space with therapeutic itineraries in
52
53 Lisbon.

54 ⁶ *La perruque* is the way a worker disguises as work for the employer what is not actually work. As
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56 explained by de Certeau (1984) this may be for instance a secretary writing a love letter on “company
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58 time” or a carpenter “borrowing” a lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living house. *La perruque*
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60 mostly diverts time or scraps, rather than goods, so it is not directed towards profit.

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