Keeping Visual Field Notes in Vietnam

BY CAROL HENDRICKSON

An early Saturday morning beside Hoan Kiem Lake. Catching the gestures of people going about their everyday lives sometimes feels like drawing the model in 30-second sketches during a figure drawing class.

Saturday, May 21

Carol Hendrickson at the tomb of Emperor Tu Doc, Hue, Vietnam.
IT WAS FIVE THIRTY in the morning on my second day in Vietnam. Propelled by jet lag and an interest in what lay beyond my hotel room, I headed off to the parklands surrounding Hoan Kiem Lake in central Hanoi. I had traveled to Vietnam with a group of faculty and students from Marlboro College with the aim of documenting local uses of urban and rural parks, and I was eager to see what was happening in this popular city space. Arriving at lakeside I encountered a scene abuzz with people practicing tai chi, walking and jogging, playing soccer, socializing on park benches, and buying fresh fruits and vegetables from vendors who had arrived with brimming baskets just minutes before. I settled into this lively scene, opened my notebook, and for the next half hour recorded my observations in the form of written notes and sketches.
A visit to Cuc Phuong National Park. These two journal pages include sketches of our group about to set off on a bird walk, a park employee in Vietnam’s national dress, and the interior of a guest room.

Tuesday, May 24

I made a tissue paper rubbing of the mosquito netting over the bed and glued this on top of the painted sketch of the room to give a sense of the layers of the view looking through the netting as well as through the windows.
My efforts at drawing as a significant part of data collection began years earlier when I first went abroad with students. I saw sketching—publicly, as an integral part of my everyday practice of anthropology—as a way to engage students more fully in the process of recording what they saw and what they were thinking about. If students saw me writing—and only writing—there was little chance that they would hang around and read my notes: writing always seems so private. Drawing, however, was an invitation to watch and ask questions, and students soon began to think of their own note-taking in different ways. After this experiment, I too became convinced that sketching as part of fieldwork was important beyond what I initially imagined. I have continued to sketch as part of my work as an anthropologist and also, somewhat ironically, have begun to put in words what I am doing and how it contributes to being a mindful observer.

**Lines of Thought**

When I talk about the benefits of keeping visual field notes people sometimes comment, “But I can’t draw.” My response is always that everybody can make marks that represent in some way the things they have seen and want to remember. To many people this means having the ability to draw a face that reminds them of a particular individual or an artifact that looks like one they are studying in a museum case. This, however, is only one way that marks on a page can represent something out there in the world. A person could also paint a blotch of color that is reminiscent of the yellow-greens of fresh vegetables in a market or record a curving line that conjures up a dancer’s gesture. In semiotic terms, these journal entries are all iconic, that is in some way (to somebody, calling on particular cultural traditions) they look like the thing they are meant to
Hanoi water puppet theater.

Writing and drawing in the dark can be a challenge. Here I noted the various colors and applied the watercolors soon after the performance.

Mai Chau rice fields in the Cuc Phuong Ecotourism Area. Along with the watercolor sketch of the valley floor I specifically noted the green and yellow colors of rice plants.
represent. In addition, these journal entries are indexical; they relate in some direct way to the context in which they were created. With this in mind, a drawing done while bouncing along in an old bus is not “ruined” by the bumps and jumps in a line. Rather, the line serves as an index—a visual reminder—of the very physical nature of that ride. Likewise, coffee stains, ink blotches, sweat marks, and dirt smudges are not so much disasters on the road to pristine journal entries as they are reminders of food eaten, a favorite pen that leaked, climatic conditions, physical exertion, and the potential of local materials to add color or line to a notebook. They are all mementos of the physical nature of travel.

Related to this, experiences and journal entries—both recorded words and images—can become permanently entwined, with each calling forth the other in complex memory chains. This is the case with my watercolor sketch of rice fields in Mai Chau, a community linked to a national park as an ecotourism area and a place where my students and I spent five days. The intense engagement of looking at and painting the rice fields resulted in both a representation of the scene as well as a vivid memory of the sensory experience: the spring of the bamboo floor I sat on, the breeze blowing in the open window. What is more, the painted sketch is inexorably linked to a comment by our translator who noted he liked the smell of rice fields. The smell of rice fields? Until that moment, I was oblivious to the sensation but now look at my Mai Chau images with his comment and the smell of rice fields in mind.

Sketching as part of fieldwork has other benefits. With a camera, I take a picture and quickly move along. Drawing, on the other hand, forces me to slow down and spend time looking and thinking. Drawing also affords me time to contemplate the theoretical issues of my

Monday, May 23

A record of different aspects of Cuc Phuong National Park. These include a list of tape recordings, sketches of flora, and a collection of litter picked up along the park trails.
A note on materials

A person interested in keeping visual field notes can do nicely with a basic kit of materials:

1. a notebook - I prefer one with thick pages that hold up to watercolor paints, sturdy covers that provide a hard work surface, and a spiral binding that allows pages to be folded back. While my two Vietnam journals are 9" x 11" and 10" x 10," I have traveled with much smaller ones as well as handmade journals (without spiral bindings).

2. roller-ball pens for writing and sketching - Choose ones that you like to use; there is no perfect pen for writing or sketching in the field.

3. either a travel-size watercolor set or water-soluble colored pencils

4. one or more water brushes - A water brush, available through several mail-order art supply companies, holds water in a tube that serves as its handle. Squeezing the tube forces a small amount of water out through the acrylic bristles. This water can be used to wet and paint with watercolors as well as clean the brush. Additional water is not necessary. This invention is a true godsend to travelers who want to paint on the spot.

5. a tube of white gouache - Gouache, an opaque water-soluble paint, can be mixed with watercolor paint. I use the white to lighten certain colors and paint white highlights.

6. a glue stick or small container of white glue

7. scissors

8. paper towels or small cloth
study in relation to what I am observing. And when I draw, people stop to comment and chat. Sketching thereby can lead to conversations with individuals in a new location, just as the finished journal can be used to share what you learn with people at home.

While not strictly drawing, collecting and gluing ephemera in my notebooks has likewise transformed a longstanding field practice. I always save a great deal of odds and ends when I travel, sure that those ticket stubs, wrappers, and receipts—stuff that borders between “data” and “trash”—will one day prove important. In the past these items were often stashed in files and then forgotten. Many are now glued in my notebooks, sometimes arranged as thematic collages. As with the drawings, they create a record and engage me mindfully in preserving and articulating a sense of a people, place, and experiences.

**Drawing as Part of Research and Travel in General**

After that morning spent drawing next to Hoan Kiem Lake, I continued to collect visual materials in other city parks, two national parks, and their environs. My one large notebook grew to two, each page densely packed with written notes, sketches, and a range of ephemera. I returned home with a rich record of my experiences in Vietnam, material that I have used in teaching, sharing with friends and colleagues, and now writing this article. And whether I am traveling as an anthropologist or a tourist, I continue to keep visual as well as verbal fieldnotes as an integral way of seeing the world, in the double sense of observing and understanding.
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For Further Reading


