

Activation after the Multimodal Turn

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ABSTRACT

As more and more anthropologists turn to multimodal/more-than-textual forms and formats of research communication, the time is ripe to think in fresh ways about how we design our research artefacts or outputs. In this essay, I will argue that doing so can help us to activate more of the potential of our anthropology. But to truly take advantage of this potential, we must redefine the way we assess the academic value of such artefacts.

KEYWORDS

multimodal anthropology, activation, intervention, design, e/valuation

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Activation

In some ways, to talk about “activating” research is to use a new term for what is otherwise a traditional set of academic practices. After all, there are all sorts of ways that we activate – animate, trigger, realize – the affordances and potentials of the text-based forms of our research, even if we do not use those terms. These include following a citation to its source to discover new ideas and materials and theoretical frameworks. Bibliographies guide readers to learn about whole fields of study. We regularly take concepts and methods developed in one article or book and put them to use in new empirical settings or conceptual contexts; and we expect (or hope) that others will do this with our research. We compare empirical materials found in various studies, sometimes contrasting them with our own research, and generate new insights or develop fresh theoretical claims. And every time we teach with an article, chapter, or monograph, we are activating some of their many potentials for specific pedagogical goals. Many of those goals amount to a training in understanding and activating the affordances of text-based research artefacts.¹

Narrative genres offer another set of distinctions to be activated in a text, for example folding elements of mystery, romance, or the Bildungsroman into ethnographic writing. Still other features of traditional academic formats afford a rich field for experimentation and intervention. Think, for example, of how Max Liboiron self-consciously designed the footnotes of their book *Pollution is Colonialism* as a site to practice and enact the socio-scholarly goals of “doing good relations within a text, through a text.” As they put it, footnotes are a

“place of nuance and politics, where the protocols of gratitude and recognition play out (sometimes also called citation), where warnings and care work are carried out (including calling certain readers aside for a chat or a joke), and where I contextualize, expand, and emplace work. The footnotes support the text above, representing the shoulders on which I stand and the relations I want to build.” (Liboiron 2021, 1)

And in his book *The Participant* (2020), Chris Kelty uses endnotes for the usual scholarly citations while employing the margins of the main narrative to portray the historical documents and texts that he relied upon ethnographically, “rather than as evidence or documentation,” with the aim to not just “represent history, but [as] an honest attempt to participate in it” (Kelty 2020, 44). Numerous other activations of traditional academic text elements (length, color, font, sequence, multiple languages, mixed media, etc.) abound.

The question of research form and format is not inconsequential – scholarly texts and their affordances play an essential role in the academic labor market. Indeed, under conditions of intense competition, one benefit of articles, books, and other text-based publications is their ability to stand as tokens of scholarly merit that can be quantified and used to assess and index the worth of individual scholars. As I will argue below, whether multimodal or intermedial works can act in the same way will depend on the values we attach to them.

¹ In this essay I use *artefact* and *work* as general terms to refer to the forms of knowledge production that our research takes when we aim to share it, whether in a text-based form like a traditional journal article, or a more-than-textual, multimodal form like a film, podcast, or exhibit.

Many activations are purposeful – as interventions into theoretical debates or the politics of scholarship or the job market – while others emerge in surprising and unexpected ways as people engage with or encounter research materials for the first – or fifteenth – time. Engaging a text may change the way we think or feel or act (or not), whether by design or chance.

Of course, text-based artefacts of research have potentials that can be activated for purposes that lie beyond (or alongside) the scholarly concerns of academia. They can inspire films and other forms of popular culture. They can be mobilized in court cases; they can inform government policy; they can participate in nation-building or stand as vehicles for cultural imperialism or political revolution. They can facilitate a space of appearance for an otherwise unformed public who, upon gathering together, may be mobilized for diverse purposes.

This is all to say that “activation” is something that anthropologists do all the time through and with their research artefacts,² whose prestige forms have long been text-based, like articles, essays, chapters, and books (particularly in the academy). And many of us implicitly or explicitly design those artefacts for one or another of the above ends.

For the past decade or so, and at an increasing rate, anthropologists have begun to explore other forms for their research artefacts: games, comics, performance, poetry, walks, photography, podcasts, video/film, digital platforms, exhibits of all kinds – a veritable explosion in multimodal, multisensory, intermedial experimentation. Of course, anthropology has never been monomodal; and some anthropologists are clearly rediscovering or building upon existing examples of media experimentation from relatively stable subfields like visual anthropology or museum anthropology.³ There are many reasons for this experimentation, including the desire to reach new publics, to co-create knowledge in forms that our research participants and epistemic partners can engage with or use, to capture and evoke slippery ethnographic objects, to find forms that better feature the media aesthetics we find in the field, or to create research artefacts that – in their design, circulation, and activation – can become the occasion for new learning and analysis. The key point here, however, is that the turn to multimodal and intermedial forms opens up a vast range of more-than-textual affordances for activation and intervention, both within academia and beyond.⁴

And yet, this expanded range of activations and interventions is likely to be limited unless we find ways to expand how we value and assess more-than-textual knowledge production. In what follows, I explore the diverse affordances of select multimodal and intermedial research artefacts and their activation, and then use this exploration to identify what such an expanded valuation and assessment might entail.

² Of course, there are long-standing discussions within anthropology about the ends towards which we activate our research, most recently in debates about public anthropology.

³ In this regard, journals like *Museum Anthropology*, *Visual Anthropology*, and *Visual Anthropology Review* offer rich discursive, conceptual, and media resources, the result of decades of published scholarship.

⁴ The interest in and activation of more-than-textual forms and formats extends to every stage of ethnographic research and knowledge production, not just the design and presentation of artefacts for public engagement. However, for the purposes of this essay, I will focus only on the latter – while also recognizing that the divisions between research conception, practice, and communication are porous and not as unidirectional as the term “stages” implies.

Example 1: Emerge Matrix

I start with an interesting experiment carried out as part of an initiative entitled “Emerge: A Matrix for Ethnographic Collaboration + Practice.”⁵ Featuring faculty and students from five different university-based ethnography labs and centers in North America, the project aimed to explore the kinds of infrastructure for ethnographic research that can be built across sites by generating new methods. I came to this project as a member of the Ethnography Lab at the University of Toronto where I taught before moving to Germany. Over the course of 2023, small teams of graduate students at each lab or center engaged in research inspired by a concept: in Toronto, it was play; in Montreal, it was composite; in Los Angeles, porosity; in British Columbia, it was dissonance; and in Philadelphia, it was curriculum. At the end of the summer, each lab or center took a single artefact from research done in the past year and sent it to another lab or center. Members of the receiving group then activated it in some way, that is, transformed it or put it to work in another context. The experiment was guided by questions such as: What potentials are activated when research objects, artefacts, methods, and events circulate out of their initial contexts of emergence and assembly? What values can we create beyond proprietary notions of research practice and production? What new insights are afforded through re/combination, re/contextualization, and re/mixing?

We gathered at the joint annual meetings of the Canadian Anthropology Society and American Anthropological Association in Toronto in November 2023 to share the results. I will describe two of the five activations that were presented at a conference roundtable event. The first was set in motion when The Ethnography Studio at USC shared an image which they used as inspiration for their exploration of how porosity figured into their individual research projects. The Centre for Experimental Ethnography in Philadelphia was the receiving lab. One of their members, Indivar Jonnalagadda, shared the following (which I quote at length):

“In our activation of this offering, we approached it simultaneously as an illustration of a material phenomenon, as an illustration of a concept, and as a media artifact. In the spirit of porosities, we began to think our activation as absorption. We asked, how do we absorb the phenomenon, the concept, and the image into our practices and our projects?”

There were multiple ways in which they activated the image and its framing as porosity, but the part I will highlight is the reflexive concept work it animated in their group,⁶ particularly in thinking about collaboration.

“In our discussions, we all converged around the formulation of porosity as the presence or existence of space within a material, which we redefined as spaciousness. Further, we were struck by how apprehending spaciousness, seemed to imply for us (and indeed for others who study porosity) the possible flows of other materials through the porous material. So porosity implies space, which in turn implies flow. Porosity for us implied a threshold...”

⁵ <https://www.emergematrix.org/>, accessed on 10.11.2025.

⁶ The group was made up of Indivar Jonnalagadda, Astrid Pickenpack, Rabani Garg, and Pablo Aguilera del Castillo.

“Thinking of thresholds and boundaries, and the flow of matter and ideas across them, also drew our attention to ethnography itself. We thought of the ethnographer as a porous figure. A figure placed at the intersection of many worlds, many institutions, many structures, many materials, who absorbs and metabolises social and environmental relations to render the strange familiar and the familiar strange by witnessing or holding space and by troubling the thresholds. Our second creation then, was the idea of ethnography as a reci-porosity. And our sense of this reci-porosity was all the more heightened by our participation in this wondrous and generous collaboration, by literally being part of a gift exchange where we are seeking to redefine the threshold of what is valuable in the knowledge economy, and hold space for new forms of creativity and collaboration.”

They also activated the image artefact by manipulating it in various ways and concluded that

“we felt a sense of creative exhilaration in being part of this collaboration. Astrid joked that we should activate a new concept every month. What was freeing and joy-giving about our reci-porous activation was that we weren’t on a limiting track to excellence, or “truth”, or success, but rather our goal was to generously and generatively take up the conceptual, material, and multimodal categories of porosity that we were gifted and build new tracks of connection and collaboration.”

The artefact that the Concordia Ethnography Lab in Montreal shared with The Ethnography Studio in Los Angeles was a zine about their research on the Francon rock quarry in Montreal. Called *The Pit Stop*, the zine was itself an attempt by the Montreal research collective⁷ to create a research artefact that could be activated to serve needs identified by members of a citizen association that advocated for the community surrounding the quarry (Campos Ortiz et al. 2025). A representative from this association had argued that “the Pit’s relative invisibility to people who lived in the neighbourhood was a barrier to organizing around it,” and that what they “needed was some material that was accessible and easy to distribute” (ibid., 18). The research collective responded, in line with their commitment to “caring for relations,” that “whatever we made needed to honour this request: a low-stakes artifact that we could make and deliver without asking anything more in return” (ibid.). A zine seemed the perfect format: each page or two could represent a different dimension of the quarry that emerged from research; it could be visually interesting and need not contain too much text. In relatively short order, it was created and printed. In it, different members of the research collective represented some of the ways they approached the quarry as a research object: as a site of community activism, as a place to dump snow when snow removal trucks got full, as a site portrayed as empty, as a site for imagining different futures, as the inspiration for a collective research method (composite ethnography).

Whereas the zine succeeded in being inexpensive, easy to circulate, and a fitting evocation of composite ethnography, its creators were disappointed in its lack of reception after it was distributed at a few events:

⁷ Members of this group included, at different times, Isabelle Boucher, Melina Campos Ortiz, Carlos Olaya, Derek Pasborg, Camila Patiño, Manoj Suji, and Ava Weinstein-Wright, along with Kregg Hetherington and Bart Simon.

“We never heard back from members of [the organization], who had clearly not felt moved enough to try to continue the conversation. We felt that in the end, even if we had not accomplished quite what we had hoped, we had approached composition in the same spirit of generosity that we had been practicing with each other throughout the process” (ibid., 19).

Upon receiving the Montreal zine, the Ethnography Studio at USC decided to activate it by making what they called an “echo zine,” in the form of a pdf along with instructions on how to print it out and fold it.⁸ Each page of the echo zine is dedicated to a resonance between what appeared in the Montreal zine and research done by members of the group at USC. For example, someone in the echo zine doing research on the Roosevelt Dam noted that, like the creation of the Pit, the Dam destroyed some communities and made others. A few pages later someone else noted that “the Pit encompasses both emptiness and fullness for different people at different times” and this resonated with their research on logging forests, leading them to reflect that “extraction hollows out while filling with new relations.”

There are many things to say about this experiment in production, circulation, and activation. In part, the activations stayed within the realm of recognizable anthropological or scholarly concerns, if in somewhat novel ways. For the Philadelphia group, the research artefacts were a concept and image. The activation consisted of concept work, probing the affordances of porosity in ways that led to new insights into the materialities of ethnography and a new theorization of the ethnographer (as a reciprocal figure). Moreover, framing the exercise as a gift exchange with a non-proprietary approach to research materials was cited by at least one group as the reason they found the resulting intellectual work pleasurable. The Pit Stop zine and its design elements were generative of a different set of activations. For the Montreal group, the activation extended beyond the analytic concerns of ethnographic research and into an attempt to support the goals of community activists, all the while enacting an ethos of caring relations that included researchers and community members. Upon receiving *The Pit Stop*, the Los Angeles group also pursued a dialogic approach to thinking about their own projects in relation to it, while sticking to the possibilities and limits of the zine format. This generated insights into their own research and produced yet another artefact (the echo zine) that was circulated further to other members of the Emerge network. Moreover, in each setting (Philadelphia group, Los Angeles group), the activation not only affected those engaging with the artefact, but also those that produced it; by getting to observe how these concepts and artefacts were activated in diverse ways, they came to see unanticipated dimensions and affordances of their own research.

Example 2: The Maribor Uprisings

Yet another example is the film *The Maribor Uprisings: A Live Participatory Documentary* by visual anthropologist and activist Maple Razsa and visual artist and filmmaker Milton Guillén. In part it documents and contextualizes a popular revolt by citizens in Maribor, Slovenia, touched off by political corruption in the mayor’s office. Using audio and video material taken from the frontlines of the uprising, each

⁸ The echo zine was created by Katie Ulrich and Rachel Howard.

screening of the film is also taken as an occasion to stage an experiment in collective decision-making. As the film website states,

“As a viewer, you must decide collectively with your fellow audience members which cameras you will follow and therefore how the screening will unfold. Like those who joined the actual uprisings, you will be faced with the choice of joining non-violent protests or following rowdy crowds towards City Hall and greater conflict. These dilemmas parallel those faced by protesters everywhere as they grapple with what it means to resist. What sparks outrage? How are participants swept up in – and changed by – confrontations with police? Could something like this happen in your city? What would you do?”⁹

The mechanics of how it works are also important:

“*Uprisings* is live facilitated by the directors, beginning with a brief orientation to the discussion and decision-making practices to be used during the screening-practices drawn from the Maribor protests. After watching the film’s introduction, the audience confronts the first of several decision-points, where they must choose between diverging storylines. Brief discussions at these decision-points raise questions about the strategies and ethics of protest, forcing the audience to decide – with a quick show of hands – whether to resist force with violence or to remain peaceful in the face of repression. What audiences see, the emotional quality of their experience, perhaps even whether they feel personally implicated in unruly protest, will all depend on the choices they make.”¹⁰

In other words, the design and facilitation of the film activate the potential of the audio/visual material to intervene into film viewing-as-usual and transform a passive public into a temporary political assembly that experiences decision-making dilemmas similar to those confronting protest participants. Those experiences may end in the thrill of recognition that comes from acting in common, or the alienation that comes from being compelled to follow choices you do not agree with. The audio and visual design of the film activates elements of the original footage to evoke the sensorily charged atmosphere of an active protest environment, and the narrative sequencing means that the film performs social analysis in ways that mirror the aftermath of any uprising. Moreover, each screening of the film also becomes an occasion for the filmmakers to learn about the possibilities and limits of film-viewing in the formation of political consciousness and constitution of collective action.

Example 3: Tivoli Stories

A third example is the *Tivoli Stories* project, a well-documented collaboration between anthropologist Deborah Thomas, community psychologist Deanne Bell, and musician and composer Junior “Gabu” Wedderburn. It began as a documentary initiative and multimedia installation focusing on “the state of emergency that began in Jamaica on 24 May 2010 when police and military forces entered Tivoli Gardens and other West Kingston communities.”¹¹ As the project website states, “The security forces

⁹ <https://mariboruprisings.org/howitworks>, accessed on 10.11.2025.

¹⁰ <https://mariboruprisings.org/howitworks>, accessed on 10.11.2025.

¹¹ <https://www.tivolistories.com/>, accessed on 10.11.2025.

were to apprehend Christopher ‘Dudus’ Coke, leader of the Shower Posse and ‘don’ of the community, who had been ordered for extradition to the United States to stand trial for gun- and drug-related charges. By the end of the week, Dudus had not yet been found and at least 73 civilians had been killed” (ibid.).

Featuring diverse audio, visual, and textual materials, including firsthand accounts of people directly impacted by the bloodshed, the project fits into Thomas’ ongoing practice of “creating and assembling archives of violence in Jamaica” that can be activated to generate “difficult conversations about the relationships among personhood, politics, and violence and toward opening new spaces in which people can connect with each other” (Welcome/Thomas 2021, 394). This, in turn, can “create the conditions for people to think through their own relation to these archives and to elaborate new foundations for sociality and liberation” (ibid.). Thomas has defined this in part as a particular form of witnessing, “a quotidian practice of watching, listening, and feeling that is relational and profoundly inter-subjective... [and] also a moral practice that involves exploring our complicity within contemporary events” (ibid.).

But what began as a multimedia installation eventually evolved into a multimodal ecology of works, including the installation, two films, a book, and other writing. This ecology emerged, or “shape-shifted,” in part due to the wishes of the participating West Kingston community members, who wanted a documentary film made to “narrate their experiences during those weeks and name and publicly memorialize loved ones they lost.”¹² And so, as Thomas writes, a 40-minute film, *Four Days in May: Kingston 2010*, was produced; and from the beginning, Thomas and her collaborators aimed to explore how the assembled audio-visual materials could be activated for the kind of witnessing and other interventions outlined above:

“Over the past few years, we have been experimenting with how a series of screenings, moderated public discussions, and community-based ritual interventions might offer an alternative to the security-oriented approaches to political and other forms of violence that normally constitute intervention within the public sphere. We have been guided by the following questions as we seek alternative routes toward meaningful social transformation: How might multimodal research practices generate new forms of public awareness of and dialogue about the long-term effects and manifestations of political, drug-related, and inter-communal violence? In environments in which individuals continue to experience the effects of traumatic violence, how might multimodal representations allow for different levels of consciousness and awareness about the everyday ways these forms of violence are perpetuated? And finally, within a context saturated by deep political, social, and economic polarizations, what are the spaces in which and modalities through which productive dialogue can occur?” (Ibid., 395-396)

And indeed, as she recounts later in that same article, screening the film for and conducting moderated discussions with working-class and middle-class Jamaicans did realize some of these aims and potentials (ibid., 396).¹³

¹² <https://www.tivolistories.com/>, accessed on 10.11.2025.

¹³ Moreover, in an unanticipated effect, the head of a Jamaican governmental inquiry into the incursion asked to watch the film and possibly enter it into the inquiry’s official record.

The next work to be produced in the growing multimodal ecology was a response to the experience of showing the film outside of Jamaica, particularly in the US, “where there is limited familiarity with the histories of political nationalism and violence in Jamaica and elsewhere” (ibid., 396). Thomas shares that at these screenings she became disturbed because US audiences “seemed to be spending more time attempting to figure out what happened – the order of the events, the reasons for the responses, the geopolitical relations that would have caused them – than they were trying to understand what they were *feeling* from people on the screen” (ibid., 396, italics in the original). Viewers in these audiences also had negative reactions to the way that the film subtitled the patois-speaking residents, becoming “frustrated that they didn’t feel they understood what people were saying” (ibid., 396). In other words, members of these audiences sought to make the film “legible and transparent” in ways contrary to the witnessing for which it had been designed (ibid., 397).

“These experiences led me to want to experiment with another form, one that was nonnarrative and non-linear, and one in which the sound (also developed by Junior ‘Gabu’ Wedderburn) did not correspond to the images. My sense was that this abstraction would potentially give viewers the freedom to abandon certain expectations of legibility in order to more fully immerse themselves in the affective relations of the visual and sonic landscapes... [that were] designed to push viewers through various visual spheres without satisfying a desire for or expectation of affective resolution.” (Ibid., 396)

This led to the production of a short, experimental film; and indeed, Thomas reports that the audiences who viewed both films had distinct affective reactions to each in ways informed by this juxtaposed viewing (ibid.).

Interestingly, the more traditional academic prestige form, the book *Political Life in the Wake of the Plantation*, was not originally planned. Rather, it emerged out of the documentation and film initiatives, particularly once Thomas started to prepare to talk about the process and its hoped-for effects. As she argues in the book’s preface, the textual contribution should be understood as a form of transmediation, extending the engagement begun in the other visual and sonic media, “with each speaking to the gaps in the other without necessarily seeking to resolve them into one seamless story” (Thomas 2019, xv).

Example 4: Yuta Anthropology

As the above example suggests, experiments in more-than-textual research have had effects on book design as well, for they are also (or can be) multimodal and intermedial artefacts. For a final example we might look at the Yuta Anthropology project of the *Miyarrka Media Collective* (MMC), “an intergeneration and intercultural arts collective based at Yalakun outstation on Yolŋu country in northern Australia.”¹⁴ This project features the book *Phone and Spear* (which appears in both print format and an online version with embedded audio and video features), and the short video *Making Worlds Otherwise*. As MMC puts it, a recombinatory principle informs the creation of what has become an ecology of media artefacts: “The video is a remix of

¹⁴ <https://miyarrkamedia.com/wanga-story/>, accessed on 8.2.2026.

a book, which was a remix of an exhibition, which was a remix of a series of small artworks made by remixing the photographs of our everyday lives in the mobile phones we use to connect with one another.”¹⁵ Each of these forms and formats offers unique ways for the MMC to conjure and enact a Yuta (or new) anthropology, based on the distinction that whereas “‘old’ anthropolog understands its task to be revealing one world to another,” Yuta anthropology seeks instead “to bring different worlds into relationship” (Miyarrka Media Collective 2019, 11). As the book states, this is based upon the “Yolŋu capacity for creating mutuality and inclusion while still allowing for distinctive and sometimes divergent points of view” (ibid., xvii). As a visual object, the book is designed according to Yolŋu concepts that link aesthetics and epistemology, and thus aims “to generate relationships...[by] activating readers as sensuous, imaginative and feeling participants in the making of meanings and connections” (ibid., 13). As MMC member Paul Gurrumurwuy puts it “You have to know how to look at things, to see those connections and feel them to. That’s why we worked so hard to make this book, so that you can see, you can feel, you can know” (ibid, xviii).

* * *

My list of examples could go on and on. I have learned from colleagues Ignacio Fariás and Tomás Criado about how games – and game design – focused on urban processes in Berlin, like those that constitute the real estate market (House of Gossip) or recycling (Trash Games), can create mobile forms of learning and understanding for scholars and non-scholars alike (Criado et al. 2022; Criado at al. 2025; Fariás 2025). And the podcasts of the Labyrinth Project – a collective inquiry led by Chris Kelty into human-animal relations in Los Angeles – offer compelling examples of how this sonic format affords a unique approach to ethnographic storytelling and analysis that evokes and participates in the media and sensory worlds in which those relations unfold.¹⁶ I name these because, like many of the previous examples, the anthropologists involved have provided accounts about the challenges and possibilities of taking ethnographic research and designing public-facing forms of research communication and activation. By providing such accounts, I argue, they are not only allowing us to learn from their process but contributing to a larger argument for why and how we can appreciate and evaluate these more-than-textual forms and formats.

Conclusions: Designing for Activation, Expanding Academic Values

As is clear from my brief description of the above examples, multimodal formats contain a vast number of affordances that can be activated for diverse ends, some with recognizably academic or scholarly concerns, and some that engage non-academic audiences for more-than-scholarly goals. This suggests two conclusions. The first is that the recent opening to more-than-textual forms and formats, alongside ongoing commitments to engaged or public-facing interventions, invite anthropologists to pay more attention to questions of design. This, in turn, means probing for

¹⁵ https://miyarrkamedia.com/bauman_portfolio/making-worlds-otherwise/, accessed on 10.11.2025.

¹⁶ <https://labyrinth.garden/podcast/>, accessed on 10.11.2025. Like many of the other projects considered here, the podcast is one among multiple formats in a multimodal ecology that also includes articles, such as Niesner et al. 2024.

and developing a familiarity with the affordances or potentials of more-than-textual media. This can be achieved in a more formalized way by creating experimental socio-material situations, like the circulation and activation of research artefacts among the ethnography labs and centers, or by creating public encounters and discussions, as through the screening of a film. Or we can learn from our colleagues in anthropology and beyond who have helpfully described their own design and activation practices, both those that went as planned and those that did not.

A second conclusion is that when we work in these forms and formats, we discover new ways to navigate that familiar tension learned through ethnographic research: go in prepared with defined goals, but also be ready to follow where the field might take you. The Montreal group did not set out to make a zine, but developed one to answer a community need discovered through the research process. A similar responsiveness can be detected in the emergence of multimodal works in the Tivoli Stories and Yuta Anthropology projects. These examples indicate yet another potential of multimodal works which only becomes visible if we focus on more than just their design and production. Instead, we need to pay attention to their social lives as they are activated and recontextualized in ways both anticipated and unforeseen. As we have seen above, through these diverse activations, multimodal works can lead to the generation of new insights, the discovery of new affordances, and the opportunity for new iterations.

This brings me to my final point, one that emerged from a collaborative project I have been involved in that focuses on the problem of evaluation when it comes to legitimizing and institutionalizing multimodal, more-than-textual forms and formats – and the kinds of activations they enable.¹⁷ One clear obstacle is that many of us do not – or do not know how to – evaluate such works, in part because we are limited in the values we can see in them. Our premise is that learning to more fully appreciate multimodal works requires that we broaden or push conventional definitions of what counts as academic, relevant, and original beyond their association with text and writing. Unless we are willing to do this, multimodal works will likely continue to be seen as inferior to the text-based prestige forms of research output, and this will relegate the kinds of circulation and activation described here to the domain of “side-projects” or reserve such activities for those with job security.

As we have written in a *Manifesto for Multimodal Evaluation*,

“this means extending questions that we usually use to assess an academic text to apply to other media forms and formats, or nonacademic forms of writing. For example, we might ask how a research-based board game makes a theoretical contribution to debates about how housing markets work. Here the academic value – how well a work contributes to theoretical debates – remains conventional, but the form and format of research changes, and we have to ask how games (or films, or comics) might be seen to be ‘conceptualising.’” (Albrecht et al. 2025, 3-4).

Beyond theoretical or conceptual contributions, there are other discipline-specific values we might consider, reflected in questions like: How well does a multimodal work communicate particular ways of knowing by evoking and eliciting particular aesthetic and social experiences, rather than merely representing them? This was

¹⁷ <https://www2.hu-berlin.de/multimodalappreciation/>, accessed on 10.11.2025. The collaborative research team included Judith Albrecht, Tomás Criado, Ignacio Fariás, Carla J. Maier, and Karina Piersig.

certainly a value of both the audio and visual materials assembled in *The Maribor Uprisings* and in *Four Days in May: Kingston 2010*, and is essential to the activations they enabled. It can also be found in the book *Phone and Spear* and the related video *Making Worlds Otherwise*, and is also key to their attempt to call into being a Yuta Anthropology.

In addition to being willing to apply traditional academic or anthropological values to more-than-textual forms, we will need to include new values not traditionally seen as academic. For example, we might need to “redefine what ‘relevant’ means by extending the boundaries of the community of relevance beyond academia and its provincial concerns. Here we might ask: How well does a multimodal work or project make visible/sensible community interests or problems?” (ibid., 5-6). This was certainly a value of *The Pit Stop* zine and the Tivoli Stories installation and films, and indispensable to their activations. And why not develop ways of valuing activities that include the kind of collaborative, recombinatory, and non-proprietary relationship to research that enabled the artefact exchange between members of the ethnography labs and centers, and were a key to their activations?

For a discipline that seems perpetually caught up with the need to defend its relevance, the turn to multimodal/more-than-textual forms has much to offer anthropology both within academia and in more public-facing roles. But it will require a willingness to unlearn and re-learn how we design and value our research artefacts, particularly by those of us who occupy gatekeeping roles in academic publishing, funding organizations, and degree-granting programs. Thankfully, we have a growing inventory of multimodal works and activations to help us in this effort.

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