

Written Interview with Gregory Gan

1. Please present yourself and your research project

My name is Gregory Gan. I am an anthropologist who has made research contributions in the fields of visual anthropology, urban anthropology, and postsocialism, with a regional focus in Russia and Eastern Europe. I obtained my PhD at The University of British Columbia (2019), for which I was awarded an Outstanding Graduating Anthropology Student Award by the Canadian Anthropology Society. During my studies, I was also made fellow of the Liu Institute for Global Issues, and was awarded a Public Scholar award, positions that facilitated the development of a multimodal ethnographic installation created using “smart” objects, which traveled internationally to anthropology conferences and film festivals.

I received my training in ethnographic film at Toronto Metropolitan University (2007), and the Digital Research Centre for Qualitative Fieldwork at Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2008-2010, both in Canada. To date, I have created three feature films. The film “Turning Back the Waves” (2010) recounts the history of the Soviet Union as told through the life stories of seven women. I was also invited to participate in SoundImageCulture (2010) a nine-month master class in ethnographic filmmaking in Brussels, Belgium, which resulted in the film “The Theory of Happiness” (2014). The film describes a sect working to uncover the secret of happiness using mathematical formulas, and it was nominated for Best Canadian Documentary at Hot Docs International Film Festival.

2. How did you come up with your research project?

Between 2021-2023, I held a postdoctoral position at CRC1171: “Affective Societies” at Freie Universität Berlin, preceded by a Postdoctoral Fellowship awarded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. In both cases, I studied the entanglement between affect and postsocialist architecture, applying visual anthropology approaches to the study of the built environment. In addition to written publications, during my postdoctoral research, I developed a prize-winning, animated ethnographic film, “Empathy for Concrete Things” (2023), currently screening at international ethnographic and documentary film festivals.

My film and my research responded to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which dramatically impacted the ability to conduct any kind of scholarship in the region. The current project responds to the urgency of the political climate to address how emotions, aesthetics, and decolonial strategies mobilize Berlin’s contested socialist heritage. This topic is examined by looking at creative practices amongst inhabitants of Berlin’s *Plattenbauten*—industrially-built, panel-block mass housing, which remains the most visible architectural legacy of state socialism. While there are many ways to view creative practices, for example, by looking at formal aspects of art, or the milieu where it is produced; this project combines formal and cultural analysis with affect and decoloniality as strategies that consider how art transforms social space. It is proposed that Berlin’s socialist built environment offers a chance to investigate the oft-neglected, but nuanced role postmigrants from former Soviet states play in shaping German society.

3. How did you get to know EEGA ScienceCampus?

Between 2021 and 2024, I took part in a series of traveling seminars titled, “Linking Art Worlds” organized by the Leibniz-Institut für Geschichte und Kultur des östlichen Europa (GWZO). The seminars explored various „subtexts” defining art making both in North America and Eastern Europe, Linking (Art) Worlds aiming to shed light on telling differences and tease out hitherto lesser acknowledged parallels, connections, or synchronicities between the U.S. and East European contexts



(<https://www.linkingartworlds.org/>). Through this collaboration, I became acquainted with Leibniz ScienceCampus “Eastern Europe – Global Area” (EEGA), and was recommended to apply to its short-term postdoctoral fellowship, which I had done in May 2024. I sought out a collaboration with Prof. Dr. Jonathan Everts at the Department of Human Geography at the Martin Luther University, Halle (Saale), and have held the fellowship between June – September 2024.

4. What are the links between your research project and EEGA ScienceCampus?

The research offers a unique contribution to scholarship at EEGA ScienceCampus by addressing a gap between decolonial theory, which challenges broad hierarchies between Western culture and other cultural groups, and local creative strategies enacted by postmigrant artists who dwell and work amongst Berlin’s *Plattenbauten*. The project therefore asks how Berlin-based artists from Soviet successor states give form to spaces, such as the home, the neighbourhood, or the city in their artwork, and how such representations shape interpretations of the socialist past.

5. What is the EEGA ScienceCampus for you?

EEGA ScienceCampus is a fruitful, interdisciplinary work environment that offers scholars an opportunity to advance the scholarship on Eastern Europe in comparative global perspective. It is a research network that facilitates scholarly interaction, collaboration, and research dissemination through diverse activities, such as symposia, colloquia, and conferences. As someone who has taken part in such conferences and who has met new colleagues and friends working on similar themes, I have found it an extremely fecund research environment.

6. The benefit of EEGA ScienceCampus to me is ...

...an ability to make a significant contribution to scholarship using self-directed, independent research. EEGA ScienceCampus gave me the ability to be financially independent for the duration of the short-term fellowship, but to plant a seed for future innovative and interdisciplinary research. EEGA ScienceCampus has provided me with a scholarly community, ample research opportunities, and allowed me to reach the next step in my career trajectory.