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SPECIAL ISSUE ON KNOWLEDGE IN PRACTICE

Beyond the Head: The Practical Work of Curating Contemporary Art

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Abstract In contemporary art, the curator plays an important role in the production of artistic meaning through exhibition-making. Although sociology has tended to see this work as the exercise of tacit or embodied knowledge, curatorial knowledge and plans may be elaborated and altered by the situated actions of exhibition installation. While curators know a successful installation "when they see it," this depends on the indexical particularities of artworks and environments which cannot be predicted in advance. In demonstrating the practical ways in which culture is mobilized in situations of object (inter) action, this paper emphasizes the "making" in artistic meaning-making.

Keywords Cultural sociology · Distributed cognition · Actor-network theory · Object-interaction

Introduction

Speaking at the outset of the 21st century, art critic David Sylvester suggested that the most important people in the cultural world are not artists but curators, "the true brokers of the art world" (Millard 2001, p. 118). Curators have risen to prominence in the contemporary art world because of the increased importance of mediating between institutional bureaucracy, market forces, artistic representation, and public taste. In particular, the crux of curatorial practice in contemporary art is the construction of artistic meaning through the exhibition. As Greenberg et al. (1996, p. 2) describe, "Part spectacle, part socio-historical event, part structuring device, exhibitions—especially exhibitions of contemporary art—establish and administer the cultural meanings of art." Yet, little is known about how curators go about creating these meanings in the physical process of exhibition installation.

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As a form of artistic mediation, curatorial work is traditionally seen by sociology as tacitly structured by “conventions,” “internalized dialogues,” and artistic “codes.” Particularly in contemporary art, this expertise is developed through a curator’s widespread familiarity with the international art world (Moulin and Quemin 1993; Octobre 1999). A curator’s knowledge about how to present contemporary artworks to the public is generally assumed to be part and parcel of their knowledge of the artwork (Tobelem 2005). This reduction of curatorial work to the exercise of tacit knowledge, however, overlooks the role played by artistic objects in their own mediation, and in doing so, fails to provide a documented, explanatory model of how culture enters into action. If something goes without saying because it came without saying, how, when, and where can it finally be said?

In order to look in depth at the practical and material dimensions of curatorial meaning-making in action, this article draws on comparative video-based, microethnographic studies of the exhibition-making process at London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts and ARC/Musée d’Art Moderne de la ville de Paris, supplemented by visual interviews with 34 other elite curators of contemporary art. This paper also draws on useful theoretical concepts in human-object interaction, distributed cognition, the sociology of affordances, actor-network theory, and learning to illuminate the extra-verbal dimensions of curatorial work. In particular, by examining how curators build successful installations through their physical orientations to artworks, this study demonstrates the reflexive and process-oriented ways in which tacit knowledge, aesthetic codes, and meaningful conventions are born, communicated, and mobilized in situations of (inter)action. In doing so, it argues for a more dynamic understanding of curatorial mediation, and the central import of object-oriented qualitative research to the sociological study of culture and action.

Dawn of the curator of contemporary art

The curatorial profession became standardized in the nineteenth century, hand in hand with the advent of the modern museum. As Bourdieu (1993 [1987], p. 204) explains, among an array of “specialized agents” (e.g., curators, critics, art historians, dealers, collectors) who shaped the economy of cultural goods, curators became crucial actors “capable of imposing a specific measure of the value of the artist and his products.” The combining of artworks by different artists to give selective readings on art and on the history of art is one of the fundamental principles that has underwritten curatorial practice since the mid-19th century. As traditional art curators overwhelmingly hold advanced degrees in art history, they generally mount exhibitions that are scholarly in nature (Alexander 1996; DiMaggio 1991; Zolberg 1981). This scholarly nature is reflected in the art historical nature of museum display, where exhibitions generally display artworks in a linear fashion within an overall historical perspective.

The 1960s and 1970s, however, witnessed the emergence of a new breed of curators in the burgeoning contemporary art world, including Harald Szeemann, Pontus Hulten, Lars Nittv, and others. Rather than base their approach to exhibition-making in art historical conventions, these curators engaged in critical curatorial practice, experimenting with the very nature of the exhibition format. In other words, the avant-garde movement among artists was met by an avant-garde movement in curating. This new breed of curator, akin to a stage producer or orchestra conductor, became sought out by institutions, often those dedicated to contemporary art but others as well, for their wide personal networks, effective

social abilities, expertise on a particular subject, and powerful visions, rather than an advanced degree in art history.

Key here to the new museum curator's role is the planning of temporary "ahistorical" exhibitions (Meijers 1996), often arranged thematically or contextually (Staniszewski 1998), in which the curator plays a role not unlike "author" of the exhibition (Heinich and Pollak 1989a). The exhibition is a way to validate the originality of the curator's point of view, his or her aptitude for discovering new talents, and the artworks themselves by exhibiting them in a dialogue with each other to an initiated public (Octobre 1999). In contrast to the taxonomical or art historical approach to exhibiting traditional art, the exhibition process in modern and contemporary art is integral to the meaning of the art work (cf. Caillet et al. 2002; Ducret et al. 1990).

Significantly, the exhibition of contemporary art *communicates* the object by contributing another layer of meaning or interpretation to the artist's original intention (Davallon 1999), which may be hazy to begin with. Practicing artists and performers have long recognized that artistic creation is an experimental and emergent process, involving input from traditions and intentionality as well as physical objects and spaces (Elkins 1999; Becker et al. 2006; Jarvis 2007). In contrast, as I will now examine in the following literature review, sociology has tended to see artistic mediation as distinct from the creative process, based on theories and guidelines rather than situated knowledge production.

Literature review

In their review of work in the sociological study of culture, Wuthnow and Witten (1988) describe two distinct views of culture as an "explicit" social construction and an "implicit" feature of social life. While the sociology of the arts continues to be driven in the main by the "explicit" conceptualization of culture as a recorded product or symbolic good, the specific study of the *mediating activities* surrounding explicit cultural forms is a window onto broader sociological conceptions of implicit culture (Acord and DeNora 2008). As demonstrated in this brief literature review, the study of knowledge production by mediators in art worlds (i.e., what informs curators' decision-making) sheds light on how culture operates in general (i.e., to inform general patterns of individual and social meaning-making).

In the dominant "production of culture" approach in the sociology of the arts (cf. Peterson and Anand 2004), meaning-making is seen to be an outcome of institutional structure or the values held by particular actors. The artistic value of an artwork resides not in its material properties, but in the individuals, institutions, and processes that mediate between artist and spectator (cf. Crane 1987; Heinich 1998; Moulin 1967, 1992; White and White 1965; Wolff 1981). These different groups have a highly interrelated existence; for example, museums buy what galleries promote, and critics justify their value.

As Bourdieu (1985, p. 728) describes, the position of a mediator in this social space—what he terms the "field of cultural production"—plays an important, structuring role by suggesting the cognitive "'filling-in' strategies" by which he or she makes meaning. Using the example of a manuscript submission to a publisher, Bourdieu (1993 [1976], p. 134–135) observes how the publisher explains his choice to accept the manuscript with an absolute kind of "flair," what Bourdieu describes as the "ultimate and often indefinable principle" behind his choice. This indefinable principle is explained by the fact that both parties have

what Lamont (2009) terms a "shared sense of craftsmanship," which led the author to prepare his text based on what he perceived the publisher would want to read. In his "Outline of a Sociological Theory of Art Perception," Bourdieu explains how such tacit "codes" play a central role in artistic knowledge:

> An act of deciphering *unrecognized as such*, immediate and adequate "comprehension," is possible and effective only in the special case in which the cultural code which makes the act of deciphering possible is immediately and completely mastered by the observer (in the form of cultivated ability or inclination) and merges with the cultural code which has rendered the work perceived possible. (Bourdieu 1993 [1968], p. 215)

Artistic meaning-making, then, is the reference to and propagation of cultural codes, as linked to the mediator's position (and strategic position-takings) in the cultural field. It is exercised through the mediator's habitus, the set of "objective" dispositions he has by virtue of his place in the social order (Bourdieu 1979). As Bourdieu (1972, p. 79) notes, "It is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know." The power of the habitus as a reproducer of cultural codes (in the explicit cultural sense of the codes by which one encounters art) comes from its tacit mastery (implicitly acting through the habitus).

As Bourdieu (1993 [1968]) continues, in contrast to the naïve observer, expert mediators (such as curators) are aware of this code and the conditions that permit the adequate perception of works (cf. Bourdieu 1993 [1987]). Several empirical studies have built on Bourdieu's work, and all emphasize the existence of tacit codes, the unconscious nature of adherence to these, and the importance of the institution in perpetuating them (cf. DiMaggio 1982a, b; Fyfe 2000; Greenfeld 1989; Lynes 1980 [1949]; Willis 1990; Zolberg 1992). Key to these studies is the fact that artistic mediators know how to "speak the code," but only when demanded (e.g., writing a catalogue essay).

In contrast to Bourdieu, Becker (1982) takes a more symbolic interactionist approach and shows that an art work takes the form it does at a particular moment because of many small and large choices made by artists and others. Mediators produce artistic knowledge by "editing" artworks in their domain of expertise. This editing is not always conscious or deliberate; rather, participants in art worlds are often guided implicitly by social *conventions*, collective beliefs that structure action and determine the shape of artistic practice. Like Bourdieu's codes, Becker's artists and mediators may find it difficult to verbalize the general principles by which they make their choices. Instead, they employ art lingo such as "it swings" in jazz, or "it works" in the theatre—what Abbing (2002) terms "container words"—to refer to the common, unspoken standard. For Becker, these aesthetic principles are learned through experience, as part of an "internalized dialogue" that participants have with other members of the art world. They may also be employed via embodied cognition or muscle memory (cf. Sudnow 1978) or concretized in the material conventions of artistic genres. On an implicit cultural level, these conventions guide how artistic mediators make choices that shape meaning-making in art worlds.

In France, a more pronounced "pragmatic sociology" (cf. Boltanski and Thévenot 1991) has led to an understanding of knowledge-making in action as based on both subjective and objective conditions. In contrast to Bourdieu's more "critical" and objective approach to social actors, this approach examines how individuals draw on their material and cognitive competencies to apply various sociocultural registers of evaluation (or orders of worth) in "justifying" their actions in particular situations. An associate of Boltanski, Nathalie

Heinich brings this approach to bear on issues of knowledge-creation in contemporary art. In her various studies of curators and other artistic mediators in action—in an art commission (Heinich 1997a, b), in planning an exhibition (Heinich and Pollak 1989b), and in museum work (Heinich 1998, 2009)—Heinich focuses on discussions between curators and other intermediaries as they carry out their work of framing. In doing so, she reveals their personal value orientations, beliefs, and the discursive word games they engage in to bring these into line with the conventions of the art world (whether it be convincing fellow commission-members to buy a particular artwork, or writing an exhibition text in an explanatory manner). As Heinich (1998, p. 41) observes, "interpretation is a fundamental instrument of artistic integration: interpreting, or giving something a value, involves justifying the interest paid to the object." On this practical level of interpreting contemporary artworks, actors construct the meaning and singularity of the artistic event. In seeing culture as located and produced through personally-held values, and not only instantiated in the background as social conventions, Boltanski and Thévenot and Heinich move the sociology of arts closer to understanding meaning-making as a practical activity situated locally to specific individuals and institutions.

Taken together, much work in the sociology of the arts speaks about mediation as governed by "imaginary feedback loops," "deeply-held values," and "internal logics." Meaning-making in the arts, therefore, becomes the function of an input-output system, as regulated by the practical consciousness (and embodied cognition) of artistic codes and conventions. As Turner (2001) points out, this over-reliance on tacit knowledge functions as a conceptual black box into which sociologists dump all unexplained things. In this case, I believe that the orientation of man to tacit social rules or repertoires is often inflated by sociological theory, in the absence of effective methodologies to interrogate the actual *ways in which* actors physically interpret situational contexts and clues in real time. Here, artistic conventions function as a *deux ex machina* of sorts which represent sociology's interest in explaining the social relations of artistic production and collective action in artistic fields, rather than the *mechanisms* through which this production takes place (the translation between objects and practical action into social systems).

Sociology of the arts has traditionally found aesthetic objects challenging to discuss (Acord 2006; Wagner-Pacifici 2010; Witkin 1997). Large scale surveys of taste treat artistic objects as little more than social markers, while ethnographic research reduces the artistic oeuvre to an ordinary object mobilized in social action. Although the semiotic approach to art amends these shortcomings by taking art's social meaning into account, it fails to examine how individuals orient to the artwork based on this meaning in space and time. Indeed, as Heinich (1998) states, the sociologist should close his/her eyes to the objects in order to open them to the values that make actors act and speak as they do. The working repertoire of methodologies is responsible, thus, for excluding the contextual particularity of the artistic oeuvre from sociology.

In recent years, there has been a turn in sociology towards microsociology, micro-ethnography, and small-group practice as venues to explore and advance theoretical work (Calhoun and Sennett 2007; Fine and Fields 2008; Harrington and Fine 2006; Streeck and Mehus 2005). Qualitative sociological research in neighboring fields provides a foundation for more practically-oriented research into artistic work. Rather than viewing common sense practices as unexamined "resources" for explaining action, work interested in the practical components of knowledge production (much of it ethnomethodological) has directed its interest at tacit knowledge itself is a "topic" for analysis (ten Have 2004). The practical dimensions of culture have been explored by

many (cf. Collins 2004; Sewell 2005; Swidler 2001). To produce knowledge is to make use of a semiotic code or schema to do something in the world, to attach the abstract to the concrete. But, it also means having the ability to modify or elaborate it based on novel circumstances:

> What things in the world are is never fully determined by the symbolic net we throw over them—this also depends upon their preexisting physical characteristics, the spatial relations in which they occur, the relations of power with which they are invested, their economic value, and, of course, the different symbolic meanings that may have been attributed to them by other actors. (Sewell 2005, p. 168)

Key here is the role of the built environment and materiality as components in the artistic meaning-making process.

Literature in a variety of fields examines the ability of artworks and aesthetic materials to speak, and how this communication is wrapped up in human/non-human interactions and the environmental affordances within physical and/or conceptual spaces.

> Instead of conceiving the relation between person and environment in terms of moving coded information across a boundary, let us look for processes of entrainment, coordination, and resonance among elements of a system that includes a person and the person's surroundings. (Hutchins 1995, p. 288)

These authors draw a contrast between work in the production of culture which focuses on "intermediaries" (e.g., actors, institutions, and organizations), and work examining physical processes of *mediation* in action. This perspective has been enhanced by work on technology and design (Henderson 1999; MacKenzie 1996; Suchman 1987), the sociology of music (DeNora 2000; Hennion 1993), material culture (Mukerji 1997), organizational aesthetics (Hancock 2005; O'Toole 2001; Taylor 2002; Witkin and DeNora 1997), environmental psychology (Gibson 1986 [1979]), epistemic cultures (Garfinkel et al. 1981; Knorr Cetina 1999; Latour and Woolgar 1986 [1979]; Lave 1988; Lynch 1985), the extended mind tradition in cognitive science (Hutchins 1995; Norman 1993), communities of practice (cf. Amin and Roberts 2008; Cook and Yanow 1993; Lave and Wenger 1991), and even disability studies (Freund 1998). Each of these bodies of work emphasizes the interdependence of individual identity, action, and materials located in the built environment.

As observed by Collins and Yearley (1992), research that looks only at human accounts of the behavior of non-humans privileges these accounts as scientific "truth." Instead, actor-network theory proposes the term *actant*, to represent all humans, objects, etc, that come to bear on one another in any given situation of mediation (cf. Callon 1986; Latour 2005). As actants, objects have non-objective consequences for mediation; they do not simply perform the "scripts" they are given. Put otherwise, objects "afford" certain opportunities for use (e.g., a spherical object is easier to roll than a square) (Gibson 1986 [1979]). While objects do not "cause" action, per say, it is through their access and use—i.e., through the ways that the opportunities they may afford are made manifest through action—that they can be understood to enable forms of activity (Acord and DeNora 2008). To look at artistic mediation in action, I will use a visual, microethnographic study of elite curators of contemporary art as they engage in exhibition-making (i.e., the making of "explicit culture" in the form of temporary exhibitions) to examine what and *how* cultural resources are drawn on to establish and communicate its meaning (i.e., the workings of "implicit" culture).

Methodology

The main methodological obstacles of examining tacit knowledge or "embodied cognition" are the difficulty of getting "into the heads" of the practitioners (Hutchins 1995), the difficulty of conversing with "aesthetic muteness" (Taylor 2002), and the possibility that this "partial opaqueness" may be exploited by informants to give their work its professional character (Goodwin 2000). To begin to address these questions, sociology needs to re-focus on the *artistic* object and what individuals actually *do* with it. This approach is well adapted by Halle (1992), who uses in-home interviews with respondents to investigate what they see when they look at abstract art. The fact that objects prompt orientations and detailed talk directed to them is methodologically significant. Yet, inquiring about aesthetic relationships after the fact merely models interactions between individuals and artworks rather than actually understanding how meaning is produced in an interaction between them.

"Members know very well what they're doing, even if they don't articulate it to the satisfaction of the observers," notes Latour (2005, p. 4). So, when a singer says that her voice tells her where to stop or begin, sociology should not see this as a case of "false consciousness," but rather as an opportunity to look at what she herself "puts into motion" in accomplishing her action (Latour 2005, p. 48). Consequently, the data presented in this paper are drawn from photo-and video-based microsociological studies of 44 curators in the process of planning and installing exhibitions (Acord 2006).

I have combined video data with follow-up video-elicitation interviews. As described by Pauwels (2006, p. 131), video elicitation allows the researcher to access the deeper perceptions and values of respondents as participants in the depicted world: "the focus of attention shifts from external manifestations to an *experience*, an *interior* perspective." Although there is quite a bit of conventional "I know it when I see it" in exhibition-making, video provides the ability to reference these statements to specific objects and events so that curators can talk about "how" they chose to do something without switching to a higher-level of thinking to explain "why." This process enabled my informants to pinpoint the motivational role of their own conventional knowledge, and identify the local resources they drew on to bring this deeply-seated knowledge to bear in sense-making practices. In what follows, I examine how conventional action is physically accomplished in the installation process.

Installing contemporary art

The ways in which an artwork—as well as the collective artworks that make up the exhibition as a whole—is performed to the public depends significantly on the indexical particularities of the installation process. There are several reasons for this state of affairs. First, many exhibitions of contemporary art feature newly commissioned works. Although curators engage in lengthy, detailed discussions with artists about the medium and nature of the work, curators cannot know the final outcome in advance, nor prepare for what they will experience in their first encounter with the finished work. On a more practical level, artists may change their minds and edit works in progress so that they diverge from earlier specifications. Second, visual decisions about placement made by looking at works in or on image files, catalogues, portfolios, DVDs, or websites can be very different than those made upon seeing the works in person. This may have to do with a lack of appreciation for the

scale of the artwork, its true color, or the technical logistics of its display. It may also be due to subtle features of the artwork not perceivable in low-quality images, for example, reflective surfaces, textures, small details, or, more simply, the backside of the artwork not shown in the image. Third, although curators are experts of the affordances of their own institutional gallery space, artworks may necessitate adjustments upon appearance with relation to space restrictions, lighting systems, and display capabilities (Yaneva 2003). The placements of works by Xs on gallery plans are seldom done to scale. Finally, and the most important factor in the installation, when artworks are displayed side by side with other artworks, curators may encounter *unanticipated situations*, such as the problem of having two red works next to each other that draw too much attention away from the remainder of the exhibition, the impossibility of installing two audio works side by side, or the logistical difficulties of hanging a video work too far from an electrical outlet. For all of these reasons, the exhibition installation can take a considerable amount of time, at least a week on average. The bulk of this time is spent moving things around, stepping back, looking at them, adjusting them, and perhaps moving them again based on a curator's sense of what "feels right."

For most of the curators I spoke with, the installation was the most "passionate" part of the exhibition-making process: only in the space of the gallery can you understand how "everything works." Curators described this as a "magical" process, involving "intuition" and "surprise." They regularly said, "I know it when I see it." Statements like these (and, more importantly, the actions they represent) denote the importance of the embodied mastery of the "codes" and "conventions" which order artistic production and mediation. These tacit practices, articulated in video-elicitation interviews, revealed a variety of conventions for installing an exhibition of contemporary art: mix wall-mounted works with sculptures to provide a pleasing assortment of media, position particular artworks together to bring out planned similarities, install particular "key" artworks in prominent places, and make the space as a whole look clean and inviting. This sense of "feeling right" is not known, however, but is rather *achieved* through the situated practices of moving things around and "giving them the eye."

Exhibition installation can therefore be seen as a combination of plans and situated actions. As Suchman (1987) notes in her study of human-machine interaction, while action is generally described as adhering to coherent plans, in practice these plans are necessarily vague and action is actually accomplished via ad hoc situated actions. Curators make no pretence to such fool-proof plans; as one curator described, "If you plan too far ahead and then you get in the space, you find it looks horrid." Yet, the spontaneous nature of these situated actions may catch even these experts by surprise. In what follows, I will use three representative examples to demonstrate the varying ways that objects and environments play important roles in building meaning and conventional (as well as unconventional) action in the installation.

Example 1: "Little tricks"

Curators move artworks around during the installation in order to achieve two things: an overall sense of the exhibition as "feeling right" and appropriate relationships between neighboring pieces. This decision-making process blurs considerations of the symbolic meanings of particular artworks and their aesthetic properties. In particular, unexpected physical or aesthetic associations between artworks provide materials for curators to "latch onto" (cf. DeNora 2000) to build their conception of an installation as satisfactory and whole. These emergent cognitive resources were described by curators as "moments of clarity," "little tricks," or "happy accidents."

In a first example, narrated by an assistant curator of the Fondation Cartier's 2005 solo exhibition of artist Ron Mueck, an unexpected eye contact between two sculptures became a resource for finalizing the placement of the second sculpture:

> When we put this artwork here, we noticed that she's looking at the mask. [Fig. 1:1, in which the woman on the left has her head turned so as to catch the eye of the mask in the far room.] It's a little bit of a wink of an eye. [Fig. 1:2, in which the curator shows me with her fingers how this "wink" functions.] We didn't plan it, but we liked the little relationship it created between the two works….It's the little things like this that when we are moving the artwork slightly like this and slightly like that, it helps us decide about the precise placement. [Fig. 1:3, in which the curator demonstrates with her hands how they turned the sculpture of the women on the pedestal looking for the perfect placement.] So, it's what we decide, but it's also determined…in a way…at the same time.

As explained by the curator above, this serendipitous "wink" or shared eye contact between the two sculptures became a cognitive resource for linking the two exhibition spaces together, and in doing so, performing the "good installation." In describing "cognition in the wild," Hutchins (1995) notes that humans are opportunistic information processors and latch on to available objects, instruments, and materials to mobilize conventions and provide the internal structures required to bring external structures into coordination with each other. Similarly, bringing artworks into a balanced whole in the exhibition requires adapting curatorial plans for the general placement of particular artworks to the physical specificities observed in the installation. In installation after installation, curators observed, identified, and mobilized the aesthetic properties of particular artworks, like reflective surfaces or color schemes, as resources for achieving planned action.

Example 2: The emergent code

As described by Heinich and Pollak (1989a), an exhibition is more than the sum of its parts; it is the curator's "oeuvre," which illustrates a particular curatorial argument or perspective. This argument is often years in the making, as curators develop ideas or concepts related to a particular body of artwork, and is carefully presented in the written editorial introduction to the exhibition located in the catalogue, visitor guide, and exhibition overview wall text. The outcome of the exhibition installation, however, can lead to "surprise moments," wherein curators observe new emergent themes in the association between particular artworks not planned for beforehand.

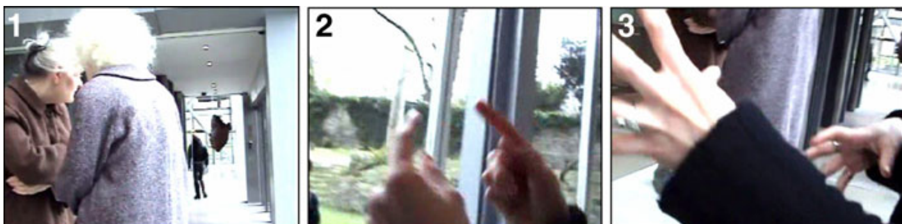

Fig. 1 The "wink".

The second example is drawn from the installation of *Jonathan Monk: Continuous Project Altered Daily* (2005) at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts, curated by Jens Hoffmann and assistant curator Claire Fitzsimmons. In the catalogue introduction to this monographic exhibition, Jonathan Monk is described as an artist who "uses various themes in his work." In the passage below, Hoffmann described his plan to showcase two particular themes in Monk's artistic oeuvre through a selection of relevant artworks in the ICA's two upstairs galleries. The installation shots in Fig. 2 illustrate the outcome of this installation.

> In the very beginning, there was this little thread running through both rooms, where it was about travelling: Afghanistan, Around the World in 80 Days, Big Ben, the Travelling Piece, The Holiday Paintings, and also the Stolen Photographs. Me Naked in the Garden had nothing to do with the travelling. Me Naked in the Garden was another strand within his work, which was about his self-portraits, and the little rings are also a portrait….

The installations in the galleries above were planned to illustrate the artist's work about travelling and self-portraits. In the installation itself, the curator took over 9 hours spread across 2 days to actually choose and install these artworks. And yet, in stepping back and looking at the particular objects that had been chosen to illustrate these discursive themes, the curator noticed that a physical, geometric theme also emerged from the installation of the works.

> The painted mirror, the circles on the floor…there's an interest in geometric patters, geometric forms…just really formal aspects…or even something…[pause]…issues of color, materiality. The floor piece, with his measurements, almost disappears in the floor. So, I like this kind of things that all of a sudden occur that are not even like necessarily planned, and all of a sudden, "Wow, this is a really interesting possibility."

Now, as a conceptual artist, Jonathan Monk's work does play on geometric forms, something the curator had written about in the catalogue. What is interesting here is that even though the geometric theme already existed in the artist's practice, it emerged in a "serendipitous" manner from the installation of works not designed to illustrate this theme.

As another curator described, artworks "activate the space" of the exhibition, but as demonstrated here, they activate both the physical *and discursive space* of the exhibition. In this and many similar examples, curators explained these installation "surprises" in such a way as to bring them back into line with their overall conception of the artist's work and exhibition narrative. The artworks reflected what had already been written in the exhibition

Fig. 2 The unexpected "geometry" theme, installation shots.

texts, but illuminated it in unforeseen ways in the installation. In some cases, however, the outcome of an installation afforded completely new opportunities for meaning-making not imagined in the exhibition planning process.

Example 3: Exhibiting Antarctica

According to Becker (1982), innovation in art worlds happens through frequent interaction with the artwork and with other people in relation to the artwork; in this process, the artist plays an important role in teaching others what it is, how it works, and how they might experience it by creating the context for the encounter. In this case, the context in which the artwork is being displayed, the museum, is already established and comes with a variety of its own institutional conventions and ways of working. Although the artist plays an important role in teaching the curator about the artwork, the curator also has an important role to play in teaching the artist how to best "package it" in the exhibition. As one curator confided, "You have to lay down rules without actually laying them down…it's a very delicate form of diplomacy." As a result, the collaborative work between artist(s) and curators in the installation is a careful visual game of display and communication.

A final example—drawn from the installation of a monographic exhibition of artist Pierre Huyghe at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la ville de Paris (2005)—looks at how unexpected orientations to a newly-commissioned film, *A Journey That Wasn't* (2005), may occur during the installation process. This example begins not in the exhibition installation, but the day before, when the curators first screened an exhibition copy of this film while crowded around a small laptop in an office. The curators also made very emotive remarks at particular places in the film featuring deep contrasts of light and dark, "That's so Pierre Huyghe," for example. In reviewing this experience in a video-elicitation interview, one curator responded:

> But when we say, "It's so Pierre Huyghe," it refers to earlier things. For example, when you have this skyscraper with the lights, and suddenly there is a kind of a light sculpture in the sky, and it's to do with the light code and all of that. That then, when you have the boat in the sea and suddenly the two lights flickering. It's just that sort of whole idea of light codes, time codes, Morse codes, having lights at night….

Particular parts of this film echo particular memories and themes in the artist's work, something the curators picked out right away. They used container words, such as "That's so Huyghe," to each other to convey this mutual sense of recognition, and in so doing, affirming their own perceptual abilities.

While the curators were very pleased with the overall product, they fell into completely rapt attention during one particular scene featuring a landscape of slowly undulating floating ice in the Antarctic sea (Fig. 3). They rewound and watched it several times. One curator watched the scene leaning forward with her elbows on the table and her head in her hands, when this particular scene came on, she audibly gasped, saying, "Look how it moves…it's like the surface of the moon." Other curators used their hands to make wave motions.

Commenting upon this scene and behavior in follow-up interviews, curators had notable trouble explaining their reactions. One used her hands to "show" me how the "light moves" (her words). There is something transcendental about this particular scene that departed from the traditional "light code" in Huyghe's work. Here, it was the total presence of light that moved the curators, rather than the interplay of light and dark common to his work.

Fig. 3 The 'white scene' from *A Journey That Wasn't* (2005, Pierre Huyghe).

According to the original plan, this film was to be installed on a flat-screen television inside a specially designed pavilion by architect François Roche, meant to echo the Antarctic experience (Fig. 4:1). Yet, when the screen was installed and the artist watched the film, he found it was too small. Coincidentally, when a statue that was supposed to be installed in the adjoining gallery space was found to be too heavy for the floor, the curator tried screening the film on various walls of this empty gallery. This expanded the film over ten times in size.

While the curators and artist debated this new installation, the same white oceanic scene appeared and everyone repeated their mesmerized actions from the initial viewing, saying "fantastic" and "incredible," and flopped to the floor or leaned on nearby objects (Fig. 4:2). Their heads bobbed in time with the floating icebergs. I overheard one curator say, "That really makes you think about global warming," which had *never* been introduced as a "code" for the interpretation of this artwork before, and certainly was nowhere to be found in the exhibition documentation.

As Streeck (1996) points out, when two or more people join together in what might first appear as a compulsive activity, it can become a code of sorts and create a new meaningful convention. Objects, and artworks are no exception, afford particular readings and uses based on their formal and aesthetic properties (e.g., the "time code," the "light code," "Morse code," etc.). Particular affordances among these are selected as meaningful by the activity that is done with them, which effectively dims their other aesthetic features. In this case, the curators' transcendental orientation to the iceberg scene, both through vocal expressions ("it's magnificent") and actions (flopping down on chairs), served to index the

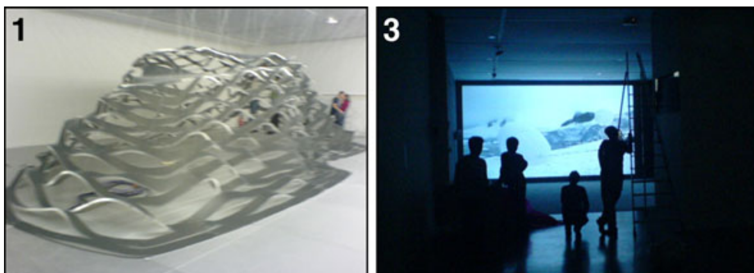

Fig. 4 Finding a suitable location for the film.

white scene as meaningful and important within the exhibition. Although participants have different orientations and backgrounds, collective identity is established when a "triggering event" occurs, something that sparks the shared recognition of collective experience (Fine and Fields 2008). Through repeated object-oriented action, a new meaning was assigned to the use of the artwork in the certain way, which indexed it with the local situation.

At this point in the example, the museum director entered the gallery. She had been informed that there was trouble in the installation and stepped in to help. In particular, Huyghe was not convinced that his work could be convincingly presented on a bare wall, in isolation from the pavilion. The curator and museum director were now faced with the daunting task of negotiating their preferences for the work (perceived and communicated through their emergent relationship to the film) with what worked best in the space, as well as with the artist's concept for the piece.

They began by talking about how good the film looked projected on the far wall. As illustrated in Fig. 5:1, they pointed to particular details in the film illuminated by the scale of the projection. They continued this discussion at two more spatial points of reference: first, moving back to the entrance of the gallery, and second, moving outside the gallery to the entrance hallway to the exhibition, the furthest point at which the film was visible.

As illustrated in the posturings in Fig. 5:2–3, the curators talked, pointed, and demonstrated the proper way to look in and evaluate the installation. Huyghe, by way of contrast, slouched, with hands in his pocket, listening, but not visibly demonstrating his orientation to this conversation. His main objection, shared by some technicians and artistic assistants, is that the film has been visually isolated from the pavilion. In not joining in the more active posturing of the curators, he actively represented his disagreement with the current "working consensus" (Goodwin 2000) among the curators.

This example continued for another 48 hours, to be exact, and I will not reproduce it further here. It suffices to say that the curators convinced Huyghe to install the film in the new location after a complex process of embodied persuasion techniques, like those illustrated above. Furthermore, the curators decided to install carpet in the room, encouraging visitors to spend time in watching the film by suggesting the act of sitting or lying down. The key point is that it was *a particular scene* in the film that initially excited the curators, in a deeply emotional way, and they subconsciously sought to recreate this original experience for the visitor (Crossley 1998). Although space and materials may foster the use of particular cultural repertoires, it may also afford less rational forms of adaptive and creative action through its appeal to the body, senses and memory (DeNora 2003, p. 129). Through a series of unexpected circumstances, the curators adapted the film such that it would become more and more overwhelming to the senses and have less of a direct relationship with Roche's pavilion.

Of course, unconventional decision-making, as it occurred through this installation process, is not unproblematic for the conventions of the exhibition. In particular, the

Fig. 5 Convincing the artist of the film's new location.

separation of pavilion and film (originally conceived of as one combined artwork) posed problems for the artist's representative gallery, future exhibitions of the artwork, the introduction of François Roche as the creator of an object in another artist's monographic exhibition, and the already finalized exhibition narrative in the accompanying documentation. This problem was solved through the creation of a new discursive frame for the artwork. One of the artist's assistants suggested that the pavilion and film be seen as a "collage" of two items together. Rather than a film shown "inside" a pavilion, the single artwork was thus reframed by the curator as a film "next to" the pavilion, two items created in collaboration. In the final press release, the term "pavilion" was changed to "topography," reflecting this discursive word play. (The catalogue, however, had already gone to press without this change.)

As demonstrated briefly through the examples above, curators' achieve planned and conventional action by mobilizing objects and discursive concepts in the installation space. Suchman (1987) illustrates this concept of action using the analogy of running a series of rapids in a canoe; although one plans one's descent carefully beforehand, this plan does not actually get one through the falls: a great deal comes down to the availability of particular embodied response to currents and handling a canoe. Like steering a canoe, it is the curator's embodied, tacit knowledge of artworks, spaces, and museum conventions that directs their situated actions to make a gallery "look good." The results of these situated actions, however, may present new opportunities for meaning-making in how works are ultimately installed and juxtaposed.

"Making sense has a lot to do with making," observes Streeck (1996, p. 383), and the ability of curators to achieve their planned actions of what "feels right" similarly depends on the contextual resources they have available to them at any give moment. In exhibition installation, these include artworks, the "white cube," lighting systems, and the time to keep moving these things around. The aesthetic properties of these features are not indeterminate, and thus curators often find their own practice achieved and continuously developed through unanticipated experiences and sensorial responses in relation to aesthetic objects. (Of course, while I have focused here on the physical resources for curatorial action, organizational resources such as "clout," safety codes, and money also structure possibilities for action.) To return to the canoe analogy, while the canoeist's embodied, deeply-seated predispositions get him down the falls, he may also discover a new trick or paddle technique in the process of encountering an unexpected rapid after a particularly heavy rain.

Discussion

Art is not only something around which people and actions coalesce, but it is also a research tool with which sociology can investigate one of its fundamental questions, how humans create meaning. Art is both a knowledge society and expert setting, which, as Knorr Cetina (1999) observes, are characterized by object-centered relations more than person-centered relationships. Seen as a knowledge-producing society (Sutherland and Acord 2007), rather than simply a social "reproducing" society, the study of artworks as they are mobilized by other mediators in their art worlds allows sociology to understand how aesthetic objects (as explicit culture) play an important role as arbiters of social relations, meaning, and action. In doing so, this study of *how* curators draw on environmental and semiotic resources in the production of explicit culture provides a window into the workings of implicit culture as an ingredient in meaning and knowledge-making.

As Boltanski and Thévenot (1991, p. 17) point out, object-interactions play an important role in how both conscious and practical strategies are brought to bear in particular situations; individuals "confront uncertainty by making use of objects to establish orders and, conversely…consolidate objects by attaching them to the orders constructed." There is a process of mutual "tinkering" or figuring out one's conscious or practical strategies, wherein object-interactions play important roles to help individuals confirm or create orders of worth, on both conscious and subconscious levels. I suggest that Schön's (1983, 1987) three-fold model of action (based on his analysis of the "reflective practitioner" in the study of education and learning) incorporates an object-oriented sense of how practical consciousness operates in sensory environments. In what follows, I will briefly demonstrate how each of the curatorial examples above represents a different "form" of cultural influence in practical action.

First, much like practical consciousness, Schön sees the traditional understanding of tacit knowledge, described in depth by Polanyi (1967), as "knowing-in-action," the know-how actors reveal by their spontaneous skilful execution of a performance. The use of "little tricks," like the "wink" in the first example, demonstrates how curators exercise embodied knowledge to build conventional action with the material resources at hand. As with practical consciousness, curatorial intuition "is not a magical process, but the unconscious workings of a prepared mind" (Rolfe 1997, p. 94).

Second, curators can consciously re-train their practical consciousness, what Schön refers to as "reflection-on-action" or processing experience after the fact. In the second example, the curator stepped back to reflect upon the finished installation, functionally changing his interpretation of the exhibited artworks. He made a conscious decision to apply a new artistic code to the outcome of his unconscious, situated actions. Yet, neither knowing-in-action nor reflection-on-action explains the genuine "surprise" moment of meaning making that emerged in the third example.

Third, as Schön describes, routine responses in the course of action may produce surprises and unexpected outcomes that do not fit existing categories of "knowing-in-action." This leads to a situated "reflection-in-action," an on-the-spot experimentation, problem-solving, and tinkering that questions the assumed structure of knowing-in-action. As seen in the third example, curatorial responses to new events may result in efforts to work outside of conventional knowledge (conceived both consciously and subconsciously). This informal theory building takes place in practice, often through the body and its emotional communication, and while public, academic knowledge or theories may be taken into consideration, these inform practice after the fact rather than direct it. In contrast to theories of justification, which appeal to establish orders of worth, the third example is a particularly clear example of how curators, engaging in reflection-in-action, can actually produce *new* orders of worth based on their emotional and physical tinkering with materials and environments.

The exhibition installation is therefore a learning environment. Curators teach themselves to appreciate objects in new situations, but there may be a disjuncture between these embodied experiences and their verbalizations of them, which bring them back into established repertoires (c.f. Atkinson and Claxton 2000; Mills 1940; Radley 1996). As Bourque and Back (1971) demonstrate empirically, the availability of (conscious) language codes plays an important role in how willing people are to talk about subjective states; while these codes enable people to talk in depth about certain things, they also prevent them from exploring other facets of the ecstatic experience. Instead, of interest in the third example above, is how these seemingly "restricted codes" of communication are actually *elaborated* through actors' physical orientations to objects and their mobilization in the

installation as instances of proto-meaning making. While discourses do indeed "pull" experiences and object interactions into meaning, they may themselves be shaped in relation to practices and materials, not only a curator's plan as enacted through his/her "practical consciousness." In these cases, objects literally "hold together" the emergent work of mediators in knowledge production (Hennion 2007).

Looking at the aesthetic elements of action and the role of reflection-in-action demonstrates that culture (in the form of tacit or explicit knowledge) sometimes does and sometimes does not directly enter into meaning-making activities; but the important thing is that by verbalizing motives or reasoning, we make it look as if it does by reflexively structuring our actions into an interpretable code based on the cues and conventions of the situation we find ourselves in. In reality, there are certainly times in the curatorial practice when the curator simply has to make a decision—practically and quickly—without allowing for consultation, self-reflection, or revealing a strategy or underlying orientation. But curators are held accountable for these choices by the individuals above them (museum directors who demand adherence to the local conventions) and the individuals below them (assistant curators and others who need to know "why" curators made particular decisions in order to write about this in texts or otherwise carry out their work in support). This demonstrates, as does DeNora (2003), that culture is not merely a medium to realize pre-established structures, but culture can also be an "end of action," in the sense that these practices of accounting for tinkering and split-second decisions can grow into new cultural repertoires.

Conclusion

As Menger (2006) notes, inevitability and unpredictability co-exist in the creation of an artwork; I have shown that both elements co-exist equally in its framing process. In the installation, curators have plans about where to place particular artworks, based on inevitable display conventions, technical practicalities, and their embodied conventional knowledge of "what works" in an exhibition. In the process of achieving their conventional understanding of "what works," they mobilize artworks based on conceptual and discursive features. In moving things around, curators have a reflective conversation with the materials of their craft and unanticipated possibilities for meaning-making may occur. In some cases, the outcome of this "tinkering" may have consequences for the public reception of the exhibition, particularly when the result of the installation presents artistic knowledge that differs from that codified in the exhibition catalogue or written documentation.

In amateur practices, DeNora (2003), Hennion (1993), and others have argued that artistic reception is in fact a creative form of production. Similarly, curatorial exhibition installation itself involves acts of consumption, which can reproduce existing conventions as well as make room for possible transformations. The curator is not simply a passive or rule-governed intermediary between the artist and audience; rather, the meaning of an artwork or exhibition emerges in and through the artist's, curator's, and other technician's appropriations (which are not necessarily conscious) of objects and space. Examining knowledge-making in artistic mediation, then, does not concern ignoring or "decoding" the properties of the artistic work, but rather examining how particular properties become salient in the hands of agents in certain moments or circumstances.

At the outset of this paper I asked the question: if something goes without saying because it came without saying, where can it be said? Hopefully, by now it is evident that "it" can be said in the micro elements of practical life. According to Fine and Fields (2008), culture for the microsociologist is a matter of "circumscribed agency" because cultural

actions result from decisions among available choices, as circumscribed by the norms and conventions of the context at hand. But dealing with the material existence of contemporary art in the installation setting, both in physical space as well as time, demonstrates that culture works in multiple ways, not all of which are restrictive to human agency.

In some cases, culture acts as Bourdieu observes, to provide "codes" with which curators can understand the objects at hand in light of their existing knowledge. In other cases, culture acts as a tacit tinkering tool, in Becker's conventional sense, as curators put their conventional knowledge to the test in deeply situational and physical ways. In still other cases, culture acts through organizational channels, as curators replicate earlier decisions by artists, museum directors, and other powerful individuals. In yet other cases, culture may be emergent as an end of action. What most of these cultural operations have in common is that they are accomplished through object-interactions, which can constrain action and sometimes create room for change. (These explicit cultural changes can concern gradual changes—what Becker (1982) terms "drift"—as well as grander, axial changes that transform or introduce new cultural models completely.) Additional studies that focus on "how people do what they do," not simply "what people do," could help to unpack the nuances of knowledge work as it occurs in situations of practical action.

To conclude, the powerful role of emotions in building interactions has been demonstrated Collins (2004). While codes and conventions can manage feelings, emotions can also change rules as well; "we ride on steel tracks laid down by others, but at critical moments we may become switchmen" (Fine and Fields 2008, p. 143). I would also suggest that looking at objects as "anchors" of action (in the sense of Swidler 2001) might inform questions by other sociologists (cf. Cerulo 2002; DiMaggio 1997) regarding the relationship between background or institutionalized scripts of action and the situational contexts that act as primers not only for "code switching," but also for the emergence of entirely new codes or regimes of justification (cf. Hanrahan 2000; Wagner-Pacifici 2000).

There are multiple, complementary paths forward for the sociological study of culture. As argued cogently by Wagner-Pacifici (2010), cultural sociologists can sustain "alternating visions" at the level of social structure *and* at the level of being in time as they work with both to transform their empirical findings into analyses of social meaning. This article has argued that, rather than being left to communication studies, the microsociological focus on situations of real-world action (and the understandings of actors prior, post, and during) introduces a valuable avenue for empirical research in culture as theoretical practice.

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