BEYOND THE CODE:

Unpacking Tacit Knowledge and Embodied Cognition in the Practical Action of Curating Contemporary Art

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NB: This online version has been revised following acceptance for the PhD to remove identifying details of those who participated in the research. This includes editing quotes and fieldnotes excerpts, removing some images, and removing some data excerpts. Brackets have been used to indicate where textual information has been removed or edited.
ABSTRACT

Re-evaluating classic work in the sociology of the visual arts, this Ph.D. thesis explores the tacit and practical bases of artistic mediation with reference to curatorial exhibition making in contemporary art. Data presented here derive from a visual microethnographic study of the exhibition-making process in two elite European centers for contemporary art, combined with an additional thirty-five interviews with other curatorial professionals. By focusing on the visual dimensions of curatorial work, this thesis uses a case study in the sociology of art to think more broadly about aesthetic materials as active mediators of action, or actants in the sense of actor-network theory. Drawing on work in the sociology of education, communication studies, and the sociologies of science and technology, this research explores how the material, embodied, and situated interactions between curators, objects, and environments are constructed and understood in reflexive relation to more explicitly cognitive and verbal representations, interpretations, and accounts. In planning and installing an exhibition of contemporary art, curators frame artworks and build meaning based on the material and conceptual resources at hand. The plans made by curators when preparing an exhibition and composing textual documentation are altered and elaborated during the installation of contemporary art in the physical presence of the artworks and gallery space. The disjuncture between curatorial plans and these situated actions has consequences for the public presentation and comprehension of the final exhibition. In documenting these processes as they take shape in real time and in relation to material objects, the body, and the built environment, this work aims to contribute to the on-going developments and debates that center on the creation of a ‘strong’ cultural sociology and to extend core sociological thinking on the social structures and bases of action.
# List of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. 2

List of tables ........................................................................................................................................... 7

List of Figures ......................................................................................................................................... 8

Note on Translation and copyright ....................................................................................................... 9

Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................................. 10

1. Introduction .......................................................................................................................................... 11

1.1 A crisis in contemporary art? ........................................................................................................... 11

1.2 Dawn of the curator ......................................................................................................................... 15

1.3 The underbelly of mediation ........................................................................................................... 18

1.4 An aesthetic methodology .............................................................................................................. 20

1.5 Organization of the thesis ............................................................................................................... 21

2. Cultural Mediation and culture in action .......................................................................................... 26

2.1 Mediation in the sociology of the visual arts .................................................................................. 27

2.1.1 Organizational systems: Influence and consensus ................................................................... 29

2.1.2 Pierre Bourdieu: Power and cultural codes ............................................................................. 33

2.1.3 Howard Becker: Collective action and tacit conventions ......................................................... 38

2.1.4 Nathalie Heinich: Interpretation and values ............................................................................. 41

2.1.5 Summary: A sociology of the black box .................................................................................. 44

2.2 Practical work and object relations ............................................................................................... 48

2.2.1 Micro-interaction ....................................................................................................................... 50

2.2.2 Epistemic cultures ..................................................................................................................... 53

2.2.3 The sociology of music ............................................................................................................ 56

2.2.4 Object-oriented work in the visual arts ..................................................................................... 58

2.2.5 Museum and cultural studies .................................................................................................... 60

2.3 Conclusion: Towards a meaningful production of culture ............................................................ 62

3. An Aesthetic Methodology ................................................................................................................ 64

3.1 Studying framing in action .............................................................................................................. 65

3.2 Setting up the research .................................................................................................................. 68

3.2.1 The pilot study .......................................................................................................................... 68

3.2.2 Sample ...................................................................................................................................... 69

3.2.3 Access ........................................................................................................................................ 71

3.3 Carrying out the research I: Ethnography ..................................................................................... 73
3.3.1 Producing data: Video and audio ................................................................. 77

3.4 Carrying out the research II: Interviews ......................................................... 79
   3.4.1 The video- and photo-elicitation interview .............................................. 81
   3.4.2 The interview in the exhibition space ..................................................... 84

3.5 Data coding, analysis, and validity ............................................................... 86
   3.5.1 Multimedia data analysis ........................................................................... 87
   3.5.2 Validity and the presentation of data ......................................................... 89

3.6 Research ethics and privacy ........................................................................... 90

3.7 Conclusion: Reflections on the research relationship ..................................... 92

4. The Curator in the Museum .............................................................................. 94
   4.1 A very brief history of exhibition making ..................................................... 95
   4.2 Training and trajectories for the curator of contemporary art ................. 100

4.3 Institutional constraints .................................................................................. 107
   4.3.1 Institutional organization .......................................................................... 113

4.4 Conclusion: A profession in flux .................................................................... 114

5. Exhibition Planning .......................................................................................... 116
   5.1 The evolving exhibition ................................................................................. 117
      5.1.1 Choosing and seeing artworks ................................................................. 118
      5.1.2 Working with living artists ...................................................................... 121

   5.2 Planning the installation ................................................................................. 124
      5.2.1 Gesture .................................................................................................. 126
      5.2.2 ‘Off-the-cuff’ sketches .......................................................................... 127
      5.2.3 In the mind’s eye ..................................................................................... 128
      5.2.4 Making the gallery plan with the artist .................................................. 129
      5.2.5 Going into the gallery space .................................................................... 130

   5.3 Composing the exhibition documentation .................................................. 132
      5.3.1 But what does it all mean? Evolving narratives and the pressure to get it right ? 133
      5.3.2 Theory vs. clarity: Writing for which public? .......................................... 136
      5.3.3 In the artist’s own words? ....................................................................... 140

   5.4 Discussion: Emergent understandings and grey boxes .............................. 142

   5.5 Conclusion: Mixed materials for building meaning ..................................... 144

6. Installation I: The Emergent Exhibition ............................................................ 146
   6.1 The evolving exhibition ................................................................................. 147

6.2 Viewer intéressement ...................................................................................... 150
      6.2.1 Creating the ‘good gallery’ ..................................................................... 152
      6.2.2 Drawing the visitor into the space .......................................................... 153
9. Conclusion ........................................................................................................................ 217

9.1 Theorizing the entry of objects into art worlds ......................................................... 218

9.2 Curating contemporary art ....................................................................................... 220

9.3 Beyond the tacit cultural code? ................................................................................ 225
    9.3.1 A relational aesthetic for the sociology of the arts .............................................. 230

9.4 Future work .............................................................................................................. 231

Appendix A: Information Letter to Participants .............................................................. 235

Appendix B: Interview Schedule* .................................................................................. 236

Appendix C: Consent Form ............................................................................................. 237

Appendix D: Curatorial Maps ......................................................................................... 238

Bibliography ....................................................................................................................... 240
List of Tables

Table 1: Summary of Wuthnow (1987), compiled by author ........................................... 65
Table 2: Interview breakdown by method ........................................................................... 79
List of Figures

Figure 1: Pointing beyond the camera .................................................................................. 85
Figure 2: Gallery sketch ........................................................................................................ 127
Figure 3: Planning the placement of signage ...................................................................... 131
Figure 4: Pointing to find the right words ........................................................................... 137
Figure 5: Knowledge making in the exhibition-planning process .................................... 142
Figure 6: The image file ........................................................................................................ 153
Figure 7: Plinths as cityscape .............................................................................................. 154
Figure 8: Shaping opportunities for visitor discovery ......................................................... 155
Figure 9: Using floor-mounted artworks to shape a visitor trajectory ............................... 155
Figure 10: Emergent impact ................................................................................................. 159
Figure 11: Projecting the poster’s image onto one possible gallery wall ............................ 181
Figure 12: Discovering the ‘wink’ ....................................................................................... 184
Figure 13: Exhibition overview text mock-up ...................................................................... 195
NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND COPYRIGHT

Many of the bibliographic sources referred to in this thesis were published originally in French. If the source also appears in English, the translator’s name will appear in the bibliographic citation. Otherwise, any quotes from these sources were translated by Sophia Krzys Acord. Additionally, some of the ethnographic and interview data informing this thesis was collected in a different language. Again, the author has translated any quotes from the original into English for the presentation of data in this thesis.

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