BEYOND THE CODE:

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

Sophia Krzys Acord

Supervisors:
Tia DeNora
Robert Witkin

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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.

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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.

Unless otherwise cited, all images of artworks and exhibitions appearing in this thesis were taken personally by Sophia Krzys Acord and are reprinted in low resolution within the guidelines of fair use. The reproduction of any images in this thesis for any purpose is strictly prohibited by the terms of informant disclosure.

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