

## **BEYOND THE CODE:**

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

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## 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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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Art does express such feelings and often focuses them — at its best with dramatic sharpness — but still not with the intellectual clarity required for their understandings or belief today. [...] Moreover, the serious artist is himself in much trouble, and could well do with some intellectual and cultural aid from a social science made sprightly by the sociological imagination.

(Mills, 1959: 25, on the role of artists to formulate public issues)

This Ph.D. thesis takes as its research field the new and emerging terrain of contemporary art, a unique arena where charismatic individuals, institutions, and publics come together to create, examine, and valorise new or recently-produced works of fine art. The study of contemporary art as a terrain *in flux* provides a window onto processes of meaning making in action. Rather than look at the social networks where the meanings of particular artworks are represented and circulate, this thesis focuses on the material context from which representations of meaning arise: the temporary exhibition. Here, the curator of contemporary art works as encouraged by Mills above, to provide intellectual clarity to the work of contemporary artists by framing them for the museum-going public. In looking in depth at the local resources and situated actions by which meaning is made in art worlds, this small, microethnographic study hopes to shed light on the concepts and means by which sociology understands how meaning is created and communicated in general.

### 1.1 A crisis in contemporary art?

The state of contemporary artistic creation has transformed rapidly since the early 1970s. As many leading art critics, cultural theorists, and sociologists have argued, contemporary art today represents a near-total disjuncture with earlier artistic movements (Crow, 1996; Danto, 1992, 1997; Dorner, 1947; Fuller, 1980; Heinich, 1998c; Kramer, 1973; Marí & Schaeffer, 1998; Moulin & Quemin, 1993; Rosenberg, 1972; Shusterman, 1997; Wallis, 1984; Wartofsky, 1993; Zolberg, 2005). Performance art, installation art, and the explosion of other contemporary art forms, styles, and techniques of production have not resulted in a new genre or style, per say, but rather in the transformation of the concept of art itself. Because contemporary art can no longer be categorized within existing grand narrative movements and its primary function may no longer be ‘aesthetic’ (itself an

historical construct), eminent art historian Arthur C. Danto (1997) defines contemporary art as ‘posthistorical’ rather than simply postmodern. The dilemma of reconciling posthistorical artistic creation with the traditional mechanisms of producing and consuming fine art has led to what many in the art world term a ‘crisis’ in contemporary art (cf. Appleyard, 1984; Fischer, 2000; Fuller, 1980; Müller & Schafhausen, 2006; Wartofsky, 1993; Wolfe, 1975). This so-called ‘crisis’ has three axes: the current indefinable paradigm of artistic creation, an increase in the economic commodification of art, and a widening distance between general publics and artistic values.

The first axis in the crisis results from the ongoing critique of the concept of aestheticism, the idea that artistic value can only be intrinsically perceived in a sensuous manner. In contrast, contemporary artists are interested less in conveying aesthetic emotion and more in seeing art in relation to everyday life, what Rosenberg (1972) terms the ‘de-aestheticization of art’. Consequently, the transgressive tendencies of the avant-garde, which led to a total break with all traditional rules and expectations in art, have created a crisis of legitimation for the contemporary artwork (Foster, 1996; Gablik, 1992). More than any other artistic domain, the contemporary visual arts depend on a system of ideas and theories to validate art objects over space and time (cf. Harrison & Wood, 1993). Before modernism, an artwork was seen to have internal rules and art historians or critics had the special skills to ‘decode’ these artworks in a more or less ‘objective’ manner in the iconographic tradition (Witkin, 2003). By contrast, the market for contemporary art is defined by an uncertainty of aesthetic values (Battcock, 1977; Moulin, 1967; Quemin, 2002a). Consequently, artistic consecration no longer concerns evaluating how ‘good’ a work of art is as outlined by these objective criteria, but rather deciding whether something is a work of art at all (Heinich, 1998c; Moulin, 1995; Moulin & Quemin, 1993; Zolberg, 2005). In the absence of established aesthetic criteria to evaluate artworks, this judgment is based less on the ‘pure act of perception’ and more on the documentation or theory surrounding a work of art and the process of its creation (Danto, 1992; Marí & Schaeffer, 1998; Rogoff, 2002; Rosenberg, 1972; Wallis, 1984).

You have to project a hypothesis: Suppose it is a work of art? Then certain questions come into play -- what’s it about, what does it mean, why was it made, when was it made and with respect to what social and artistic conversations does it make a contribution? If you get

good answers to those questions, it's art. Otherwise it turned out just to be a hole in the ground.<sup>1</sup> [Arthur C. Danto]

Given the elevated importance of the discourse surrounding the contemporary artistic work, the current art world makes far more profit from the circulation of information and services than the artworks themselves (Crow, 1996). As a result, the elite art expert plays an important role in the valorisation process by producing this information (Heinich, 1998c: 305-326).

The second axis of the contemporary artistic crisis is linked to increasing social and economic meddling in the aesthetic world.<sup>2</sup> This stems from the internationalization of the contemporary art world and the great influx of financial capital into the contemporary art market, as well as social and cultural capital (Moulin, 1992). Indeed, contemporary art receives its consecration from the market, not museum purchase, which has created new forms of institutionalism like biennales and experimental spaces (Bernier, 2002; Zolberg, 2005). The reputation of an artwork is not constituted by its own presence or style, but rather by various identities operating in the 'intentional space' created by the mass media, market, dealers, and institutions (Wartofsky, 1993: 225). Art, thus, is neither radical nor traditional; it has, as the artist Leon Golub terms it, a 'special anonymity' constituted by these external forces (Obrist, 1997: 157-158). As described by Heinich (1998c), Zolberg (2001), and Bernier (2002), this rising market for contemporary art has more or less obliged museums and academic institutions to be open to new artistic styles. Institutions and structures to exhibit and disseminate contemporary art have proliferated in the past decade. Museums, seeking to accompany their permanent collection with a more experimental space, have expanded: Tate made the Tate Modern, MOMA bought P.S.1, and the Musée d'Art Moderne de la ville de Paris created ARC (Mack, 1999). Yet, museums and these other institutions of contemporary art concentrate more on finding sponsorship and providing a space for the interpretation of artworks to take place, and less on actually pronouncing on their specific value (which takes place largely in the art market).

The third and final axis in the so-called crisis of contemporary art is a crisis of publics (cf. Mitchell, 1993; Steinberg, 2007). In the search for newness and originality,

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from: Wallach, A. (1997) ART; Is it art? Is it good? And who says so? *The New York Times*. New York edition, 12 October, section 2, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> The spring 1981 issue of *October: The Journal of Contemporary Art Theory and Criticism* (vol. 16) seeks to address what its editors term the rampant 'foolishness' in the contemporary art world. In the introduction to this special issue, the editors accuse 'collectors acting as curators' and 'curators acting as art commissioners' as portraying art theoretical practice as 'sport' rather than discipline.

contemporary art has ruptured from the art historical tradition and, in doing so, has alienated general audiences who simply do not understand current developments as works of fine art (Heinich, 1998; Menger, 2006; Wartofsky, 1993).<sup>3</sup> Prior work has demonstrated the divisive nature of artistic consumption (cf. Bourdieu, 1979; Gans, 1974; Jenkins, 1979b; Lamont & Fournier, 1992; Levine, 1990; Willis, 1990), and unsurprisingly, the audience for contemporary art remains young, professional, and already highly oriented towards fine art (Moulin, 1992: 216). With the rise in sensationalism concerning contemporary artworks, publics are interested in an increasingly transparent role for elite decision-makers.<sup>4</sup> Those administrators or cultural professionals charged with the mediation of contemporary artistic industries have been called ‘tastemakers’ (Lynes, 1949), members of the ‘culture club’ (Appleyard, 1984), and ‘prophets’ (Millard, 2001) by disenfranchised members of the public. Moreover, the art museum has itself been treated sociologically as a barrier to the non-initiated public (cf. Brighton, 1977; O’Doherty, 1999 [1976]; Zolberg, 1992). In debating how to best overcome this barrier and present contemporary art to various publics, museums and institutions of contemporary art are torn between conflicting tendencies to emphasize the aesthetic experience with contemporary artworks versus their analytical interpretation (Berleant, 1990; Marí & Schaeffer, 1998; Serota, 1996; Weil, 2002). This dilemma reveals the core of the crisis in contemporary art, namely, where and how can meaning making take place and of what should this artistic meaning consist?

Taken together, the various facets of the crisis described above fall into the pattern of artistic change described by Becker (1982: 314), who notes that innovations in artistic creation spread quicker than the means of sustaining them in terms of production and cooperation. Moreover, as Bourdieu (1993 [1968]: 225) points out, contemporary art is in a ‘period of continued rupture’, meaning that the transformation of the instruments of art production (when they catch up) themselves precede the transformation of instruments of

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<sup>3</sup> The public disapproval of state support for contemporary art has been particularly acute in France, as seen in the great ‘contemporary art debate’ (c.f. Barrer, 2000; Heinich, 1998b, 1999; Jimenez, 2005; Michaud, 1999; Strassoldo, 2004). Negative public reactions to contemporary art were also documented in the U.S. controversy surrounding photographer Robert Mapplethorpe (c.f. Acord, 2004; Dubin, 1992), and the *Sensations* exhibition of Young British Artists in the UK and U.S. (c.f. Halle, 2001; Marontate, 2000a; Rothfield, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> For example, the BBC films the process of selecting artworks to be included in the Royal Academy’s annual summer show. See also Millard (2001: 118-119), who quotes Tate Modern curator Iwona Blazwick as stating, ‘They [curators] always had power but before they were protected by the mantle of the institution. Now at least people are coming forward, saying, “This is my decision. I take responsibility for this.” And I think that is more transparent. I think it is a positive thing, a political thing. And at least one knows who to blame!’.

art perception. Consequently, contemporary artistic creators and mediators adhere to a different system of values than their wider audience.

Rather than become obsolete, processes of artistic mediation are particularly integral to consecration and meaning making in contemporary art, where assertions of value and judgements of taste are increasingly open to challenge by publics, governments, funding bodies, and the media (Zolberg, 1990). In the absence of a confirmed hierarchy of artists and artworks, professional mediators play an active role in attributing value and shaping the institutional criteria for classification (cf. Crane, 1987; DeNora, 1995; DiMaggio, 1982a; Douglas, 2002; Moureau & Sagot-Duvaurox, 2006; Wolff, 1981; Zolberg, 2005). Following Becker's landmark publication of *Art Worlds* (1982), the role of intermediaries in the contemporary visual art world(s) has been a key area of sociological attention (cf. Bellavance, 2000; Crane, 1987; Heinich, 1998c; Moulin, 1967, 1992; Quemin, 2002a), as well as more journalistic or popular interest (cf. Millard, 2001; Thornton, 2008; Wolfe, 1975). This thesis will focus on one particularly significant mediator who operates in the nexus of the production and consumption of contemporary art: the curator of contemporary art.

## **1.2 Dawn of the curator**

Speaking at the outset of the 21<sup>st</sup> 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: 118). Curators have risen to prominence in contemporary art because of the increased need for charismatic and knowledgeable individuals to mediate between institutional bureaucracy, market forces, artistic representation, and public taste (cf. Gielen, 2007; Moulin & Quemin, 1993; Octobre, 1999b). 'This development of curating as a pervasive "medium" of contemporary art suggests an uncertainty about the domains of art making and curating alike, just as the development of socially site-specific projects bespeaks an anxiety about the status of the public not only for art museums but for contemporary art in general' (Foster, et al., 2004: 629). Curators act as public mediators in contemporary art by performing three tasks: managing and displaying collections of contemporary art, purchasing new artworks for permanent collections, and mounting temporary exhibitions. The role of curators of contemporary art in managing institutional

collections (cf. Moulin, 1992; Octobre, 1999b; Quemin, 2002a) and purchasing new artworks (cf. Altshuler, 2005; Heinich, 1997b, 1997c; Octobre, 1996a, 1999a; Urfalino & Vilkas, 1995) has been studied in depth. This thesis is interested in the specific practice of exhibition making as a unique frame and mediating device in contemporary art.

The crux of curatorial practice in contemporary art is the construction of artistic meaning through the exhibition. As Greenberg, et al. (1996: 2) note in the preface to their comprehensive anthology on contemporary exhibition making, ‘Part spectacle, part socio-historical event, part structuring device, exhibitions — especially exhibitions of contemporary art — establish and administer the cultural meanings of art’. In the penultimate sociological examination of this subject, Heinich and Pollak (1989a) describe the exhibition’s shift from transparent medium through which the encounter with artworks takes place, to an opaque *oeuvre* which is perceived as such by its public (including specialists as well as the ‘grand public’ writ large). The public now consumes not only the artworks, but the experience of the exhibition as a whole.

As Octobre (1999b: 91) concludes in her detailed analysis of the changing curatorial profession, ‘Art, the vehicle of mental ideas, “mentalities”, substitutes the value of exhibition or communicational exchange for the cultural or sacred value of art, not only through the contemplation of artworks, but also through a communication about the subject of the artworks which blends philosophy, aesthetics, sociology, ethnology, and art history’. In conceiving of and installing an exhibition, the curator ‘post-produces the artist’s output by placing their work within an overall sequence. [...] In the process, the work is also extended’ (Coles, 2005). To collect and restate past work on this subject, curators of contemporary art do not re-present artworks in a descriptive way, drawing on existing codes of meaning, but rather seek to address them in a *performative* way, through the experiential frame of the public-oriented exhibition. The exhibition, therefore, is a medium for the ongoing creation and production of artistic knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, the rise of the temporary exhibition had vast implications for the status identity of the curator, who is now the *auteur* of the exhibition (Heinich & Pollak, 1989a). The curator is no longer simply a producer, but a creator and improviser in his or her own right who frames artistic works with consequences for their meaning. This is an argument

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, the recent symposium ‘Concerning “knowledge production”: Practices in contemporary art’, held at the BAK (basis voor actuele kunst) in Utrecht, Netherlands (November to December, 2006). Available at: [http://www.bak-utrecht.nl/?&click\[id\\_projekt\]=38](http://www.bak-utrecht.nl/?&click[id_projekt]=38) [Accessed 10 September 2009].

familiar to some in music, regarding the role of performers who make real-time decisions concerning how to enact previously-mastered parts (Becker, et al., 2006; McCormick, 2006). The curator's role as a producer of discourse on art functions not only to valorise the importance of the artist and artworks, but also his or her own importance as a privileged mediator (cf. Ardenne, 2003; Octobre, 1999b).

Though generally a reserved, behind-the-scenes figure (responsible for collections, administration, research, and presentation), the new importance placed on changing exhibitions and enlarging museum visitation allows the curator to engage in the most personal (and thus previously deemed inferior) aspect of his or her work: its presentation. As a result, a new legitimacy is conferred to the curator's contact to the 'profanes' through the intermediary of the physical installation of artworks (Heinich & Pollak, 1989a: 34). The curator is literally 'at the interface of the museum as an institution and the public as consumers' (Alloway, 1996: 222). The challenge, as outlined by Wolf (1981), is now for the curator to curate not only for fellow art professionals, collectors, and artists, but also for the grand public. This means that the museum curator is placed firmly at the intersection of the three axes of the crisis of contemporary art. The curator's work to make meaning through mounting exhibitions of contemporary art must negotiate the market-driven forces of the art world as well as the needs of uninitiated publics.

The nature and institutional context of the exhibition of contemporary art has been discussed in depth from a variety of sociological viewpoints. Chief among these studies are Heinich and Pollak's (1989b) discursive study of the exhibition *Vienne, naissance d'un siècle* (Center Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1986) from conception to reception, Alexander's (1996b) quantitative study of the format and content of exhibitions at American museums from 1960-1986, and Yaneva's (2003a; 2003b) ethnographic studies of exhibition installation at a Parisian museum. These studies illuminate the multifarious pressures and interests in exhibition making as presented by institutions, governments, funding bodies, publics, curatorial taste, and the built environment. Work in museum studies has also looked rigorously at issues of contradiction and display in museums. This thesis seeks to unite and extend these approaches through a microethnographic, comparative examination of the process of exhibition making *in action*. In particular, rather than focusing on the structural conditions in which contemporary art is mediated, I will examine the everyday negotiations and adaptations made by curators of contemporary art in the mediation process on explicit *and implicit* levels.

### 1.3 The underbelly of mediation

According to Zolberg (2005) and Halle (forthcoming), the current state of contemporary art means that both art and sociology may need new paradigms for understanding and analyzing the arts. In art, many have embraced Bourriaud's (1998) relational aesthetics to describe and categorize contemporary artworks. This approach sees the aesthetic nature of an artwork not as a property of the artwork itself but, rather, as a dimension of one's behaviour in relation to the artwork, combined with other objects and events (cf. Schaeffer, 1996). This means, as Witkin (2003) describes, that the role of reception has become progressively greater in establishing the meaning and significance of contemporary artworks.

In contrast, sociology has traditionally viewed mediation and meaning making in art as an outcome of institutional structure or the values held by particular actors. Much less work has looked in depth at the impact of situational dynamics on the logic of the decision-making process. As Heinich (1999: 111-114) observes, the criteria for defining a cultural object as a work of contemporary art are social; the artistic value of an artwork resides not in the material properties of the specific object, but in the totality of mediations which bring the artist and spectator together in any art world. Yet these mediations are not only between different human actors or social groups, but include active roles played by artworks, objects, and other aesthetic materials (Latour, 2005). The time has come to focus the sociological lens on the level of situated action, closely examining individuals charged with the mission of mediation and examining how they negotiate and mobilize available resources in this process (which may be material as well as mental in origin).

Theoretically, this thesis aims to address the ways in which sociology has largely overlooked the practical work of mediators by labelling it 'connoisseurship', 'mythmaking' (Willis, 1990), 'internalized dialogues' (Becker, 1982), 'imaginary feedback loops' (DiMaggio & Hirsch, 1976), or simply the exercise of a 'code' (Bourdieu, 1993 [1968]). In particular, I aim to re-evaluate Bourdieu's (1979) claim that, even among professional values, the criteria on which elite judgments are based usually remain implicit. This idea of tacit, naturalized knowledge as enabling artistic mediation is not only a fundamental tenant by which symbolic boundaries are drawn in cultural practice, but it is also one way in which past research fails to provide an accurate, documented, and explanatory model to

examine the ways in which culture enters into action. If something goes without saying because it comes without saying, then *when*, *how*, and *where* can it be said?

My main research question aims to open up the black box of curatorial mediation by asking: how do unacknowledged criteria — such as personal taste, emotion, and aesthetic materials — play a role in mediation, artistic framing, and meaning making? In looking at curatorial work in detail, I will examine how these unacknowledged criteria are mobilized and negotiated in the exhibition-making process. I will also interrogate how these curatorial negotiations affect what is offered to the public in the final exhibition presentation.

As Alloway (1984: 5) points out, decisions in museums and other arts organisations are made close to the working base of each enterprise. This focus on mediation as a temporal, situational, and grounded practice reflects a broader turn in sociology towards microsociology, microethnography, and small-group practice as venues to explore and advance theoretical work (cf. Fine & Fields, 2008; Harrington & Fine, 2006; Streeck & Mehus, 2005). Moreover, the close study of the curator of contemporary art also responds to a call by Alexander and Smith (2001) to strengthen the role of culture as autonomous in social worlds, towards a ‘strong’ *cultural* sociology. As they point out, the thinking of gatekeepers in contexts of action (as they *do* their decision making) is a ‘missing link’ in sociology; without this link, ‘we are left with a theory that points to circumstantial homologies but cannot produce a smoking gun’ (Alexander & Smith, 2001: 141). In this case, the study of elite curatorial mediators in action can pinpoint the specific resources through which meaning is constructed in the framing process.

In investigating the tacit underbelly of mediation, this thesis draws together important and highly current strands from cultural sociology, the sociology of music, visual sociology, museum studies, anthropology, education, communication studies, and science and technology studies. I look to these bodies of work, in particular, to understand human-object interaction, the production of knowledge in epistemic cultures, and the socialization and learning process in both craft and scientific communities. By re-introducing the embodied, situational, and object-interactive dimensions of artistic mediation, I will encourage sociology itself to move towards a new paradigm for understanding and analyzing contemporary artistic mediation: a relational aesthetic in the sociology of the arts.

Specifically, the contemporary art world provides a useful subject for sociology, as both fields have regularly defined themselves as self-reflexive motors for the production of knowledge. Both fields also function to create bridges of comprehension between

individuals and the world in which they live. Interrogating meaning making and actor agency in the contemporary art world, a world of cultural production which has grown more rapidly since the 1990s than perhaps any other (the recent art market crisis notwithstanding), is also a quest to understand how sociology itself makes its object in the increasing economic, social, and political interconnectedness of the world.

#### **1.4 An aesthetic methodology**

These research questions pose two methodological challenges: studying elite populations and investigating the ‘hidden’ topic of tacit and tactile practices in professional work. In Chapter Three, I detail a research methodology that draws on work in ethnomethodology, microethnography, microsociology, the sociology of education, and the sociologies of science and technology. On the broader level, this research combines ethnography and in-depth interviewing to achieve comparative power and breath, as well as ethnographic depth.

This thesis is based on two three-month ethnographic explorations of the curatorial activities at two elite European centers of contemporary art. In each space, my role as a curatorial assistant allowed me to shadow head and assistant curators as they engaged in the final planning, installation, and opening of major exhibitions. While it is impossible to witness the entire lifespan of planning an exhibition, because ideas and even artworks are often chosen years before an exhibition’s opening, the three months I was in residence at each site gave me access to the materials documenting the inception and process of exhibition design, as well as firsthand experience in the meetings and backstage activities with gallery managers, technicians, graphic designers, museum directors, artists, educational staff, and funding representatives. In particular, the ‘backstage’ moment of the exhibition’s installation provided a pivotal opportunity for investigating curatorial work and decision making in action, as this is often the first time that curators see the artworks to be shown and they are under the occupational pressure of real-time decision making.

This in-depth ethnographic fieldwork was supplemented by interviews with thirty-five other curators of contemporary art (not affiliated with these exhibitions) of varied ages, backgrounds, and interests. These other informants represent a variety of exhibition spaces for contemporary art, including public museums, private foundations, community arts

centers, biennales, and commercial galleries. I chose these interviewees based on dual processes of convenience and snowball sampling. When possible, I also attended the installation of exhibitions curated by these individuals. In its wide diversity, this sample represents a cross-section of contemporary curatorial practice which contextualizes, validates, and enhances the reliability of my ethnographic data.

When carrying out both ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, I worked to capture the visual, aesthetic elements of curatorial work, as well as verbal and written accounts. To this end, I employed a variety of visual methods, which provided tools to closely examine the differing roles of extra-verbal experience and verbal accounting in curatorial work. Moreover, the use of visual research methods represents an important methodological step in approaching curators on their own terms (the visual), rather than those of the sociologist (the discursive or the symbolic).

### **1.5 Organization of the thesis**

In an art world, mediation takes place at the intersection of two smaller worlds: that of the artist and his or her work, and that of the public and visitors to the institution. The presentation of data in this thesis will also follow curators as they move between working with the artist and preparing the exhibition for its public visitors. I begin by looking at the institutional history and context of curatorial practice, and the conventions of presenting and framing art for the public. I then turn to a more focused examination of ‘what curators do’, where I explore the importance of the art object, object relations, and the ‘wobble room’ curators have within the greater organizational field. The last chapters return to an examination of the public effects of this work, looking critically at the implications of curatorial mediation for public engagement with the exhibition. Throughout, I will treat this presentation of material a bit like a detective story (cf. Austrin & Farnsworth, 2005), examining what curators do at consecutive stages of the exhibition-planning process and using this information to examine what they know and what resources they have at their disposal at any given stage. As with investigations of epistemic cultures in the sciences (cf. Knorr Cetina, 1999; Latour, 2005; Lynch, 1985), I will likewise follow the objects and actors through their work of exhibition making.

When curators say that they ‘don’t know what they do’, work in the sociology of the arts, driven by the production of culture approach, has largely followed one of two explanations for this: to see their work as a lay game or performance, or to explain everything in their work with reference to the tacit structuring conventions of the contemporary art world. In **Chapter Two**, I review literature in the sociologies of the arts, culture, science, technology, education, and museum studies in order to examine the various ways the act of mediation is understood to take place. In particular, I contrast understandings of mediation in the sociology of the visual arts, which are based on organizational systems of value promotion and established codes and conventions, with the practical, object-oriented approach to mediation found in the sociologies of music, science, technology, and museum studies. By exploring more ethnographic and practice-based work that unpacks the black box of art objects in mediation, I explore the ways in which a sociology of affordances or actor-network theory can equip the production of culture approach to adequately discuss meaning making in art worlds.

Looking at the aesthetic nature of artistic mediation poses several methodological queries for sociology. In attempting to respond to these questions in **Chapter Three**, I outline an aesthetic methodology which utilizes audiovisual tools adapted from visual sociology, anthropology, technology studies, communication studies, and education. Microethnographic work in science and technology studies, in particular, has long assumed that social scientists have a great deal to say about the technical properties of artefacts, as well as how people interact with artefacts and the affordances they provide (cf. Garfinkel, et al., 1981). Here, I show that the goal of aesthetic sociology is not to ‘debunk’ the exhibition, but rather to help sociology converse with aesthetic intelligence. A new methodological approach is important to providing new forms of data and analysis to investigate some of the biggest unanswered theoretical questions in the sociology of the arts.

**Chapter Four** casts a wide net, exploring the historical emergence of the curator of contemporary art and changing practices of museum exhibition and display. As described by Bourdieu (1993 [1983]), curators exist in a field, in relations of competition with a variety of other agents. They have to deal with heteronomous forces in this field, such as institutional norms and financial limitations. This discussion of the more mundane and cognitive features of the contemporary art world provides a context to understand the value of the case study data. Yet, the diversity of curating today, particularly the rise of the ‘star’

curator and temporary exhibition, problematizes comparisons between curatorial practice in contemporary art and traditional, art historical museum curation. Instead, I will use research on ‘communities of practice’ to understand the progression of contemporary curating as an activity which ‘cannot be taught’.

**Chapter Five** begins the presentation of ethnographic research data by examining the process of exhibition design and planning. Curators are responsible for the production of two distinct sets of reality: the textual documentation surrounding an exhibition, and the physical exhibition itself. This includes: creating the concept, working with the artist, choosing and acquiring artworks, creating promotional material, writing the catalogue and visitor aids, and planning the physical installation. Of note here is the fact that artworks are largely absent from this planning process, for a variety of logistical reasons, and curators turn to a variety of proxies for artworks in their absence. This chapter begins to examine how curators treat the ineffable in their work, by discussing the differences between the abstract, aesthetic work of conceiving and creating the exhibition, and the mundane tasks of working within the museum infrastructure.

Although mediation is usually discussed in terms of the initial selection and framing of objects for exhibition, the installation is a pivotal moment when curators first physically encounter the artworks. Here, curators view the relationships between artworks in the gallery space and actively work to construct a physical frame for the exhibition as a whole. In closely examining this dynamic process, **Chapter Six** and **Chapter Seven** parallel chapters three and four of Hutchins (1995) by focusing on discrete units of cognitive analysis: the individual curator in **Chapter Six**, and the collective of actors installing the exhibition in **Chapter Seven** (including artists, assistant curators, museum directors, and technicians). Although perceived as ‘end curating’ by many curators, I demonstrate that the installation is in many ways the most decisive point of curatorial action.

In particular, **Chapter Six** uses video data in the microethnographic tradition to investigate the installation as a combination of ‘plans and situated actions’ (Suchman, 1987). By highlighting the ways curators orient to unexpected outcomes and ‘surprise moments’ in the physical confrontation with artworks, this chapter investigates how curators operate inside and outside of the museum code. Curators have great capacities for agency and power to shape exhibitions, despite their operating in a field governed by power and conventions that control their actions. Mediation is an aesthetic, situational practice.

**Chapter Seven** continues this exploration, looking in detail at the ways emergent meanings are communicated among participants in the installation. How is consensus as to ‘what works’ established among participants with very different orientations to the exhibition and artworks? Here I show that achieving consensus through giving an installation ‘the eye’ relies not on restricted codes of embodied, ingrained conventions, but rather on physical, gestural, and other nonverbal elaborations in the situational context (Goodwin, 2000). Mediators are themselves mediated in the process of installation. Therefore, rather than focusing the sociological gaze on curators’ individual work as mediators, it is more useful conceptually to understand their work as part of a ‘situation of mediation’.

**Chapter Eight** begins where the last ends, by looking at the institutional processes at work to transform the situational, contingent process of installation into a readily consumable exhibition. The final stages of exhibition installation are detailed here, including the placement of texts, labels, and visitor aids, as well as the finishing touches on the exhibition, such as painting and lighting. In moving from the micro focus on curating to critical sociology’s broader interest in museums as instruments of social distinction, this chapter looks cumulatively at everything provided to the exhibition visitor and analyzes what it might all mean to the uninitiated viewer. What role do these institutionalized practices play in the ‘cultural persistence’ (Zucker, 1977) of viewing patterns for fine art?

Finally, to conclude this study in **Chapter Nine**, I pull these various threads together to explore how interrogating the extra-verbal actions of curators and aesthetic professionals contributes to work in social theory and the sociology of knowledge by unpacking the ‘implicit’, emotional, and embodied dimensions of human life. In particular, case studies of material culture allow sociology to better explore the relationship between the cognitive and the quasi-conscious, or somatic, properties of culture, and the role objects and object-relations play in curators’ work by anchoring their practices. Ultimately, I demonstrate that accounting for object relations and situated actions in the process of fabrication is important not only to contemporary art, but also to a grounded, explanatory sociology of the arts and theories of action more generally.

Although sociology views artistic mediation as produced and regulated by codes, conventions, and internalized dispositions, the nature of the contemporary art world(s) is complex and constitutes a ‘struggle over meaning’, rather than a ‘uniform straitjacket

imposed on people' (Saukko, 2003, p. 101). Redirecting the sociological eye to the 'struggle' in place of the 'straightjacket' sheds light on artistic mediation as a practical activity carried out using the available resources at hand. In doing so, this thesis aims to provide empirical data that can be mobilized as evidence for sociological theory, particularly theories of culture and cognition, to broach unanswered questions as to how culture works and the possibilities and mechanisms of cultural change.

## 2. CULTURAL MEDIATION AND CULTURE IN ACTION

In the world of research, only a permanent questioning of acquired positions can lead to genuine advances.

(Lamont & Fournier, 1992: 4)

As the detailed overviews of the field demonstrate (cf. Alexander, 2003; Blau, 1988; Foster & Blau, 1989; Harrington, 2004; Heinich, 2004; Hennion, 1993; Le Quéau, 2007; Wolff, 1981; Zolberg, 1990), the sociology of the arts has traditionally had difficulties defining its approach to artistic forms and making its object in this aesthetic territory. Some have identified this insecurity as due to the increasing overlapping interests of sociologists with art historians and those in cultural studies (cf. Bird, 1979; Calhoun & Sennett, 2007). In an effort to secure a unique place for themselves in this field, there has been a tendency on the part of many scholars to treat sociology less as a content-based discipline and more as a lens or way of looking at the world to examine the social or economic bases of action, in this case, in the world of artistic activity (Bowler, 1994; Heinich & Ténédos, 2007). Debates over what precisely constitutes the ‘social bases of action’ have led to a variety of different approaches in the sociology of the arts, including the ‘production of culture’ (seen in the focus on artistic ‘fields’ or ‘art worlds’), semiotic analyses of artistic works, and object-relational studies of artistic consumers. As Alexander (2003) observes, just as artistic forms compete for status, so to do these different approaches in the sociology of the arts. This contest is not so much over the identification of social networks, themes, or characteristics of art worlds, but rather, over what these approaches can tell sociology about the arts as a cultural system.

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. This distinction plays a key role in this thesis. The sociology of the arts continues to be driven in the main by the former, an ‘explicit’ conceptualization of culture as a recorded product or symbolic good, such as a painting, literary text, or piece of music, and the social activities involved in its production. In contrast, Wuthnow and Witten (1988) note that the sociology of the arts has not specifically examined ‘implicit culture’, a more abstract feature which, like tacit knowledge, provides the framework for social action. As I will now demonstrate through a detailed examination of the sociology of

artistic mediation, this is a false dichotomy. Rather, the specific study of the *mediating activities* surrounding explicit cultural forms (such as artworks and exhibitions, but also scientific knowledge, technologies, and music) plays a powerful role in shaping sociological conceptions of implicit culture. This literature review will first examine the notions of implicit culture embedded in the sociology of the visual arts, and then turn to studies in the sociologies of science and technology, music, education, communication studies, and action theory in order to extend the concept of artistic mediation into the arena of practical cultural action.

## 2.1 Mediation in the sociology of the visual arts

The production of culture approach in the sociology of the arts was born in the 1970s from a desire to show that culture is not a simple mirror or instrument of structure. Instead, work in this vein demonstrates that culture is a situational, expressive phenomenon that interacts with structure through norms, values, and patterns of social organization (Peterson & Anand, 2004). Formed by those in the sociology of work, organizations, and occupations, with added influences from the sociology of education and culture, this scholarship attempts to link the production and reception of particular artistic forms in order to create a more integrated theory of culture.<sup>6</sup>

Key to this new, dynamic understanding of culture is a focus on mediation — what Crane (1987) terms the ‘sociostructural’ dimensions of the art world — understood here as the individuals, institutions, and processes that mediate between the artistic object and its consumer, public, or audience (Becker, 1974; Peterson, 1976; Wolff, 1981). According to Griswold’s (1987b) classic work on an integrated methodological framework for the sociology of culture, any study of art and society must account for several entities: artistic products, their creators, consumers, and society, as well as the relationships between all of these things. This ‘cultural diamond’ approach shows that the links between art and society are never direct, but are mediated by the creators of art and its consumers. Alexander (2003: 6) adds distributors to the middle of this diamond, noting that, ‘Art is communication [...] art has to get from the people who create it to the people who consume

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<sup>6</sup> This effort in sociology can be seen to contrast some work in art history, such as Zangwill (1999), that sees no need to integrate understandings of audience into theories of art.

it'. After all, an artwork's meaning changes, but these changes are contingent upon the process of cultural transmission (mediators, media, institutions, etc.). Sociology's terrain is thus the 'demonstration of an object's conditions of circulation, of the contextual effects, mediations, and even the power relations that condition its situation in the world' (Heinich, 1998d: 74).

Mediation in the sociology of culture has long been viewed through the personage of the 'gatekeeper'. Information, ideas, or other processes in social institutions or particular domains travel through specific communication channels, interspersed with 'gates' governed either by impartial rules or individuals empowered with the decision-making ability to regulate entry. Originally used by Lewin (1947) to describe the role of a mother in deciding what food to put on the table, the term 'gatekeeping' was adopted by White (1950) to explore the process by which news anchors decide what stories to air, and was then quickly applied to a number of empirical cases describing the work of editors in 'making the news' (cf. Kadushin, 1976; Tuchman, 1978) or approving publication (cf. Coser, 1975; Crane, 1967; Powell, 1985).

There are three important points made in these founding studies which have been carried into the sociology of artistic gatekeepers. First, gatekeeping is an exercise in power, in which the process of *framing* is important: 'Power may be realized through the dissemination of some knowledge and the suppression of other ideas. And it may be reinforced by the way knowledge is framed as a resource for social action' (Tuchman, 1978: 215). Second, given the subjective and often implicit notion of framing, gatekeepers regulate production through a number of *informal controls*, which include socialization into organizational expectations and vocabularies (Powell, 1985). Third, and building on the two previous points, decision making is a process rather than a concrete event: 'Editorial discretion is a negotiated order, a continual process of interaction and redefinition between an editor's preferences and the house's tradition and operating preferences' (Powell, 1985: 158). In sum, gatekeepers not only regulate the flow of information and ideas, they may subtly or not so subtly alter them in the process of framing during a temporal course of action.

In the sociology of the arts and culture, studies of mediating individuals and institutions have been conducted in fiction publishing (cf. Griswold, 1992; Sutherland, 1976), foundations (cf. Coser, 1965), the performing arts (cf. Atkinson, 2006; Shrum, 1991), music (cf. Adorno, 1976; Lebrecht, 1991), and haute cuisine (cf. Leschziner, 2007),

to name only a fraction of this work. Other studies have examined the role of gatekeeping individuals and institutions in the manufacture of celebrity and/or authenticity (cf. DeNora, 1995; Heinich, 1996; Peterson, 1997). These individuals are described as ‘boundary personnel’ (Alexander, 2003) or ‘contact men’ (Hirsch, 1972), and are part of what Adorno (1976) terms ‘decision chains’. The work of these individuals runs along a spectrum from merely determining what people will see, to actively shaping and influencing the artworks themselves; as Adorno (1976) notes, the productive forces of artists are themselves transformed into means of production for mediating individuals. Given the important role of gatekeepers and mediators in enabling cultural and artistic work, artists and other cultural producers are tied back into the organizational ‘gatekeeping’ machinery in order to retain their position. For heuristic purposes, I will divide relevant work in the sociology of the visual arts into four categories to examine the implicit cultural resources and structures that shape artistic mediation: organizational systems, power and codes, tacit conventions, and interpretation and values. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, but they do illustrate different approaches and levels of analysis in the sociology of artistic mediation.

### *2.1.1 Organizational systems: Influence and consensus*

As White and White (1965: 2) point out, fine art is produced by a specific ‘institutional system’, ‘a persistent network of beliefs, customs, and formal procedures which together form a more-or-less articulated social organization with an acknowledged central purpose — here the creation and recognition of art’. Indeed, artistic content and value is so closely interwoven with this system that movements or changes in artistic *content* or *style* also result in the creation of a new institutional, or to speak more generally, organizational system (Zolberg, 1990). For instance, in her examination of the avant-garde movement and gallery system, Crane (1987) explains how each artistic movement redefines some aspect of the aesthetic content, social content, and norms surrounding art’s production and distribution, and Becker (1982: 309) points out that ‘changes in art occur through changes in worlds’. The important outcome of this work is to demonstrate that art is not produced by lone artists as ‘transcendent geniuses’, but rather by interrelated producers and mediators in distinct and overlapping art worlds or social circles (cf. Kadushin, 1976). The study of these mediating systems in the modern and contemporary visual arts generally

takes the form of sociological analysis of specific professional groups and the functioning of related institutions.

Historically, there are three distinct institutions that shape the visual arts, all with their roots in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe: public art museums, the world of visual arts discourse, and the art market. Holt (1979) uses case studies of important exhibitions from these centuries to demonstrate the important changes brought by the advent of the public exhibition and the publication of interpretive criticism on the artist's manner of working and the viewer's manner of evaluating art. White and White (1965) describe in close historical detail how the change wrought by Impressionism was not simply in painterly style, but rather in the introduction of the 'dealer and critic system' to the art world, which replaced the centralized dissemination and reward system of the Salon. Similarly, in France the 'critic-gallerist system' promoted value in Modern Art from the 1950s to 1980s (Moulin, 1992), and the 'artist-dealer system' proliferated among avant-garde groups in 1940-1985 New York City (cf. Bystry, 1989; Crane, 1987). In particular, after the birth of the dealer and critic system, the market for particular art genres began to play an influential role in mediating artistic promotion and public consumption (Moulin, 1967; Moureau & Sagot-Duvaurox, 2006; Quemin, 2002a).

Beginning in the 1970s, as predicted by Moulin (1992), the star duo of the museum curator and gallerist came to eclipse the role of the critic in their monopolization of the cultural and economic power, respectively, to valorise contemporary artistic work (Farquharson, 2005; Heinich, 1998c; Moureau & Sagot-Duvaurox, 2006; Quemin, 2002a). Recently, with the increased internationalism of the art world (cf. Bellavance, 2000), there are strong indications that even the gallerist's role in the creation of artistic celebrity is waning, with the growth of the 'artist-curator relationship' (Bellet, 2001) and that of the 'artist-collector' (Daled, 2002). Although the market is the primary vehicle for determining value in contemporary art (Moulin, 1967; Moureau & Sagot-Duvaurox, 2006; Quemin, 2002b), an artist's reputation continues to be established through institutional exposure (Bernier, 2002; Moulin, 1992; Tobelem, 2005). As a result, as I broached in Section 1.2, the past two decades have ushered in a new paradigm for the valorising of contemporary art: that of the curator-exhibition.

As a result of these changes over the past half century, recognition and legitimation in modern and contemporary art are no longer identifiably situated in a single institution such as an academy. Instead, the contemporary art world has become a domain composed

of an increasing plurality of local and international mediators (Foster & Blau, 1989; Moulin, 1992; Mulkey & Chaplin, 1982; Zolberg, 2005). In Rosenblum's (1978) analysis of the rise of photography as an artistic genre, she notes:

In short, powerful gatekeepers can make a trend. [...] One consequence of the market structure is that it does, in fact, allocate enormous power among very few persons, with the unintended result that their decisions can create a wave whose wake seems to radiate to other strata and other regions in the [art] world. (Rosenblum, 1978: 99)

Examples of professional gatekeepers in the visual arts include: curators (Gamboni, 1997; Greenfeld, 1989; Irvin, 2006), gallerists or dealers (Bystryn, 1989; Coppet & Jones, 1984; Crane, 1987; Halle, forthcoming; Rosenblum, 1978; Simpson, 1981; Taylor & Brooke, 1969; Velthuis, 2007), museum directors (Suchy, 1999), auctioneers (Quemin, 1997), art restorers (Hénaut, 2008; Marontate, 1997), collectors (Martorella, 1990; Quemin, 2002a), art critics (Duncan, 1993), and art schools (Adler, 1979).<sup>7</sup> All of these individuals and institutions make up what White and White (1965) term the 'social market' for contemporary art. In this social market, particular artistic movements are promoted by unique 'constituencies' (Crane, 1987) of organizational patrons (government and educational figures, corporations), professional experts (critics, curators), and private consumers (dealers and private collectors). The work of such constituencies is particularly important in the case of objects newly consecrated as 'art', such as aboriginal art forms (Myers, 2002), popular culture artefacts (Shapiro, 2004), or outsider art (Zolberg, 2001; Zolberg & Cherbo, 1997), as well as in periods of artistic controversy (Dubin, 1992).

In contemporary visual art, an artwork is valorised through temporary exhibitions held by an artist's representative gallery and various institutions, writings done by curators and critics, and purchases by influential collectors and museums. Since few museums have the right to re-sell artworks, in purchasing a contemporary artwork a museum curator places it in the history of art; this increases the value of the artist's other artworks held by the gallery and collectors, and may enhance the artist's reputation among critics. As Heinich and Pollack (1989a) point out, there's an element of 'auto-realisation' in gatekeeping: a gatekeeper may exhibit, write about, or purchase an artwork because it's good, but it's good because they've done so (which, in turn, increases the value of the environment it is

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<sup>7</sup> In French sociological jargon, there is no equivalent word to connote 'gatekeeper' to describe the individuals responsible for establishing value in social worlds. The closest possible word is 'médiateur', which is not a sociological term but refers to the profession responsible for presenting items to the public or packaging things for the market. Though they do not use the term 'gatekeeper', the French studies cited above examine mediators acting in a gatekeeping capacity.

brought into). The influence of the mediator is an important signalling device as to the quality of the artist or artwork, which sends ripples through the art world.

Moulin (1967: 26) defines these gatekeeping mediators as professionals, intellectuals, and artists who define the value hierarchy, ‘qualified’ judges who are ‘credentialized by official institutions or accepted by artists working in a recognized school of contemporary art’. Ultimately, their authority rests not on official institutions or rules, but rather on a consensus, or a near consensus, among the dominant market actors responsible for the control of the various formal and informal barriers that make up the gatekeeping process (Abbing, 2002). This consensus is two-fold: a consensus of who is qualified to judge, and over the criteria for the inclusion of new artworks.

This analysis of the visual arts on the level of their organizational makeup seeks to examine the social system of art, rather than accounting for the behaviour of individual participants. This risks reducing the sociology of artistic mediation to an exercise in ‘institutional analysis’ (Williams, 1981), or describing the social organizations and processes necessary for artistic production. According to Blau (1988), sociological studies which only aim to discern the ‘peopled arrangements’ that govern the production of art leave much unexplored territory in the arena of meanings and their connection to the social order. Otherwise put:

If the only proper way for sociologists to study the paintings of the Impressionists is to find out how much money Degas received from his father, or what kind of contract he had with Durand-Ruel, then such a study can never be more than peripheral...it can only be about the context of creativity. (Bird, 1979: 47)

These studies unearth the institutions and organizational structures that play an important role as historical enablers in the mediation of art, but do not, and cannot, go so far as to examine what the criteria for artistic meaning making are, how they came to be, or why they are meaningful to their participants.

The important lesson to take from this work focused on organizational systems is that gatekeepers involved in various institutions (curators in museums, critics in art magazines, and gallerists in the market) have a mutually-constituting existence in achieving this consensus in any art world, especially contemporary art. Curators consult artists and gallerists, and look for confirmations of their choices from critics and art historians. Gallerists promote artists with an eye to what collectors and museums are looking to purchase. And, critics provide the vocabulary to confirm these choices. ‘Everything unfolds as if the actors are organized to self-fulfil their own expectations of the value of any artist’

(Moulin, 1992: 67). The question remains, however, as to how this elevated consensus in the art world is translated into decisions made by mediators at the practical level. I turn now to three different approaches, seen through a focus on Pierre Bourdieu, Howard Becker, and Nathalie Heinich, who offer different explanations as to how consensus is achieved through more practical action.

### *2.1.2 Pierre Bourdieu: Power and cultural codes*

Scholarship in the power-laden approach to artistic mediation emphasizes the hierarchical nature of consensus-building and defines meaning making as the outcome of ingrained social and cultural codes. Here, artistic mediation takes on a normative focus, influenced heavily by studies of reproduction in the sociology of taste and education, notably Bourdieu and Darbel (1969) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1970). Studies in this area focus on the museum as elite artistic mediator, which doubly functions as an instrument of social distinction through the genesis and perpetuation of a ‘pure aesthetic’. The consensus which supports the successful work of artistic mediators is distinctly class-based.

As Bourdieu argues neatly in ‘The social space and genesis of groups’ (1985), social life is arranged as a social topology.

The objects of the social world can be perceived and uttered in different ways because, like objects in the natural world, they always include a degree of indeterminacy and fuzziness. [...] This element of play, of uncertainty, is what provides a basis for the plurality of world views, itself linked to [...] all the symbolic struggles for the power to produce and impose the legitimate world-view and, more precisely, to all the cognitive ‘filling-in’ strategies that produce the meaning of the objects of the social world by going past the directly visible attributes to the future of the past. (Bourdieu, 1985: 728)

The perception of objects involves an act of social construction, often implicit and tacit, that is generated by virtue of one’s position in the social world. Bourdieu’s exploration of artistic mediation similarly begins by inserting the artwork into the system of social relations that sustains it, what he terms the ‘field of cultural production’.<sup>8</sup> The artistic mediator, then, is located in an organizational field that is involved in a symbolic struggle of the sort described above, a struggle to successfully frame and valorise particular works of art and artists. These middle men:

...who live for art and, to varying degrees, from it, and who confront each other in struggles where the imposition of not only a world view but also a vision of the artwork is at stake, and who, through these struggles, participate in the production of the value of the artist and of art. (Bourdieu, 1993 [1987]: 261)

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<sup>8</sup> For a thorough anthology of all of Bourdieu’s work examining cultural production, see Bourdieu (1993).

For Bourdieu, artistic mediation is quite literally a cultural battlefield of ‘position takings’. The mediator’s position in a field in the social space — as defined largely through shared understandings of values, and experienced through personal habitus (cf. Bourdieu, 1979) — plays an important, structuring role in his or her work by giving it legitimacy, as well as by suggesting the cognitive ‘strategies’ by which the mediator goes about making meaning. Bourdieu’s biggest contribution to the organizational study of mediation described above is his specification of the practical cognitive mechanisms by which an organizational consensus is achieved.

Research examining decision making in publication and peer-review processes, such as Powell (1985) and Lamont (2009), emphasizes the informal way that controls (such as ‘excellence’) and consensus are built and the difficulties that decision-makers can encounter in articulating what attracts them to a particular submission. Using his own analysis of a manuscript submission to a publisher, Bourdieu (1993 [1976]: 134-135) describes this informality as maintained through an (unstated) process of ‘pre-selection’. This pre-selection happens in a variety of ways: the author’s own self-censorship, the author’s perception of what the publisher wants to read, and the intermediary work of various editors. 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.<sup>9</sup> Yet, this indefinable principle is nevertheless confirmed by the publisher’s perception of the author’s text as pre-selected, and the fact that other authors, critics, the public, and other publishers recognize his function in the division of intellectual labour. This is the ‘auto-realisation’ described by Moulin (1992) above, but experienced in a very deep, indefinable way.

In his ‘Outline of a sociological theory of art perception’, Bourdieu (1993 [1968]) explains the tacit ‘code’ which underwrites the achievement of this consensus.

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]: 215, his emphasis)

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<sup>9</sup> This indefinable principle may be based on a ‘shared sense of craftsmanship’, as evidenced by Lamont’s (2009) study of the ways that interdisciplinary academic panels determine excellence in research. As Lamont and others demonstrate (cf. Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991), these indefinable principles can also be the subject of extensive debate in competitions, ‘breakdowns’, and other interactive situations. Bourdieu, in contrast, is interested in painting a larger picture of artistic decision making as it progresses smoothly and unencumbered.

Artistic mediation, then, is the reference to and propagation of this code, as linked to the mediator's position (and strategic position-takings) in the cultural field. Mediation is successful because both parties (producers and consumers) share in the knowledge (overt or tacit) of this code. It is exercised through the mediator's habitus, the set of 'objective' dispositions one has by virtue of one's place in the social order. These are envisioned as embodied dispositions that enable individuals to produce practices based on older ones; like 'a pinch of sugar', you do not know what they are until you do them in practice (Calhoun & Sennett, 2007). Similarly, as Bourdieu (1972: 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'. In this way, Bourdieu explains how cultural codes acting through the habitus govern individuals' artistic perception and the language systems through which it is expressed.

As Bourdieu (1993 [1968]) continues, in contrast to the naïve actor, expert mediators (such as curators or art historians) are aware of these codes and the conditions that permit the adequate perception of artworks. They establish their position in the field through the creation of institutions which uphold the codes and confer prestige and authority upon themselves (Bourdieu, 1993 [1987]).

There is in fact every reason to suppose that the constitution of the aesthetic gaze as a 'pure' gaze, capable of considering the work of art in and for itself, i.e. as a 'finality without an end', is linked to the institution of the work of art as an object of contemplation, with the creation of private and then public galleries and museums, and the parallel development of a corps of professionals appointed to conserve the work of art, both materially and symbolically. (Bourdieu, 1993 [1983]: 36, his emphasis)

Seeing the work of artistic mediators as the production of a 'pure gaze', Bourdieu accuses them of 'misrecognizing' the economic and political bases of their decision making (Ardey, 1997; Bourdieu, 1993 [1977]). Producers, and I would add here mediators, of cultural goods derive power from this *disinterestedness* because the world of 'legitimate culture' supports the primacy of its own worldview (and codes). Consequently, the people who are in the best position to change these categories of perception are the least inclined to do so (Bourdieu, 2002 [1984]: 72).

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. DiMaggio and Hirsch (1976) note that organizational networks in the arts perpetuate themselves via 'imaginary feedback loops' between gatekeepers, the government, the market, and other players in the institutional system; these feedback loops sustain the 'cultural hegemony' of the ruling class. The most

detailed historical exploration of the institutionalization of high culture is DiMaggio's (1982a; 1982b) examination of the creation of the Museum of the Fine Arts in nineteenth-century Boston by the Brahmins, or 'cultural capitalists'. Their activity of mediation had three elements: an entrepreneurial network of private institutions, a symbolic ritual classification system to give this system meaning, and the situated framing of the artistic experience. The latter demonstrates the key importance of framing as defining the tacit conventions for artistic experience or, as DiMaggio describes it, the 'etiquette of appropriation'.

To see art as expressing the ineffable, as beyond words, to define the relationship of the viewer or listener to the work of art as a transcendent one, not sullied by description or interpretation, is to make art ultimately the property of those with the status to claim that their experience is the purest, the most authentic. (DiMaggio, 1982b: 317)

Nineteenth century curatorial professionals sustained this pure *code* of connoisseurship by privileging the encounter with the object, and seeing any discourse on the objects or art historical explanation as merely supplemental or secondary. In addition, these curators, critics, and historians played key roles in providing the 'secondary' vocabulary for understanding art and legitimizing the status of the elites who monopolized their services (DiMaggio, 1982b). They enabled the creation not simply of artistic works, but of an entire artistic world. Similarly, Fyfe (2000: 54) notes that, throughout the eighteenth century, exhibitions were 'seasoned rituals of power', confirming the elite status of visitors and the exhibiting artist.

Work in this vein highlights two important elements of cultural mediation. First, it puts forth a view of the museum as an instrument of social inequality or symbolic violence because it elevates only one 'code' or aesthetic worldview (cf. Lynes, 1949; Willis, 1990; Zolberg, 1992).<sup>10</sup> Second, it identifies the important role played by 'unclear definitions', 'ineffable qualities', and 'God-like discourse' as a reputational strategy in promoting artistic value, while trying to disguise the arbitrariness and social origin upon which curators' aesthetic decisions are based.<sup>11</sup> This is particularly the case in contemporary art, where more educationally-accessible art historical criteria may not apply (Greenfeld, 1989; Heinich, 1997b, 1997c; Moulin & Quemin, 1993; Octobre, 1996a, 1999b). Exhibiting the

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<sup>10</sup> At the outset of his study, DiMaggio (1982b: 306) observes that the symbolic violence inherent in the classification of high culture was more extreme in the case of the Museum of Fine Arts than in that of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, because, unlike the symphony (which was traditionally perceived as exclusive), the museum required a move away from its original educational mission to one of being a temple for the appreciation of art (cf. Meyer, 1979).

<sup>11</sup> This situation of power is not exclusively between curators and their publics. As Michaud (1991) argues, curators may also monopolize prescriptive authority and define what art is for artists as well.

extreme of this argument, Choay (1992: 157) accuses the culture industry of abusing its public, as it ‘tries to sell the audience illusions in the guise of the promised values’. Mediators spend more time building the symbolic belief in a cultural object than they do in actually explaining from where its value derives. This critique of the fine visual arts is similar to Adorno’s (1976: 199) critique of the popular music industry, in which he accuses the industry of creating a concentration of power, in which ‘listeners’ preferences are created and their needs are merely dragged along’.

To briefly summarize what is learned from the power-laden approach to mediation in terms of implicit culture, while influential gatekeepers and institutions play important roles in the consensual regulation of art worlds, here this cooperation is seen to take place through social and cultural codes, acting in both overt and implicit manners. Artworks are social products not merely because of their involvement in communities of mediation, but because the codes necessary to access them derive unconsciously from social origins. Culture operates practically, and there is no need to identify exactly *why* Picasso’s *Garçon à la Pipe* is a masterpiece when everyone is in agreement that it is; ‘culture is not what one is but what one has, or rather, what one has become’ (Bourdieu, 1993 [1968]: 234). As a result, mediation in museum studies and in the fine arts is an exercise in the larger cultural issues of *symbolic violence* and *inequality* (the unconscious modes of social and cultural domination reproduced through the naturalized habits of everyday life). For the artwork, however, the invention of the ‘pure gaze’ is critiqued by some as removing the relationship between the viewer and art form; it ‘over-cleans the work of art and transforms it into an aesthetic dummy’ (Wind, 1969: 31). This is exactly what Bourdieu and others have in mind to do by demonstrating that the aesthetic experience is also a socially-constructed occasion for the reproduction of social relations.

Bourdieu has been accused of caring about class not culture (Alexander & Smith, 2001) and engaging in a ‘sociology of domination’ (Heinich, 1998c). Indeed, in one of his last public interviews prior to his death (published in French magazine *Les Inrockuptibles* 323, January/February 2002), Bourdieu writes that he considers his work on museums and art to be his political work, and that the goal of sociology should be to call veiled systems (especially economic systems) into question and play the role of a liberator.<sup>12</sup> Speaking

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<sup>12</sup> In demarcating the new field of ‘visual culture’, Rogoff (2002) emphasizes the ‘unframing operations’ necessary to substitute the historical specificity of that being studied with the historical specificity of the

twenty years earlier, Berger (1981) spoke out against so-called ‘suspicious sociology’, whose practitioners act as ‘enlighteners’ by explaining away ideas by demonstrating their origin in the very society, culture, or institutions that validate them. In contrast, Berger argues that it is ultimately not the self-serving character of an idea that impugns it, but rather a judgment that it is illegitimate. Recent research on management in the cultural industries argues that mediators regularly follow courses of action that are not automatically geared at enhancing status (cf. Banks, 2006; Bilton, 2007). Similarly, further work in the sociology of music and performance argues that accounts of artistic experience in terms of sensation or aesthetic feeling should not be rejected as mere illusions of actors’ own beliefs (Benzecry, 2007; Gomart & Hennion, 1999: 228).

The sociological suspicion of cultural mediators is also driven by an underdeveloped notion of agency, in which there is no room for actors to think apart from market rationality, and no consideration of the aestheticization of work or personal values (Heinich, 1998c). As DiMaggio (1979: 1464) describes, the concept of habitus acts as a ‘theoretical *deus ex machina*’ by which Bourdieu links objective structure and individual activity. Implicit culture, seen acting through the availability of particular cultural codes, becomes a dependent variable on social class: a gearbox, not an engine (Alexander & Smith, 2001). Otherwise put, a mediator’s understanding of artistic works reflects their participation in the cultural field, rather than drives new meaning-making activities based on space and place (cf. MacKenzie, 2006). This is, as Albertsen and Diken (2004) note, a very ‘modernist’ concept in the sociology of the arts. Furthermore, as Prior (2005) explains, this approach may simply no longer apply to the fractured, postmodern world of the contemporary visual arts. Moving from macro organizations to meso codes, I now turn to a micro-level focus on artistic mediation which aims to ground tacit orientations in the ongoing accomplishment of collective action.

### *2.1.3 Howard Becker: Collective action and tacit conventions*

The ‘art worlds’ approach to artistic mediation focuses less on the making of hierarchical art *worlds*, and more on the situational dynamics of the making of artistic *works* within them, perhaps a result of what Becker (1982) confesses in the preface as his

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scholar doing the studying. In this rhetoric, Bourdieu’s so-called ‘suspicious sociology’ could be seen as deriving from his specific social environment, rather than an ongoing need for such an orientation in the field.

‘congenital anti-elitism’. Taking a symbolic interactionist approach, Becker (1982) examines art as it is created, produced, mediated, and consumed by individuals operating in an assortment of interconnected art worlds (cf. Alloway, 1984). In defining and contributing to the ‘social relational’ approach in the sociology of the arts, Becker (1982) shows that an artwork takes the form it does at a particular moment because of the small and large choices made by artists and others up to that point: choices between multiple possibilities of subject, format, stylistic treatment, material, assembly, techniques, etc. These choices reflect the influence of mediating parties who determine the dissemination of artistic work:

Curators, publishers, conductors, and theatrical and movie producers all perform editorial functions by creating and maintaining channels of distribution more adequate for some kinds of work than for others, and totally inadequate for still others. They thus select, or lead makers of art works to select, choices which fit easily into the available system. (Becker, 1982: 214)

As a result, mediating individuals play a dynamic role in the life of artworks because they are responsible for the active framing of a cultural object, which situates it firmly within the internal logic of any art world.

Mediators engage in this framing through processes of ‘editing’ artistic works that pass through their domains of expertise. This editing is not always a ‘deliberate’ act or conscious deliberation. Some choices by the artist become ‘habitual’, others get ‘embodied in physical objects and thus become permanent’ (Becker, 1982: 197). Becker then goes one step further in describing, on an implicit level, exactly how these individual editing practices result in a product agreeable to the art world as a whole. In carrying out their own roles and actions, participants in particular art worlds are guided by social *conventions*, collective beliefs that structure action and determine the shape of artistic practice.<sup>13</sup>

Like Bourdieu’s actors, 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. Although participants may employ vague words to express their agreement, the unspoken standard is itself learned, experienced, and ‘felt’ on a deep and elaborated basis by practitioners (Arnheim, 1954; Sorri, 1994; Sudnow, 1978). If these criteria do respond to identifiable logics, they are not

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<sup>13</sup> As Becker (1982: 204) observes, some of the work in mediation is exported to artists, who have a high degree of awareness of their art form and can better predict the responses of others (e.g., songwriters are aware that a minor key conveys melancholy). This is ‘conventional knowledge’, but artists may experience it at a ‘very primitive level’, such that they can think and act in conventional terms without hesitation.

(or are seldom) communicated through the use of words, but rather by gestures or looks. In other words, mediators know more than they can say. Again, like Bourdieu's codes, these conventions, sustained in part by mediating individuals, make art possible because artists, mediators, and audience all share an ingrained knowledge and experience of them. Mediation creates meaning in artworks because gatekeepers are part of 'interpretive communities' who share a cognitive style or a set of conventions in approaching art (Griswold, 1987b). Yet, unlike Bourdieu's codes, which have their origin in social relations, familiarity with Becker's conventions originates through practical action.

For Becker, these nondescript aesthetic principles are part of an 'internalized dialogue' that artists have with other members of the art world; 'they respond as they imagine others might respond, and construct those imaginings from their repeated experiences of hearing people apply the indefinable terms to concrete works in concrete situations' (Becker, 1982: 200). Therefore, the choices made during editing are not necessarily 'deliberate', but rather are a product of the subconscious as employed via embodied cognition or muscle memory (cf. Sudnow, 1978). Conventions may also become embodied in artistic forms. At one point, Becker (1982: 45) discusses how a poet derives humorous effect by combining sounds with contradictory connotations, like 'glitch' or 'glump', producing a 'heavy, awkward phenomenon of light'. Similarly, he demonstrates that individuals in art worlds are sometimes at the mercy of cooperative agents, for instance, a case when a sculpture too heavy for a museum floor (Becker, 1982: 26-27). Mediation is not simply 'in one's head', but is also subject to aesthetic indicators and material constraints.

Becker demonstrates that artistic conventions are the product of collective work and consensual recognition, and in so doing, his work opens artistic institutions and organizations to the analysis of collective action. He also demonstrates that the editing of artistic works by artists and mediators is not an arbitrary act. Rather, it is the result of extensive familiarity, training, and sophistication in the conventions of the art world. Now is perhaps the time to mention that Danto (1964) first used the concept of the 'artworld' to explain that something becomes art not in the act of painting or in the act of observing, but in being associated with a rationale or an *aesthetic*. But as Becker (1982: 133) notes, when aesthetics are seen as an activity, rather than as a body of doctrine (or code), individuals are guided in the production of artworks by feeling a 'vague sense of something wrong' if they run afoul of them. By exploring the collective action implicated in the organisation of art

world consensus, this work plays an important role in providing the empirical structure for more macro-organisational studies.

As described by Sawyer (2006: 117-119), Becker's formulation of the structured existence of conventions in artistic production has its origin in his desire to explain his ability to continue playing improvisational jazz piano while falling asleep in the early morning hours at smoky jazz clubs. Therefore, it should come as little surprise that Becker focuses on conventions as a form of tacit or embodied knowledge. Like Bourdieu, this is inherently a reproductive understanding of implicit culture as it acts through conventions to organize the actions and perceptions of producers and mediators. But, unlike Bourdieu, Becker sees these conventions as emerging through collective activity and does not deal with issues of hierarchy in cultural mediation. Indeed, in his latest work on the subject, Becker clarifies that, 'Art is social not because social variables affect it but because it is the product of collective work' (Becker, et al., 2006: 3).

While describing the production of explicit cultural objects, Becker simultaneously provides clues as to the unifying elements of implicit culture, seen as conventions, beliefs, customs, and formal procedures which are given meaning through collective work. Martin (2007) describes Becker's work as the genuine search for meaning and creativity in music by describing how art rests on a vision of human life as collective and the human mind as social. In a final section, I will look at more interpretive work that examines how mediators negotiate between the structuring codes and collective conventions in artistic worlds and their individual beliefs and values implicated in meaning-making activities.

#### *2.1.4 Nathalie Heinich: Interpretation and values*

Given the widespread influence Becker has had on the sociology of the arts, it is difficult to single out other studies working in his tradition for mention. Instead, I will speak briefly about the work of Nathalie Heinich to inject the study of values into Becker's more 'factual' study of mediation (Heinich, 2002). Heinich's work on curators and other specialists in contemporary art, which is under-represented in the English-language literature, prioritizes interpretive and highly descriptive qualitative research (cf. Danko, 2008). Like Becker, Heinich sees the meaning of artworks as somewhat embodied in the anthropological conventions used to create them (Crane, 2001), but she focuses on how

various actors in the art world strive to produce ‘singularity’ (exceptionality) as a motivating value (Marontate, 2001).

In outlining the ‘triple game’ in contemporary art, Heinich (1998c) observes that specialist mediators play an important and interpretive role in negotiating between artists and publics, akin to that played by a priest in religious societies. When framing contemporary artworks for public consumption, mediators are torn between their personal values and knowledge of an artist’s work, institutional conventions for the display of traditional art forms, and public expectations (which border heavily on the ‘rejection’ of contemporary art forms).<sup>14</sup> This dilemma is at the heart of her work which bridges the ‘sociology of domination’ with a broader ‘sociology of values’.

...the work of the interpretive sociologist is to complement the institutional network with the self-understanding of the practitioners themselves (emotion, genius, divas, universality) instead of claiming art’s lies by making explicit its social ‘reality’. It’s not about finding a deeper level of reality but about building an explanatory model that incorporates the agent’s experience without reducing it to participation in a collective deception. (Benzecry, 2007: 190, endnote 21)

As Benzecry describes above, the goal of interpretivism in the sociology of the arts is to incorporate actors’ personal beliefs and feelings into their supposedly conventional action. In leading this charge, Heinich observes curatorial values as they are revealed through situations of interpreting, purchasing, and exhibiting contemporary artworks.

In her various studies of curators and other artistic mediators in action — in an art commission (Heinich, 1997b, 1997c), in planning an exhibition (Heinich & Pollak, 1989b), and in museum work (Heinich, 1998c, 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 (1998c: 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 and valorising contemporary artworks, the artistic event is made singular by its actors. In seeing culture as located and produced through personally-held values, and not only instantiated in the background as social conventions, Heinich moves the sociology of

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, as Marontate (2000b) elaborates, the ‘rejection’ of a work of art provides further support for the multiplicity of values, interpretations, and manners of meaning making in contemporary art. Seen in this way, artistic controversies may provide new, lasting insights into contemporary artistic practice via public debate.

arts closer to understanding meaning making as a practical activity situated locally to specific individuals and institutions. In the process, Heinich also reinforces the new and ‘singular’ challenges contemporary art poses to sociological study.

As with many of the organizational studies before (cf. Crane, 1987; Moulin, 1992; White & White, 1965), Heinich reduces artistic forms to the category of profane objects, focusing on their mobilization in social networks or value systems. Heinich emphasizes the examination of the *use* and *meaning* of the art object by and for others, rather than the object itself: ‘our focus is not on the mediations surrounding artworks which shed light on the artworks, but rather the artworks which turn around mediations in order to make them visible’ (Heinich, 2009: 33). While this approach does not privilege interactions with specific art objects, it does demonstrate that local context and individual personality play a role in mediators’ use of codes and conventions.

Scholars of museum studies and visual culture (cf. Bal, 1996; Bennett, 1995; Cheetham, et al., 1998) look rigorously at issues of display, but ignore the mediators, practices of viewing, and the perhaps subversive contradictions going on behind the scenes. Instead, Heinich’s work falls into line with recent historical work in the ‘new organizational analysis’, which reveals tensions between the goals and beliefs of cultural mediators and the institutions or fields in which they act (cf. Alexander, 1996b; Lantz, 2005; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Zolberg, 1981). As DiMaggio (1991) observes, the action of curators in the contemporary art world is itself shaped and regulated on a variety of levels, including their organizational identity as a profession and the type of institution in which they work. Contemporary work on the ‘cultural industries’ also examines the negotiations between creative managers and institutional demands (cf. Banks, 2007; Bilton, 2007; Cuno, 2006). These studies, particularly Alexander (1996b), demonstrate the dilemmas curators face between curating for their peers and curating for the ‘grand public’.

The lived nature of these conflicts and contradictions is evidenced by further work that has followed Heinich in looking at mediation in contemporary art in a detailed, qualitative manner (often through participant observation or interviews). This includes studied examinations of the evolving nature of curatorial expertise (cf. Heinich, 1995; Moulin & Quemin, 1993, 2001; Thornton, 2008), the work of building museum collections (cf. Herrero, 2007), curatorial decision making (cf. Gielen, 2005), and changing notions of museum curatorship to accommodate contemporary art (cf. Jouvenet, 2001; Michaud, 1987; Octobre, 1999b; Tobelem, 2005; Zamora, 2009). In particular, studies and

discussions of conservation dilemmas in modern and contemporary art (cf. Corzo, 1999; Hénaut, 2008; Hummelen & Sille, 2005; Irvin, 2006; Marontate, 2006) illuminate the outcomes of these conflicts as they impact the physical editing, display, and interpretation of particular artworks. The studies cited here make important contributions to the sociological study of mediation in the visual arts by demonstrating how the specific and dynamic nature of contemporary art poses unique problems for traditional artistic ‘codes’ and museum ‘conventions’.

For Heinich, the work of curators involves not only mediating conventions, but also the particular experiences, beliefs, and values of individuals. Conventional action, as seen in the production of a regime of ‘singularity’, arises through the propagation of particular values by multiple intermediaries in the art world or field. Although Peterson (1994) praises Becker for putting the culture back at the center of the production of culture, Heinich emphasizes the culture within Becker’s study of collective action by emphasizing the use and meaning of cultural conventions for individual actors. With this starting off point, I will reflect on the remaining limitations of the study of mediation in the sociology of the visual arts, namely the majority absence of materials and aesthetics from the discussion, before turning to gather work in other fields that addresses this void.

#### 2.1.5 Summary: A sociology of the black box

As demonstrated by literature in the sociology of the visual arts, mediators play an important role not only in the material creation of artworks, but also in the production of their symbolic worth and the value of art in general. Their role is not simply economic, but involves the creation and maintenance of a social relation (MacKenzie, 1996b). This production of belief in the artwork takes the shape of ‘creating and maintaining the rationale according to which all these other activities make sense and are worth doing’ (Becker, 1982: 4). Mediators, therefore, produce two things in art worlds: the artworks themselves and the institutional structure in which they circulate, what Bourdieu (1996) terms the ‘two-step social construction of events’. While sociological studies have focused instead on the latter (the field or worlds in which mediation takes place), the former (the editing of specific artworks) is often seen as an automatic process. Consequently, although sociology introduces a ‘vital corrective’ to the art historical view that creativity takes place

independently of social or economic forces (Bird, 1979; cf. Wolff, 1981), it also circumscribes any attempt to discuss value and meaning as outside of the sociological project.<sup>15</sup> Creativity becomes a property of the aesthetic of contemporary art, rather than an emergent and practical property in the process of an artwork's creation and mediation, and the artist is strictly separated from all other mediators as the locus of artistic creativity.

Although the literature examines the work of mediators from a variety of angles (macro-level organizational studies, institutional codes and habitus, micro-level collective action, and the values and beliefs of individual actors), scholars focused on the accomplishment of ongoing action, rather than temporary breakdowns, almost unanimously end up talking about mediation as governed by 'imaginary feedback loops' and 'internal logics'. Consequently, these authors view much action as tacitly organized through a fixed core of discourse in artistic worlds. Meaning making in art, then, is nothing more than a 'mediate deciphering operation' of these codes or conventions (Bourdieu, 1993 [1968]), as actors 'apply' tacit knowledge to shape artworks for their expectant publics.

The quality of the work of art [...] is determined by its ability to arouse a reaction of this special kind among this special public, while the public is defined by its ability to react in this specific fashion to a work of art of the kind defined above, namely defined by the reaction it is capable to arouse among this public. (Greenfeld, 1989: 105)

As clarified by the production of culture, the distinct role of mediators is to bring artworks and ideas into line with the conventions of the art world to make this deciphering operation possible (Peterson & Anand, 2004). As a result, the experience of art becomes 'an exercise in the implicit' (DiMaggio, 1982b: 317), as does the subtle masterwork of the mediator. Making meaning in the arts becomes the function of an input-output system, as regulated by tacit conventions or codes and presided over by all-knowing mediators. If sociology's interest is in the social relations of artistic production and mediation (the existence of internal dialogues that structure action), then it comes as little surprise that the *mechanisms* through which this action is made (how artworks and situated actions come to be related to codes and conventions) remain largely unexplored.

I hypothesize that this is largely because much sociological work largely overlooks the role played by artworks in the mediation process. Scholars in the production of the arts

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<sup>15</sup> The project of artistic meaning is generally left to art history, but the line separating discussions of production and those of value are blurred by some sociological readings of artworks (cf. Wagner-Pacifici, forthcoming; Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991; Witkin, 1997), as well as texts in social art history (cf. Bogart, 2006; Clark, 1973; Crow, 2000; Danto, 1964; Hadjinicolaou, 1973; Kramer, 1973; Paret, 1980). While sociological perspectives have informed 'critical art history' (cf. Duncan, 1993), other recent movements in art history-turned-visual culture examine art not as the 'end result' of a socioartistic process but as alive in its own right (cf. Bryson et al., 1994).

have assumed that sociology must observe who art worlds treat as capable of making value judgements, and rely upon those because they constitute the reality of art in a particular world (cf. Becker, 1982; Moulin, 1967). As Bourdieu (1993 [1983]: 35) clarifies, the sociological program must make a break with the belief in a ‘deceptive language of artistic celebration’, because it is part of the reality under examination; to do otherwise ‘renders the sociologist the victim of ideologies that he or she should be studying’ (DiMaggio, 1982a: 320).<sup>16</sup> Consequently, studies that focus on the organization of art worlds do not explain why people enjoy art or what meanings they get from it, but instead, make art objects into ‘black boxes to explain intergroup relationships’ (Alexander, 2003: 241) or symbols to be used in the production of belief (Hennion, 1995a). The irony here, as pointed out by Heinich (Heinich & Ténédos, 2007), is that this position both reduces art to the mere reflection of a social group or network, while simultaneously endowing artworks with the extraordinary capacity to transmit the essence of a society. As a result, much work in the sociology of the visual arts negotiates a fine line between accusations of determinacy (the artwork is a cultural text with an internal meaning that structures social action as pre-determined by ‘encodings’) and indeterminacy (the artwork is a profane object whose meaning emerges from the editorial application of ‘conventions’). In both cases, the art object remains a black box whose meaning results from a process of production, not anything specific to the artwork or its direct communication with its audience (Eyerman & Ring, 1998).

One final area that much of the literature above fails to address is change, which is generally discussed only as the effect of institutional change (with the notable exception of Heinich and those authors cited alongside her). As Gooding (2006: 696) notes with reference to the sciences, ‘The sociological assimilation of all knowledge to social relations and cultural traditions makes it difficult to explain how the larger, distributed system can deal with change or produce innovations’. The sociology of the visual arts does have an effective institutional way to account for change. As Becker (1982: 309) states, ‘Changes in art occur through changes in worlds’; while some change happens as conscious experimentation, other change happens through the accumulation of small, unremarked changes in usage, or simple enduring mistakes, what Becker terms ‘drift’. Participants in art

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<sup>16</sup> Ironically, early arguments against aesthetic neutrality in sociology (cf. Bird, 1979; Wolff, 1983) have noted that this sociological critique of judgment leads either to seeing the best art as that which is liked by the majority or dominant classes, or unable to explain the continued dominance of particular artworks that outlast their systems of social and economic production.

worlds see drift as logical developments in the tradition because communication about new developments is built upon the shared knowledge of existing conventions. Bourdieu (1993 [1968]) similarly notes that the capacity for embracing avant-garde artworks is based not on the pure gaze, but rather on elite expert individuals who speak ‘the code of the codes’. Consequently, even though new art violates rules, it leaves the grammatical and social system largely intact (Goodman, 1968), and winners reproduce its mystique (Abbing, 2002).<sup>17</sup> While sociology demonstrates the importance of institutions and influential individuals in mediating artistic change, it is able to offer few considerations of what actually *impels* artistic innovation in the first place because it gives little detail about the properties of material artefacts that physically create these instances of drift (Zolberg, 1990).

As a result, sociology in the main has tended to treat expert aesthetic mediation as the mere accumulation and exercise of tacit knowledge, something common to other professions (Ericsson, et al., 2006). As some have pointed out (cf. Pleasants, 1996; Turner, 2001), this over-reliance on ‘tacit knowledge’ functions as a conceptual black box into which sociologists dump all unexplained things. There is the additional risk, as Wrong (1999) warns, that further work will make assumptions about human nature in order to fit the man into these existing theories of action. In this case, I believe that the orientation of man to tacit social norms may be 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*. The study of this novel generation of curators of contemporary art offers new insights into the role of cultural codes or conventions in shaping action, precisely because these individuals are engaged in moments of ‘drift’. The next step, methodologically speaking, is to examine how aesthetic ‘rules’ are ‘made’ via the performative work that instantiates them in the here and now. How precisely does the editing of artworks take place in the framing process, not at the level of belief or value, but at the level of situated action? In the second half of this literature review, I turn to work outside the sociology of the visual arts to collect a variety of methodological and theoretical tools that aid in this endeavour.

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<sup>17</sup> The role of gatekeepers can also be calculated, often admitting new values in a rational logic of profit maximization. As art historian Thomas Crow (1996: 35) observes, ‘The avant-garde serves as a kind of research and development arm of the culture industry’. See also Cameron (1990) and Mahon (2000).

## 2.2 Practical work and object relations

In the case of modern and contemporary art forms, aesthetic experience is largely a consequence of interpretation; as Danto (1981) observes, the material composition of an artwork is irrelevant, what is relevant is the ability of a particular material composition to speak. Calhoun and Sennett (2007) conclude that sociology has a problem with understanding in art because its methods are inappropriate to understand the creative process; sociologists must be able to understand both social structures/processes and the meaning of artistic phenomenon. In deconstructing the value and meaning of art by focusing on its production, some have argued that the production of culture approach neglects the imaginary, symbolic, and ritual dimensions of reality (cf. Eyerman & McCormick, 2006). Recent work in the sociology of culture has called for abandoning the production paradigm in order to re-center sociological inquiry on the work of art and questions of meaning and value (cf. Kaufman, 2004). These criticisms have resulted in a number of 'turns' in the sociology of the arts aimed at resurrecting the role of aesthetic materials: the art historical turn, the cultural turn, the performative turn, and the practice turn. For all of these theorists, a focus on meaning in artworks (as explicit culture) is also a way to strengthen a notion of (implicit) culture as autonomous and 'strong'.

The art historical turn (cf. Hennion, 1995b; Witkin, 1997) suggests that in order to understand meaning and content in the visual arts, sociology needs to return to the artwork in its social and historical context, something later confirmed by Becker (2006). This begins with the painting in situ and the meaning obtained from recourse to its materiality. Work in this turn calls for a return to the life of the image, rather than the production of its belief, but does not consider active processes of mediation involving curators or others.

In formulating the cultural turn, Alexander and Smith (2001) note that the production of culture approach emphasizes how social identities constrain meaning, and not the other way around; it is therefore a 'weak' approach to the study of implicit culture. Instead, they call for an understanding of the codes in play in cultural objects themselves, not simply in the circumstances of their production. While this turn towards a 'strong program' of cultural sociology sees culture (both explicit artworks and implicit orientations) as a text that actively shapes its world, the sociologist's task remains one of applying and reading codes. It does not account for how these codes emerge through

interaction, and how this process may be linked to concrete instances of material engagement.

In applying the performative turn within cultural sociology (cf. Alexander, 2004) to the sociology of the arts, Eyerman and McCormick (2006) note that a non-instrumental conception of culture as autonomous necessitates seeing art as a practical and *creative* social activity through which new kinds of social identities and practices emerge. While Eyerman and McCormick emphasize the action of mediation, they focus on how art forms are used, not how they may structure their users. Other, more object-oriented work that examines action as performative, such as Wagner-Pacifici's (2005) study of political surrenders (which draws on a visual analysis of paintings of these surrenders) demonstrates the important role of people and objects, as well as speech acts, in achieving a successful exchange or surrender, for instance, the need to point muskets up or deliver keys. As theorized in Wagner-Pacifici (2000), actors may engage creatively in these 'bridging actions' in order to connect rules, symbols, and immediate contexts.

Work in the practice turn supports the importance of non-linguistic, learned conditions for activity that mediate action and communication in art worlds. Yet, the mastery of these codes or conventions is not the same thing for different people under different circumstances. Instead, this mastery is purpose and situation relative because individuals' goals and the information they receive may be heterogeneous (Turner, 2001). Rather than abiding by a singular 'aesthetic' or 'tacit rule book', art worlds are composed of patterns of people coming together and doing things, in an ethnomethodological sense. As King (2004: 12) notes, the study of social relations as they operate in everyday life can also help to see individuals as producers of social structure, rather than simply its subordinates. I believe it is this practice turn that offers the sociology of the arts the most useful methodological and theoretical tools to unpack the physical and situated dimensions of mediation in action.

These recent turns in the sociology of culture emphasize the active role played by aesthetic objects and the ways in which actors work with these and other available cultural resources in building action. In what follows, I will summarize empirical work in a variety of fields that extends these movements by examining the ability of aesthetic materials to speak, as well as how this communication is wrapped up in interactions between the object, audience, and environment of encounter. Drawing largely on case studies in the sociologies of music, science, and technology, these authors draw a contrast between work in the

production of culture which focuses on ‘intermediaries’ (e.g., actors, institutions, and organizations), and broader ecological situations of ‘mediation’ in action.

### *2.2.1 Micro-interaction*

Over the past two decades, there has been a shift, as DiMaggio (1997: 265) puts it, from culture as value (e.g., Bourdieu) to ‘how people use culture’ (Acord & DeNora, 2008). Recent reviews of work in the ethnographic examination of small group and micro-level interactions demonstrate the value of practice-based studies in illuminating central questions in the study of culture (cf. Calhoun & Sennett, 2007; Fine & Fields, 2008; Geertz, 1993 [1983]; Harrington & Fine, 2006; Streeck & Mehus, 2005). More anthropological work focuses researchers on the workings of culture, not just the institutions or organizations which organize it (Hennion, 1993; Shilling, 2005). Deriving from Becker, microsociological work examines practices as the level of experience where the ‘rules’ of culture are the most visible, focusing on the ‘doing’ of culture as ‘lived experience’ (Fine & Fields, 2008). Overall, microethnography has led to an increasing detachment from structural and linguistic conceptions of ‘form’ to issues of dynamic action (Streeck & Mehus, 2005).

Sociological analyses of tacit knowledge have tended towards viewing common sense practices as unexamined ‘resources’ for explaining action. Instead, as outlined by ten Have (2004: 31-32), ethnomethodology has tended to see tacit knowledge itself as a topic for analysis and how it is employed for consensus-building by participants. The ethnomethodological study of common sense knowledge is an important tool to unpack ‘what works’ in art worlds governed by codes and conventions, focusing on the experience of how those conventions are made in circumstances of action. As Garfinkel (1967: 53) demonstrates, individual actors produce the features of a real society by being compliant with moral and background expectancies as they understand them. The production of explicit cultural objects (such as artworks) is therefore also the production of the implicit cultural features by which the former are constituted and given meaning. Indeed, as Mehan, et al. (1986: 28) show in their practical approach to educational gatekeeping, while the school counsellor is a passive paper-shuffler in the reproduction model, ethnographic studies demonstrate that counselling sessions, and the gatekeeping that ensues, are based on

an *interactional machinery* rather than a ‘simple transmission or conveyor belt’. In this machinery, culture is certainly more of an engine than a gear box. Work in this ethnographic and practical vein focuses less on the use of discursive constructs or heuristic devices to explain collective work, and more on how the work itself gets done, however messy this may seem (cf. Bittner, 1990; Law & Mol, 2002).

The practical dimensions of culture as illuminated through action and interpretation have been explored by many (cf. Alexander, 1988; Barnes, 1995; Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991; Collins, 2004; Griswold, 1987a; Lopes, 2000; Schudson, 1989; Sewell, 2005; Swidler, 2001). To ‘do’ cultural practice 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 that code or elaborate it based on novel (often material) circumstances.

What things in the world are is never fully determined by the symbolic net we throw over them – this also depends upon their pre-existing 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: 168)

Key here is the active role of the built environment and materiality in the meaning-making process. Although objects and experiences derive their meanings from the social narratives in which humans embed them (Bourque & Back, 1971; Harré, 2002), the material properties of objects, and the contexts within which they are found (cf. Tota, 1998), can themselves determine particular forms of interaction (Chateauraynaud & Bessy, 1995). As shown by DeNora (2002) and McDonnell (forthcoming), objects may be re-assigned new meanings based on their functionality and actors’ specific material orientations to them. In understanding these orientations, emotional and spatial interactions are important, as are visual (Jay, 1994 [1993]), tactile (Classen, 2005; Leder, 1990), and even olfactory modes of perception (Drobnick, 2002). Seeing objects as playing a significant role in human action works to combat what Latour (1992) terms the ‘sociologism’ that, given the competence and pre-inscription of human users and authors, you can read out the scripts non-human actors have to play. It is also in contrast to what Berger (1995) terms ‘culturology’, or the simple reading of codes in cultural objects.

Work on human/non-human interaction emphasizes the environmental affordances that are found within physical and/or conceptual spaces. The concept of affordance, originally used in psychology and to conceptualize the relationship between organisms and their environments, was coined by Gibson ([1979] 1986) to describe how objects may provide opportunities for perception and/or action. (A spherical object may be easier to roll

than a cube, for example.) This perspective has been enhanced by empirical research in design (Büchler, 2004; Drake, 2003; Henderson, 1999), urban planning (Innes, 1998), the sociology of material culture (Mukerji, 1997, 2009), organizational aesthetics (Hancock, 2005; Taylor, 2002; Witkin & DeNora, 1997), environmental psychology (Gibson, 1986 [1979] ), the study of emotions (Katz, 1999; Sheller, 2004), anthropology (Born, 1995; Douglas, 1996; Lave, 1988; Turkle, 2007), technology use and design (Heath & Luff, 2000; Suchman, 1987), crime and deviance (Goffman, 1961), cognition (Hutchins, 1995; Noë, 2006; Norman, 1993; Rose, 2004; Vaughan, 2002), sport (Delamont, 1998), ‘pragmatist hermeneutics’ (Shalin, 2007), linguistic philosophy (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), technological innovation (Akrich, et al., 2002 [1988]), education (Cicourel, et al., 1974; Erickson & Shultz, 1982; Mehan, et al., 1986), expert studies (Klein, 1998; Klein, et al., 1993; Smith & Wynne, 1989), 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.

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: 288)

The focus of these studies, then, is not to read objects in terms of their codes or conventions, but to look at how object-based practices create regimes of meaning.

Work on ‘communities of practice’ and ‘organizational learning’ in education examines the practical manner by which individuals learn and manage the nonverbal practices and tacit expectations in social groups (cf. Amin & Roberts, 2008; Cook & Yanow, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1991). As Cook and Yanow (1993: 380) observe in craft communities, the language of interchanges is inexact because many of the actual physical dimensions and tolerances of flutes are never made explicit or referred to in explicit terms; things ‘feel right’ because craftsmen learn the conventions through tactile experience (cf. Sennett, 2008). Even in more epistemic communities, such as software engineering, Henderson (1999) demonstrates that visual skills are themselves important cognitive skills and visual representation is a resource for situated practice. Nowhere is the role of embodied cognition shown on a more practical and micro level than work by Goodwin

(2000) and Streeck (1996), who examine the role that local objects play in communication encounters.<sup>18</sup>

Empirical studies of object-oriented work in action demonstrate that semantic codes and conventions are elaborated through actors' performative tellings of them (cf. Barnes & Bloor, 1982; Bernstein, 1971; Goffman, 1961; Schuetz, 1953; Wieder, 1974). In short, if there is a 'rule book', the contents of that book are indexical; individuals make sense of an object or action in regards to a particular context and 'index it' under those circumstances (Garfinkel, 1967). Norms, repertoires of action, and cultural patterns of meaning making grow when individuals observe them repeatedly in particular situations or material circumstances. This picture of the actor's relation to culture varies markedly from that implicit in many discussions of the cognitive turn within sociology, because it highlights local and often haphazard sense-making practices rather than tacit mastery of a normative cultural code. It also re-introduces an element of the personal and the embodied into sociological work (cf. Smart, 2007), and sees theoretical machinery like the 'habitus' as fractured by personal history and local circumstance (cf. Armstrong & Weinberg, 2006; Decoteau, 2008; Delamont & Stephens, 2008). A detailed look at the knowledge-producing work of scientific and technical communities elaborates this theme.

### 2.2.2 *Epistemic cultures*

Like the sociological study of the arts, the sociologies of science and technology have worked to replace a deterministic model of the creation of cultural objects with a more interactionist one. In particular, the long-dominant thesis of technological determinism, the idea that the path of technological development is laid out according to an *intrinsic logic* and scientists simply 'discover' the next logical steps, has been replaced in the past two decades with an understanding of technology (or scientific findings) as the product of social constructivism. Work on knowledge creation in science and technology studies demonstrates that the production of culture (both explicit artefacts and implicit organizational regimes and practices) is seen to emerge from within a matrix of social

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<sup>18</sup> Additional case studies examining the role of objects and embodied practice in knowledge-producing work can be found in the 2000 special issue of the journal *Mind, Culture, and Activity* on the topic of 'Vision and Inscription in Practice' (volume 7, numbers 1-2), as well as a 1993 special issue of the French journal *Raisons Pratiques* on the topic of 'Objects in Action' (volume 4). Several of the authors published in these issues are already cited here in other venues.

relations and things (cf. Collins, 1985; Galison, 1997; Gieryn, 1999; Goodwin, 1994; Knorr Cetina, 1999; Knorr Cetina & Mulkay, 1983; Knorr Cetina, 1981; Latour, 1987; Latour & Woolgar, 1979; Lynch, 1985; Myers, 1990; Pauwels, 2006; Pickering, 1984; Star, 1995).

According to MacKenzie (1996a), sociologists have a great deal to say about the technical properties of artefacts. Technological objects can be constituted in different ways because they have ‘interpretive flexibility’ (Pinch & Bijker, 1989), are ‘affiliative objects’ (Suchman, 2005), and humans mobilize objects in social interaction, using material objects as social links (Strum & Latour, 1999). The artificial environments humans create thus sustain certain forms of interaction. As demonstrated by Suchman (1987) in the development of a copy machine and Hofmann (1999) in designing a word processing program, technical artefacts are productive of social behaviour and competencies, but can also be misused in unanticipated ways.

Ethnomethodological studies in the sociology of science (notably Garfinkel, et al., 1981; Knorr Cetina, 1999) also describe the extraordinarily complex situated work required to produce knowledge about material objects. Pre-existing knowledge does not merely ‘emerge’ from material objects to be ‘discovered’ by scientists, but rather scientists (along with technicians, funding bodies, and administrators) actively craft this knowledge in and through social interactions, which can include *unfolding* the features of objects, *framing* objects by considering them in light of other results, and *convoluting* objects by working them in with existing theories (Knorr Cetina, 1999: 71-78). In this process, scientific practice is itself delineated and shaped by material objects, and discourse is an ‘interpretive resource’ used to describe this observed reality (Barnes, 1983). The codes and conventions of science are literally drawn on and performed as needed in the laboratory inscription process. As Knorr Cetina (1999) describes, culture is derivative from these processes, the result of the self-articulation of systems and identity formations that structure and learn from themselves, not society.

The situated study of epistemic cultures and technological development demonstrates that actors use the resources provided by a particular occasion to construct their action’s developing purpose and intelligibility. This results in what Suchman (1987) terms the ‘mutual intelligibility’ of actions produced by collaborative work with material resources, discourses, and orientations. Moreover, this work is distributed (Star, 1995), and organized through common reference to particular ‘boundary objects’ that individuals in a

community of practice use as common points of orientation to align differing interests (Star & Griesemer, 1989).

Latour (1987; 1992; 2005) and Callon (1986) developed actor-network theory as a grounded theory from the sociology of science because existing models of mediation, which emphasize social forces, could not give a social explanation of the hard facts of science. Instead, scientific activity demonstrates the need for sociologists to examine the role of objects in their own making. As observed by Collins and Yearly (1992), science studies that look only at human accounts of the behaviour of non-humans privilege these accounts as scientific ‘truth’. Instead, actor-network theory sees mediation as the all-encompassing process of simultaneously producing, changing, and transforming both the artistic object and its audience at any given point in time. Rather than positing the existence of the ‘social’ and working to see how it acts in situations of artistic mediation, actor-network theory sees the social as the end product of the close study of associations made by actors. Actors are not made to act by codes or conventions, but rather by others; action is dislocated. Performance is a central component of actor-network theory, as the socially-situated action that develops connections between materials and symbolic resources, and because researchers do not see the social as ‘already made’, they need to ‘treasure all of the traces that manifest the hesitations actors themselves feel about the “drives” that make them act’ (Latour, 2005: 47). In order to break away from more figurative sociology that sees the actor as an all-knowing, autonomous figure, Latour proposes the term *actant*, to represent all humans, objects, etc., that come to bear on one another in any given situation and that have non-objective consequences for mediation. In actor-network theory, object-interactions go both ways; as Akrich (1992) describes, artefacts are also shaped in and through their use.

Scholars in the sociology of music (cf. Gomart & Hennion, 1999; Hennion, 1993, 2007), and more recently in the sociology of the visual arts (cf. Becker, 2006; Gielen, 2008), were quick to embrace the possibilities of this more action-oriented approach to mediation as a way to open the black box of the artwork described above. Here, artworks are ‘actants’, active parts of any situation, and not just a ‘hapless bearers of symbolic projection’ (Latour, 2005: 10). This is not to say that objects ‘cause’ action, but it does recognize that they have an existence beyond that of a blank slate. They are a backdrop for action and part of their own mediation. As the sociology of music has grown to incorporate

this paradigm for understanding artistic reception and meaning making (cf. Hennion & Latour, 1993), it has forged new ground in the sociology study of artistic mediation.

### 2.2.3 *The sociology of music*

Informed by work in science and technology studies, select studies in the reception of music have looked in depth at the musical encounter as an experience of mediation. As Hennion (1993) explores in depth, the true understanding of mediation is not the relationships between actors and organizations that separate art and society, but rather the physical, situated encounter with artistic forms as it has meaning to the actors involved. Instead of viewing aesthetic effect as the outcome of a tacitly understood convention or a successfully interpreted code prepared as such by skilled mediators, these studies offer an alternative account of the ways in which subjects may experience explicit cultural artefacts, such as music.

Building on Gibson's (1986 [1979]) concept of affordance, DeNora (2003) explores music as a ground for action and conception, in which musical affect is contingent on the particular circumstances of its reception and appropriation. While reception has always been seen to play a role in an artwork's production — witness the role of Becker's conventions or Bourdieu's (1993 [1968]) explanation of aesthetic affect as a 'mediate deciphering operation' — DeNora (2000: 33) describes musical effect as a product of 'human-music interaction'. Aesthetic materials provide parameters (stylistic, physical, or conventional) that *afford* particular dimensions of experience; they configure their visitors by affording particular modes of agency through their use (cf. Zimmermann, 2007). Here, music is literally a space for 'work' (DeNora, 1986), as agency takes shape through and with reference to musical media. Individuals and groups respond to and activate particular properties of music in situations of action, something that can involve emotional involvement and unexpected orientations. The question of mediation then is not to ignore or 'decode' the properties of the artistic work, but rather to examine how particular properties become salient in the hands of agents in certain moments or circumstances.

Inspired by work in actor-network theory, Gomart and Hennion (1999) describe how the power of music — its ability to 'take over' its listeners — is linked to the ways that those listeners prime themselves, their environments, and their music selections for

maximum effect. Through these activities, individuals engage in the process of crafting a situation in which explicit culture (their music) would be empowered to act ‘over’ them (e.g., to heighten or alter mood and bodily processes — such as levels of excitement or musical ‘passion’ — and therefore influence their social orientation). ‘Mediation is a turn towards what emerges, what is shaped and composed, what cannot be reduced to an interaction of causal objects and intentional persons’ (Gomart & Hennion, 1999: 226). Key here is the focus on the unanticipated and emergent activities arising from aesthetic engagement.

Other studies demonstrate the extent to which artistic forms, via the way people orient to them emotionally, play an active role as a driver of action. This includes the role of music in social movements (cf. Bergh, 2007; Eyerman & Jamieson, 1998), health (cf. Aigen, 2005; Ansdell, 1995; Radley & Bell, 2007), and community (cf. Finnegan, 1989). The study of *musicking* (cf. Cook, 2003; Small, 1998) also demonstrates that music can be seen as practical action not contained in a static artefact. Similarly, Atkinson (2006) and Warren (2001) note that musical texts, in particular operatic and musical scores, respectively, can be organizers and drivers of concerted action. Additionally, Hanrahan’s (2000) study of the temporal dimensions of music demonstrates that while musical production occurs within limited conditions (conventions, vocabularies, and ‘contingencies’), these conditions are always in flux and redefined by each new musical piece.

This work demonstrates, as Hennion (2007) points out, the profound difference between the empirical study of *intermediaries between* artworks and audiences, and *mediation* itself. Artworks and built environments for the artistic encounter are not passive intermediaries transmitting encoded knowledge between artists, viewers/audiences, and the world but rather are active *mediators* of this encounter based on how they may create unanticipated circumstances or appeal to the senses or emotion. Drawing on Latour (2005: 39), ‘Mediators transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry’. As music, environments, and individuals transform, rather than simply filter, experience, codes and conventions can themselves be altered through the mediation process. Moreover, as Hennion (1989 [1983]) demonstrates in his study of the popular musical producer as mediator, working in this sensory-rich environment means that the producer’s work is composed less of rule-following and more of laboratory-style experimentation with available resources and conventions. While studies of reception and

amateur practices in music have driven this second, dynamic approach to artistic mediation, there is increasing interest in such an approach in the sociology of the visual arts.

#### 2.2.4 *Object-oriented work in the visual arts*

While not drawing directly on concepts of affordances or actor-network theory, some qualitative work on reception in the visual arts in everyday life does paint mediation as a situated, grounded practice. For example, using in-home informal interviews about the objects on people's walls, Halle (1993) and Belcher (1997) concluded that audiences select (consciously or not) images and negotiate the physical properties of the image to attribute to them meanings that resonate with their current lives and beliefs. Similarly, although Wuthnow (2001) does not treat artworks as direct enablers of action, he does describe how individuals achieve states of creativity or transformation while doing artistic things. Artistic forms create 'ambiences' for particular behaviour or situations (Wuthnow, 2003). In his exploration of 'iconic consciousness', Alexander (2008) goes one step further in trying to identify the role of the materiality of an artwork in its own mediation. For Alexander, the experience of meaning and emotion in relation to a material object results from one's tactile experience with it, an unconscious experience of being 'drawn into its expressive texture' (Alexander, 2008: 10). Yet, there is little investigation of what this 'drawing into' process involves, and like Halle (1993), the relationship between art and individual seems to model existing codes *ex post facto* rather than investigate the cases of their constitution.

It was a student of Latour, Albena Yaneva, who first drew directly on actor-network theory to examine mediation in the visual arts. Yaneva (2001; 2003a; 2003b) uses an ethnographic analysis of museum installation to demonstrate the agency of art objects to shape their own mediation. As Yaneva (2003b) states, exhibition installations are an opportunity to see people experimenting with objects, which likens them to studies of the scientific laboratory. Moreover, Yaneva demonstrates that objects guide the manner in which they are installed, and in the process, museum conventions are made visible through the way they are invoked to edit artworks.

As de la Fuente (2007) describes, calls to return the study of artworks to the sociology of the arts have grown in recent years. The value of this developing approach is demonstrated by Becker's (2006) most recent work, in which he shifts attention from the

artwork's context of production to 'the principal of the fundamental indeterminacy of the artwork' as an ongoing process wherein people engage with artworks in different ways at particular occasions. A similar call to arms is made by Ducret (2006). Methodologically speaking, it is important to study the work '*as people view it*' (Becker, et al., 2006: 5, his emphasis). This 'genetic approach' re-introduces the artwork into sociological analysis through a focus on how it is made by art world actors in an organized world which constrains and attaches certain motivations to available choices. This cannot tell sociology the 'secrets' of the artwork, but it can shed light on why people do things in certain ways and what the likely effects on the audience might be (Becker, 2006). While this process-based approach to artistic production has studied the work of the artist (cf. Jarvis, 2007), it has not been applied to the detailed exhibition-making practice of the curator.

Actor-network theory has since been readily adopted by scholars to examine the reception of artworks in museums in a dynamic manner (cf. Gielen, 2008; Loer, 2005; Saurier, 2008). In particular, these scholars move beyond the 'background features' of the museum (such as class, institutional roles, production, and consumption) to focus on museum presentation and the *how* of people's interactions with art. In his study of the audiences for contemporary art in Italy, Cossi (2004) notes that the spatial layout of exhibitions and the plastic properties of contemporary artworks cause publics to interact in significant ways, such that members of the public actually become the 'container' of the work of art or exhibition. Visitors are themselves part of the 'occasioning devices' that prompt the meaning-making process. Furthermore, video-based and ethnographic explorations of visitor interactions with displays or exhibitions demonstrates how meaning making emerges through their interactions in the museum space (cf. Atkins, et al., 2009; Heath & vom Lehn, 2004; Jansen, 2008; Sager, 2007; Smith & Wolf, 1996; Van Moer, 2007; Vom Lehn, et al., 2001a; Vom Lehn, et al., 2001b), as well as how visitor movements are shaped by the physical design of the gallery (cf. Bourdeau & Chebat, 2001; Melton, 1933). As vom Lehn, et al. (2001b) document, visitors provide frames of interpretation for each other to access the exhibition or artwork; in place of Bourdieu's encoded 'pure aesthetic', artistic mediation is largely governed by a 'practical aesthetic', the unique aesthetic experience manufactured in interaction on the spot. Other studies have seen this same meaning making emerging in visitor conversation about exhibitions (cf. Bruder & Ucock, 2000). This visitor reception research sees the art object as the center of a network of communications in a microethnographic, not institutional, sense.

Object-oriented sociological research in the arts and music focuses on pragmatic work in specific studies of action. In particular, these studies move away from general reception studies, which only interrogate what individuals think about art, to more grounded consumption or use studies, examining what individuals do with particular art forms. This approach is reminiscent of studies of subcultures or youth cultures (cf. Hebdige, 1979; Willis, 1990). Studies of ‘audiencing’ (cf. Hall, 1980; Moores, 1993) also demonstrate that despite the meaning given to an artwork in its production, audiences may decode the image in different ways based on their position and past cultural knowledge acquisition (Rose, 2001). This look at how artworks are mobilized in action is complementary to the growing importance of a sociology ‘of artworks’ (and ‘aesthetics’) (cf. Esquénazi, 2007; Halle, forthcoming; Le Quéau, 2007; Majastre & Pessin, 2001) and the critical cultural examination of the museum space.

### *2.2.5 Museum and cultural studies*

As many have observed, museums provide the highest kind of institutional approval available in the contemporary art world (cf. Becker, 1963; Heinich, 1998c; Moulin, 1992; Zolberg, 1990). This sorting is more critical in the case of contemporary art because it has not been preceded by a history of eliminations, but actually participates in the creation of art history (Bernier, 2002; Gamboni, 1997: 319; Kramer, 1973; Moulin, 1992; Rosenberg, 1972). The museum, of course, is not a neutral body, but is a social institution reflected in the cultural politics of differentiation (Bennett, 1995; Bourdieu, 1979).

Studies of the mass media have long embraced the notion of framing in order to describe how, after McLuhan (2003), the medium through which a text or object is presented has concrete implications for shaping its message. In this case, the museum directs the interaction between the creator of the aesthetic experience and the person who experiences it (Gumpert, 1987). Work in cultural and museum studies demonstrates, similarly, that the physical expanse of the museum organizes and gives meanings to artworks in a performative way (cf. Bal, 1996; Bennett, 1995; Bernier, 2002; Crimp, 1993; Duncan, 1995; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Valéry, 1931). While this has always been true in ethnographic and historical museums (cf. Clifford, 1988; Geertz, 1993 [1976]; Karp & Lavine, 1991; MacDonald, 1997; Nayar, 2006), contemporary conditions have brought this

to the fore because in contemporary art the museum is the context of the origin of the artwork (Barker, 1999; Bernier, 2002; Buskirk, 2005; Crimp, 1993; Davallon, 1999; Harding, 1997; Staniszewski, 1998). The result is what Bernier (2002: 97) terms ‘the culture of exhibition’, because it is the physical exhibition of the artistic work (its packaging by the museum) which produces its value. Artistic objects are, as Raymond Williams (1981: 131) points out, signalled by occasion and place.

Moreover, the white cube is a ‘technology of aesthetics’, wherein the gallery space ‘quotes things’ and ‘makes them art’, in the same manner as the technology of the picture frame indicates the value of the image contained within (O’Doherty, 1999 [1976]). For this reason, O’Doherty (1999 [1976]: 24) notes that much more information is needed about hanging, ‘The way pictures are hung makes assumptions about what is offered. Hanging editorializes on matters of interpretation and value and is unconsciously influenced by taste and fashion. Subliminal cues indicate to the audience its department’. The main defining element of the institutionalization of high art is the isolation of different artworks from each other, what DiMaggio (1982b) and Bourdieu (1993 [1987]) note subliminally indicates the ‘pure aesthetic’. Just as the museum establishes its own historical accounts of canonized artworks, the museological space is also a framework through which to control and exact particular types of cultural readings and understandings; it establishes viewing conditions with an invisible regime of control. As Carrier (1987) points out, for instance, modern display conventions limit the nature and media of artworks that can be effectively exhibited. The literature in museum studies reminds the sociologist that spaces carry meaning as well as accounts, objects, and actions.

This brief presentation of object-oriented work shows that the seriousness with which scholars account for the presence of aesthetic materials and tastes in any art world has important repercussions for describing a vision of implicit culture as either weak or robust. Taken cumulatively, a sociology of mediation based on object-interactions (be it through mobilizations of the built environment, affordances, or actor-network theory) allows sociologists of the arts to carve out a unique research space alongside art history. In this space, sociology can examine meaning not as the textual analysis of artistic works or output of pre-scripted actions, but rather as the outcome of interactionist meaning making between subject, object, and a plurality of other factors. More importantly, the resulting conception of implicit culture here does not see culture as scripted by codes and

conventions, but instead sees culture as a theory of action. Rather than focus on the accountings of action (be they verbal or written), work in this area examines objects, activities, and encounters as they are transformed into discursive artefacts, either through conversation, accounts, or scientific reports. This focus on culture ‘in action’ allows sociologists to begin to ask and answer questions about how various elements of cultural experience — which may include personal histories, institutional norms, values, and local ecologies — are drawn into sense-making activities.

To bring the sociological study of the arts into the arena of action, sociology needs to navigate the methodological minefield of organizational studies and survey methodologies and re-focus on the *artistic object* and what individuals actually *do* with it. Studies in artistic consumption, in contrast to production, have focused more on the material nature of this interaction, through such techniques as in-home interviews with informants looking at their art (Belcher, 1997; Halle, 1993) or listening to their music (Hennion, 2001), real-time commentary via personal microphones (DeNora, 2000), or video recordings of public interactions with exhibitions (Vom Lehn, et al., 2001b). Here, the temporal and material nature of research inquiry is important in understanding what goes on between individuals and artworks. By bringing work from microethnography and the sociologies of science, music, and museums into dialogue with the sociology of the arts, this thesis aims to both unpack the practical work of mediation but also address methodological gaps in the literature about the ‘how’ of artistic mediation.

### **2.3 Conclusion: Towards a meaningful production of culture**

In what is often cited as the founding text in the sociology of the arts, White and White (1965) describe not only a shift from artistic recognition as granted by the jury at the Royal Academy’s annual Salon to a decentralized system of dealers and critics looking for the next ‘big thing’, but also a general move from ‘canvasses to careers’, to quote the titular phrase. The ideological focus of the Salon was on the painting or canvas as an individual entity, while the emergent gallery-based institutional system was built around speculation surrounding the worth of the artist, as judged by art critics. If indeed, the modern and contemporary art world is built more around the promotional figure of the artist than the aesthetic transcendence of the artwork (see especially Crow, 1996; Heinich, 1997a;

Heinich, 2005), it should not be surprising that sociology followed this development in focus and methodology. Yet, as I have shown, a focus only on the organizational, habitual, and conventional dimensions of mediation neglects much of the meaning-making process, particularly as it is carried out in concert with environments and aesthetic materials.

Although the domination of the production of culture approach in the understanding of artistic mediation has effectively separated issues of support from issues of creativity and meaning, throwing out this perspective is a case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. In a reply to their critics, Peterson and Anand (2004) claim that the production perspective is necessary to understanding the constructed nature of collective representations, values, and other aspects of culture, *not* that the perspective is sufficient for a full understanding. Past work in the sociology of the arts is invaluable for demonstrating that meaning making is a product of individual values and collective action, which are both inseparable from organizational systems. The question remains, however, as to what role the artwork plays in its own mediation and how practices are deployed in the framing process.

I propose a study in the sociology of the arts (as explicit culture) which combines the two approaches to mediation presented here by examining how curators, acting as gatekeeping intermediaries in social worlds, themselves engage in individual, situated practices of mediation that are relational in the sense of being object-based, performative, and emergent. After all, so-called ‘producers’ of artistic works are also their first ‘consumers’ (Hennion, 1989 [1983]). As demonstrated through studies of epistemic cultures, in particular, meaning making can draw on a variety of orientations and repertoires not ‘coded’ for in the conventions of a social world. As ‘knowledge-producing societies’, the arts and sciences have much in common for the interests of sociology (Gaudez, 2007). Similarly, my goal is to do for art worlds what these studies did for science, to follow the art and what people do with it in order to examine the processes by which knowledge is discovered and meaning is made. On an implicit cultural level, this study can illuminate the value of Becker’s conventions and Bourdieu’s aesthetic coding operations by demonstrating the grounded and process-oriented ways in which these tacit conventions are born, communicated, and mobilized in situations of action. In this way, sociology can begin moving towards a meaningful production of culture.

### 3. AN AESTHETIC METHODOLOGY

So there we both are, this presumed reader and me, just having a nice little zizz of mutually affirmed affection, when in creeps this American guy, sits down, and starts watching. The first click of his ballpoint and, I tell you, we didn't get another wink.

(Bennett, 1998: 488)

Mediation in visual art worlds has been largely studied through ethnography (Becker, 1982), historical text and document analysis (Alexander, 1996b; Moulin, 1967; White & White, 1965), and personal interviews (Crane, 1987; Gielen, 2007; Heinich & Pollak, 1989a; Moulin & Quemin, 1993, 2001; Octobre, 1996a,b, 1999a,b, 2001). As demonstrated in Section 2.1, large scale surveys of taste treat artistic objects as little more than social markers (cf. Bourdieu, 1979), while ethnographic research reduces the artwork to an ordinary object mobilized in social action (cf. Becker, 1982; Heinich, 1998c). Although the semiotic approach to art amends these shortcomings by taking art's social meaning into account (cf. Alexander, 2008; Clifford, 1988; Wagner-Pacifici, forthcoming; Witkin, 1997), it fails to examine how individuals orient to the artwork based on this meaning. Sociology's working repertoire of methodologies is responsible, thus, for excluding the contextual particularity of the artwork from the sociology of the arts.

Indeed, studies reliant on 'conventions' or the 'code' intimate that art seems hard or unnecessary to talk about, as if it is beyond discourse. As Geertz (1993 [1976]: 94) describes, 'It speaks, as we say, for itself: a poem must not mean but be; if you have to ask what jazz is you are never going to get to know'. Aesthetic knowledge is unique from any other kind of knowledge because it is sensorially embodied, and is ultimately practical not intellectual. I sketch here a research design focused on the close examination of the aesthetic dimensions of mediation in the process of planning an exhibition of contemporary art (Acord, 2006). Through incorporating visual methodologies borrowed from the sociologies of science, education, and technology, I attempt to grasp what is often not available in the lines of the written text or in the explicit pronouncement of conventional knowledge. In exploring the often embodied, situational, and nonverbal influences on professional decision making, these research methods are designed to interrogate on a grounded level those individuals, practices, and contexts implicated in the creation of regimes of meaning. In doing so, these methodological tools also help to unpack what is

commonly grouped together as the ‘implicit’, developing a more nuanced understanding of the ‘tacit’ in knowledge production.

### 3.1 Studying framing in action

Wuthnow (1987) describes four different approaches to cultural analysis: subjective, structural, dramaturgic, and institutional. These are outlined in Table 1 below. While work in the production of culture has focused on the institutional approach, examining culture as the distribution of resources required by actors, the problem of meaning-creation requires subjective and dramaturgic approaches to cultural analysis, which envision culture as the meanings found in individuals’ beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and values, and their interaction with social structure.

<i>Approach</i>	<i>Culture is:</i>	<i>Culture defined by:</i>	<i>Research methods</i>
<i>Subjective</i>	<i>Subjective, mental construction</i>	<i>Individual beliefs, values, attitudes and opinions</i>	<i>Hermeneutics, exploratory tool</i>
<i>Structural</i>	<i>Objectified entity</i>	<i>Boundaries and categories, that maintain distinctions between moral codes</i>	<i>Interview information is discourse</i>
<i>Dramaturgic</i>	<i>Communicative</i>	<i>Interaction with social structure, expressive dimension of social relations</i>	<i>Look at rituals, ideologies, and symbolic acts</i>
<i>Institutional</i>	<i>Actors and organizations</i>	<i>Actors that require resources and how these resources are distributed</i>	<i>The production of culture approach</i>

**Table 1: Summary of Wuthnow (1987), compiled by author**

Methodologically speaking, a more subjective and dramaturgic approach directs the researcher to focus on the particular ritual and communicative acts through which individuals experience and express these beliefs and values. But the challenge here is to see the interaction of these beliefs with social structure in physical situations of action.

As Mahon (2000) demonstrates, anthropological and ethnographic examinations of the artistic industries provide evidence of how discursive and material practices are changed and reproduced by situating these productions in ongoing work, while paying attention to institutional structures and power struggles. They provide a window onto the inherent complexity of action necessary to perform ‘organized’ environments (cf. Atkinson, 2006; Law & Mol, 2002). In particular, as DeNora (2000: x) notes, there are so-called

‘small details’ illuminated by ethnographic research; ethnographic methodologies bring emotions, feelings and presumptions to the surface of discourse. The value of participant observation and ethnography has been documented by many (cf. Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Spradley, 1980). Ethnographic studies satisfy three important methodological demands for the study of culture in action: they provide an empirical approach, they open the researcher to items or actions that cannot be codified at time of study, and they ground observed phenomenon in the field of study. In particular, the tradition of institutional ethnography guides researchers ‘to begin in the work and practical reasoning of actual individuals as the matrix of the everyday world’ (Smith, 2005: 165). The demonstrated values of ethnographic work led me to choose this method as the foundation of my research design.

Every situation of work is unique, requiring distinct competencies and adjustments on the part of the researcher. Successful naturalistic inquiry, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), relies on the ability to approach informants on their own level. In the curation of contemporary art, informants work at a highly visual level. Such a study, then, requires a return to visual research methods and the unique forms of data they can generate (cf. Pole, 2004).

As Ball and Smith (1992: 55) point out in their discussion of visual data, people’s experience of the seen world is culturally shaped and socially mediated; as a result, to be analytically concerned with experience is to treat seriously what people are aware of and notice as part of their everyday world. The challenge for the researcher is to find a way to follow these trails because, as Spradley (1980: 11) observes, they often refer to practices that informants cannot talk about in direct ways. The main methodological obstacles to unpacking the realm of visual cognition are the difficulty of getting ‘into the heads’ of the practitioners (Heinich, 1998c: 255; Hutchins, 1995: 131), the difficulty of conversing with ‘aesthetic muteness’ (Taylor, 2002), and the possibility that the ‘partial opaqueness’ of visual decision making may be exploited by informants to give their work its professional character (Goodwin, 2000: 1508). Although language (or institutional discourse) may always obscure experiential work processes (Smith, 2005: 156), this may be exaggerated in the case of curators’ visual work.

A close to the ground, visually-driven data collection program is one important way to address and overcome these obstacles. ‘Members know very well what they’re doing, even if they don’t articulate it to the satisfaction of the observers’, notes Latour (2005: 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: 48). Thus, an investigation into the tacit dimensions of action requires not only a study of the contextual cues and institutional codes to which people orient, but also a focus on the previously ‘unseen’: *how* people orient to them through physical procedures. Several strong studies have paved the way in examining the visual dimensions of professional work in a deeply ethnographic manner.

In order to unpack decision making as it unfolds in a naturally-occurring situation, I turn to research in microsociology and microethnography that incorporates the visual elements of this work. Microethnography locates the foundations of social organization, culture, and interaction at the micro-level of the moment-by-moment development of human activities (Streeck & Mehus, 2005). It examines the sequential emergence of talk and action through interactional events, often (but not always) via the frame-by-frame analysis of video recordings of these activities. Small-group microethnography has been used to study a variety of work practices, including air traffic controllers (Suchman, 1993; Vaughan, 2002), school counsellors (Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1963; Erickson & Shultz, 1982; Mehan, 1979), architectural design instructors (Schön, 1987), lab scientists (Pauwels, 2006), archaeologists (Goodwin, 1994, 2000), biscuit promoters (Streeck, 1996), and museum visitors (Atkins, et al., 2009; Vom Lehn, et al., 2001b). These studies look not only at individuals’ behaviour, but also at the material environment of action and the patterned activities of the organization to understand how social actors (as organizational personnel) produce strategies to deal with scenarios and interpret action. In so doing, microethnography examines the interaction of the culturally-provided categories that actors bring to any situation and the new information that emerges therein, both of which influence their action. Building on the strong foundation laid by ethnography, I used strategically placed video microethnography to capture particularly salient moments of curatorial decision making in the exhibition planning process, such as selecting artworks for exhibition, designing visitor aids, planning the installation, and the installation process itself.

As Bryman (1988: 47) explains, it is not uncommon for participant observers to use a wide variety of tools and methods for corroboration, following up on leads, and observing all relevant situations and processes which may otherwise be missed. Similarly, my

research design employs a variety of methods to process the video data collected during ethnographic fieldwork. As I will describe below, these include video-elicitation interviews with the curators involved in the ethnography, visual interviewing in the exhibition space with additional curators at other institutions, and the close analysis of visual materials produced in the course of exhibition planning. In what follows, I document the process of setting up and gaining access to my research sites, carrying out different facets of the research, analyzing research data, and reflecting on the implications of aesthetic research methods for the researcher-informant relationship.

### **3.2 Setting up the research**

#### *3.2.1 The pilot study*

I carried out two pilot studies prior to embarking on the full program of ethnographic fieldwork in August, 2005. The first study consisted of an interview with the museum liaison and registrar at a major UK contemporary art gallery. In the decentralized art world ushered forth by the avant-garde artistic movements of the twentieth century, galleries became responsible for the discovery and promotion of new talent (Bystryn, 1989; Crane, 1987; Moulin, 1967). There are many routes for exposure in the 21<sup>st</sup> century contemporary art world, and curators today exercise more freedom in dealing directly with young artists outside of gallery relationships. Yet, galleries still play an important function in relation to the museum by lending artworks, advising museums on the work of artists they represent, mediating between museum curators and private collectors, providing financial and other support for exhibitions, and commissioning artworks and hosting events surrounding the exhibition (Bellet, 2001; Moulin, 1992; Moureau & Sagot-Duvaurox, 2006; Quemin, 2002a; Vander Gucht, 1990). It is with this in mind that I met with individuals at the gallery to discuss the inner workings of London's contemporary art scene and explore existing systems and tensions in the marketing and exhibition of contemporary art.

The second pilot study was an opportunity to test the methodological apparatus I designed to carry out video-based microethnographic research. I engaged in participant observation at a public-funded regional contemporary art space in the UK, during the

installation of a monographic exhibition. The director and curator graciously welcomed my participation in the installation and allowed me to test my various interview instruments, as did the artist and artist's assistants. This 'dress rehearsal' of my research methods allowed me to ensure that I was collecting valid and replicable data on my research question, refine my techniques for visual and audio data collection, and unearth the preliminary concepts that would develop throughout my full research study.

### *3.2.2 Sample*

As I will discuss further in Section 4.2, there is no singular definition of a curator or curating and no way to create an all-encompassing curatorial typology. Curators conceive of and carry out their jobs differently in ways that are dependent on the type of institution in which they work, their position in that institution, the type of exhibition they are planning (e.g., a monographic versus a group show), the personality and prestige of the artist(s) with whom they are working, their personal trajectories and training, and their individual curatorial personality. As a result, I sought to capture a range of contemporary curatorial practice in my research sample, from which to examine the similarities across the emerging profession.

In its attempt to span a new field of practice, this research is inherently comparative. I chose two European cities as fieldwork sites, not because they represent two distinct curatorial cases (although there certainly are commonalities linked to local artist communities and organizational funding structures), but rather because they are both important bases in the international contemporary art world. While New York birthed and dominated the contemporary art world after World War II, the art world has become vastly more international in past decades. Yet, Quemin (2002b) demonstrates that certain 'prescriptive' countries still dominate the international art scene. Currently, European cities, galleries, and museums play an important role in the dissemination of contemporary art. The world congregates around the yearly Venice Biennale and Art Basel, the premier international art fair. Due in great part to their international galleries, centralized geographic presence, and prestigious museums, these two cities represent excellent microcosms of the international contemporary art world. These cities also offered the convenience of being easily accessible from Exeter.

As I had discovered in my pilot study at the regional contemporary art center, I needed to learn more about the institutional dynamics of curation in order to understand curators' agency in planning exhibitions. Therefore, I based my study on two four-month ethnographic residencies, the first from August-November 2005, and the second from December 2005-March 2006. I chose these institutions for four reasons. First, they offered me internship positions as a curatorial assistant, while the other institutions I contacted in those cities were unable to give me permanent space. Second, both have the common mission of hosting temporary exhibitions of contemporary art, versus curating permanent collections. Third, both exhibition departments are located in larger, multidisciplinary institutions. Fourth, and final, I had the great pleasure of working with curators with internationally active profiles. The choice of these two fieldwork sites allowed me to focus on the common dilemmas faced by curators working in established institutions, and their comparatively smaller size ensured that I would have access to every dimension of the exhibition-making process. These periods of time, while short, allowed me to follow an exhibition in development through its installation and opening. The hands-on experience of working with these two curators also provided a window onto the larger contemporary art world.

While embedded in this ethnographic research, I conducted interviews with thirty-five other curators representing various institutions in each city, in an attempt to extend my ethnographic findings and probe their reliability. I constructed this interview sample using a mix of quota sampling, snowball sampling, and opportunistic or convenience sampling. I first laid a net over each city's contemporary art world and identified the most influential institutions of contemporary art in that city. I did this through a mix of objective and subjective measures. First, I searched the exhibition listings in the press from 2000-2005, using national versions of Lexis Nexis, as well as the main cultural magazines/circulars. I defined institutions as influential based on the frequency and size of articles written about exhibitions at the institution over the past year, and sent an informational letter and interview request to a curatorial representative from the major public institutions of contemporary art, leading galleries, private foundations, and alternative art spaces. This method, however, did not capture the notoriety of independent curators not permanently attached to an institution. To sample this population, I relied on snowball sampling, asking informants for recommendations of additional curators in the area, as well as opportunistic sampling, networking with curators at gallery openings and other functions. This sampling

technique resulted in curators from a mix of exhibition types and spaces across each city's contemporary art world.

Variety in a research sample allows the researcher to account for a wide variance in independent variables identified as central to the analysis and preserve several avenues of explanation (Peters, 1998). The research presented in this thesis focuses not on the differences (and explanations for those) in the research sample, but rather gains strength from elaborating on the similarities. The data and examples given throughout were carefully chosen, out of many others *just like them*, to illustrate core points and arguments that emerged again and again from the data. Although curating is a highly indexical activity (related distinctly to time, place, and situation), the repeated themes that emerged from this diverse sample support the verifiability of my findings and give explanatory power to my research (cf. Nadai & Maeder, 2005).

A further level of comparison took place by situating my findings in the emerging body of work about the contemporary curatorial field. Many of these texts feature interviews conducted with, or memoirs written by, star curators of classical and modern art (cf. Heinich, 1995; Hiller & Martin, 2000, 2001; Kuh, 2006; Kuoni, 2001; Laclotte, 2004; Martin & Hiller, 2001; O'Neill, 2007; Obrist, 2006, 2009; Rosen, 2006; Tannenbaum, 1994). Although I did not conduct a textual analysis of these sources or mine them as data in the conventional sense, they provided a helpful background for my empirical research by suggesting particular themes, questions, and dilemmas in contemporary curatorial practice.

### 3.2.3 Access

It is notoriously difficult to gain access to elite populations because, simply put, they are in a comfortable position to say 'no'. Moreover, as explained by Moulin (1967: 3), hostility to the sociologist may be heightened among art worlds because its participants see the discipline 'as bent on depriving art of its sacred status'. While I certainly encountered this attitude among museum administrators and other bureaucrats, it was less prevalent among curators. Instead, curators see their own work as informed by scholarship in sociology and critical theory, something I will elaborate on in Section 4.2. In Thornton (2008), sociologist turned art writer Sarah Thornton describes her own struggle to gain entry into the exclusive and elite contemporary art world. While art world participants

generally perceive sociology as ‘gossip’, Thornton notes that she gained the confidence and support of her informants by emphasizing the *accuracy* of her statements. Similarly, I found that the curators with whom I worked were generous informants as well as formidable critics; they lent their time, space, and confidence to me, but demanded in return competent knowledge and rigorous involvement in the curatorial world.

Gaining access to my curatorial sample required first earning the trust of ‘gatekeeper’ informants, the head curators at each field site. In spring, 2005, I sent a letter of introduction to one. The exhibitions department there has a strong internship program, which it relies upon to provide important administrative support for its staff positions (curator, assistant curators, educational liaison, press liaison, and gallery manager). The curator replied favourably to my letter and arranged a meeting to confirm my position. As Janes (1969: 58-59) notes, ‘Much of the meaning of items of information secured by the participant observer rests in the community role phase between the field-worker and local persons with whom he is interacting’. At this center, I worked as a full-time curatorial assistant. My primary duties related to an exhibition that was mounted in fall and winter 2005. Given the smaller scale of the exhibitions department, I was assigned a myriad of different tasks including: getting mail and coffee, creating a lecture series to accompany the exhibition, condition-checking works as they arrived for exhibition, editing catalogue texts, compiling image files, organizing details of this and future exhibitions, liaising with galleries, and creating an institutional archive. In short, I had full access to every level of exhibition design and planning, although it was not appropriate for me to sit in on budget meetings with those outside the department. Two months into my time in this first field site, a curator there put me in touch with a colleague at my second field site, who helped me to secure a similar position.

It was not possible to secure an identical position as curatorial assistant at the second center. An alternative solution was devised as an ‘independent journalist’, and I was welcomed by the department to assist with mounting an exhibition in winter and spring 2006. My English skills proved helpful in facilitating editing and translations of exhibition texts, and my translating work also granted me informal access to several levels of the exhibition process. The larger size of this center (which employed curators, several assistant curators, press liaisons, several educational liaisons, multiple gallery managers, and countless administrative staff) and my own independent position meant that I did not have access to some of the formal planning meetings.

At both field sites, my presence was aided by the fact that both institutions had an active student research culture, through employing student interns or housing university-level educational programs. As a result, my presence as a research student/intern, and the constant questions I asked, was generally met in a positive manner.

Working as an intern at the first field site also helped me to access the rest of my curatorial sample in the city, as local curators played a role in the center's programming activities. In the second city, however, I had only a 20% response rate from my letters of introduction to external curators.<sup>19</sup> Curators are professional networkers, and therefore, are also each other's gatekeepers. Ultimately, the curators I worked with made phone calls on my behalf to ensure that I was able to speak to all of the desired individuals in my sample. But first, I spent months learning about their work and working with them on a variety of personal tasks, in addition to my duties as a curatorial assistant. These tasks supported their work as independent curators beyond the institution, and included everything from editing texts for external publication, to planning travel and making dinner reservations.

To summarize what was a lengthy and painstaking process of identifying and gaining access to an elite group of individuals, I was required to be both informed about curatorial practice and incredibly explicit about my own research aims. (See **Appendix A** for an English-language copy of the informational letter I sent to informants as a description of my work.) Once I earned the confidence of informants, however, they were incredibly generous and willing to speak with me frankly, and at length, often delaying later appointments to extend our interviews (which ranged from forty minutes to two hours in length). As I will describe below, they were also accommodating in my choice of visual research methods, as well as generous with their permissions to report on our discussions in this and other publications.

### **3.3 Carrying out the research I: Ethnography**

When I first asked one of the assistant curators at my first field site if I could attend the curators' regular exhibition planning meetings, s/he replied in an amused tone, 'We don't talk about anything interesting'. But, of course, what may not be interesting to the

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<sup>19</sup> In re-writing to these curators, I was advised to call myself an 'anthropologist' and augment my letter of introduction with a detailed abstract of my work, as seen in **Appendix B**.

informants is always interesting to the sociologist, and I had a small learning curve to overcome in my understanding of curatorial practice. Ethnographic study goes a significant way towards understanding the skilful craft-work that participants bring to bear when creating artistic work. This entails a great deal of passive acculturation and learning to recognize and observe these skills in the everyday work environment. In parallel to this learning process, as Oughabi (2005) observes, the ‘fresh eye’ of the ethnographer can also be valuable in studying artistic work as it allows the researcher to stay alert and curious, get everything directly from the informants’ mouths (versus employing one’s own ‘common sense knowledge’), and observe a wide variety of situations, contradictions, and discourses. I found both my gradual acculturation and ignorance to be useful tools throughout the ethnographic period.

I largely spent the first month of each ethnographic period learning about the local context of curatorial practice and the history of the artist and exhibition I was following, so that I would have an understanding of the milieu in which my informants were operating. It was common for curators to invite me along to particular events or tell me about things that they thought ‘would be interesting for me’. At this point, I was capturing moments on film and in fieldnotes whose significance I would not understand fully until much later. By the second month, I was better able to orient my research focus to activities of significance to the particular exhibition-planning process at hand.

Exhibition planning is a highly informal process. By this, I mean that much work unfolds in a spontaneous, unplanned fashion and curators often compose their responses to new developments as they go along. While there are a number of different tasks to complete in the lead-up to an exhibition, and there are decidedly firm deadlines for many of these (e.g., submitting exhibition materials to the publisher, and opening the exhibition to the public), the work needed to accomplish these tasks evolves based on new information and ongoing feedback from curatorial staff, artists, gallery managers, and others. Consequently, I attempted to remain as flexible as possible in my hours and data collection. I also learned quickly to never go home before anyone else, as evening and late afternoon moments often prompted informal reflection circles or social gatherings, which would prove crucial to setting out the course of work the following day.

I held dual roles during these ethnographic periods: as a researcher and as a curatorial intern. While my curatorial work was itself a valuable form of data collection, at times it limited my ability to be in other places and participate in other aspects of exhibition

planning. I sought to account for any form of ‘missing data’ by completing curatorial work in the off-hours, negotiating occasional breaks to attend other events in the planning process, and keeping up to date with other dimensions of planning through informal interviews and written documentation.

When observing, I paid special interest to pinpointing the physical resources curators drew on in making decisions and how they communicated these decisions to others, whether it be through a gesture, sketch, or email message. In my fieldnotes, I described not only what was happening in a particular situation, but *how* it was happening, including details of nonverbal communications. Moreover, I paid particular attention to comparing official documents, drafts of work, and off-the-cuff sketches created in the process of planning an exhibition.

Ethnographic interaction was also an important part of building rapport over the course of my research, particularly through informal moments, such as sorting mail or making coffee. The experience of being with informants around the clock, above all during the stressful period of the installation, provided opportunities for spontaneous moments of intimacy to occur. It was in these tired moments, when curators were exhausted and worn down, that the rush of decision making broke up temporarily and opportunities for reflection and informal interviewing emerged. I also found that such ‘informal’ moments could sometimes be invited through offering a batch of homemade chocolate chip cookies (a welcome break during stressful periods of planning or installation).

As Atkinson (2003) points out, the ethnographer does not have to be a critic or artistic agent or have specific knowledge, but he or she does have to be interested in the local aesthetics that inform the production of the art form. As a result, the sociologist gains a sort of lay expertise. The chief dilemma in ethnography, that of ‘going native’, was also a risk in my time as a curatorial intern. In particular, because of my extensive involvement with the exhibition-planning process, I became part of the work situation I hoped to study. Artists even began to use me as a mediator between themselves and the curators. Employing carefully the tools of the ethnographer, specifically fieldnotes and a research journal, allowed me to turn these ‘native’ moments into data for analysis.

At any given time, I carried a variety of items on my person: a large notebook for descriptive fieldnotes from meetings or office work, a pocket-sized notebook for shorter jottings while engaged in physical tasks (when the bulky larger notebook had to be left behind), a digital recorder, and a handheld digital video camera. I used different notations

to separate fieldnotes, quotes, theoretical memos, and personal observations in the same notebook (Silverman, 1993), and awoke every morning at six o'clock in order to spend two to three hours typing up my fieldnotes from the previous day's work (when I separated them into different documents: fieldnotes, research diary, and theoretical memos). I kept the digital recorder and video camera on hand at all times to record planning meetings, which may emerge spontaneously from coffee breaks or the arrival of an artist's CD of work, and chose to use one or the other based on what I judged to be most appropriate at the time.

While some curators were not distracted by the presence of a notebook or recorder (these items are also common in curatorial work), others took visible notice of my writing and would ask me what I was writing about or refer explicitly to my note-taking during their work. In wrestling with a piece of gallery equipment during an installation, one curator told me directly, 'This is for your notes...institutional curators don't usually do this'. As this excerpt demonstrates, while the explicit presence of a field notebook certainly disrupts the natural process, it can also be a tool to elicit particular 'museum codes'. Similarly, in one planning meeting, the artist joked about saying something secret, 'that [his/her] gallery wouldn't like to hear', and turned the recorder over on the table to emphasize the point. The recorder also came in handy for the assistant curators themselves on multiple occasions, for instance, when they asked me for the verbatim descriptions of an artwork given by the curator or artist for reference in writing the catalogue or other texts.

As Becker (1963) describes, close contact with people is necessary to present their interpretations of behaviour as reality. I believe that my participation as an active stakeholder in the high-stress events of curating fostered a level of trust and mutual appreciation that contributed to the validity of my data collection and analysis. My role as a participant observer was never 'nine-to-five', and I commonly interrupted or ended a work day by accompanying curators to exhibition premiers, external meetings, the local café, and even midnight studio visits. My role as a virtual shadow gave me the opportunity to witness curatorial work firsthand, and, more importantly, the 'debriefing' sessions following these activities (as I accompanied curators a small distance in a bus or on foot) made me party to their personal thoughts on the matter. As I will now describe below, using the example of the exhibition installation, capturing some of these informal and intimate moments on film is a powerful tool for the close study of curatorial action.

### *3.3.1 Producing data: Video and audio*

When I first informed one curator of my desire to videotape the exhibition installation, s/he replied, ‘I don’t understand why you’d want to tape that...all I do is stand in the middle of the room and point and say, “There, there, there” to put things up in it’. Yet, this is precisely the reason why video is such an effective tool to study embodied action (e.g., ‘pointing’) in a work setting. First, the main advantage of video in this context is that it allows the researcher to incorporate knowledge which is not verbally accessible (cf. Erickson & Shultz, 1982; Pink, 2003). It acknowledges the embodied basis of curatorial practice, as well as the fact that much tacit knowledge is exercised in a non-verbal way. Indeed, much of the curatorial work during the installation occurs through a language of gestures, focused staring, and repeated mind-changing, rather than explicit, verbal directions. This can be preserved on video for comparison and analysis, rather than possibly misinterpreted in fieldnotes. Second, the installation is a situation of work, often strictly compressed by a temporal deadline. There is little, if any, time in the installation to interrupt and ask questions. When I did interrupt one curator in the middle of an installation who appeared to be quietly looking around and thinking about something, the swift reply was ‘I’m not thinking about anything’. Rather than interrupt a highly sensitive and intensive work process, video preserves the ‘behaviour record’ of this work for later analysis and interrogation by the researcher and participating informants (Collier, 1967; Erickson & Shultz, 1982; Mehan, et al., 1986; Silverman, 1993). I will describe part of this analysis further below in the discussion of the video-elicitation interview.

At both field sites, I deployed visual methodologies over the course of the exhibition installation. Here, I employed digital video and real-time microphone streaming in order to trace aesthetic experiences as they unfolded in concert with materials and environments. As communication is cross-modal, spanning both gestures and language, I paired my video of the installation with a lapel microphone attached to a pocket-sized digital recorder worn by the curator during the installation. The microphone served the practical need of recording the curator’s speech when the video camera’s built-in microphone was too far away to pick up the dialogue. This combination allowed me to make explicit links between the visual and verbal knowledge that informants conveyed, and to preserve an in-progress record of the installation.

Generally, studies using video to capture movement and interaction position the video camera as a passive input device; it is often located in one corner of the room to ‘routinize’ it into the activity (Cicourel, et al., 1974). The spontaneity of exhibition planning and installation made this impossible. Instead, I used the video camera as a mobile tool of inquiry. As Goodwin (2000) describes, videotaping can be guided by the participants’ visual orientation to the setting, allowing the researcher to follow what they think is important with the camera (e.g., resources, materials, or gazes). In so doing, the researcher can follow the link-making process (cf. Latour, 2005). At times, curators demonstrated things for the camera to facilitate my understanding or even took the camera themselves to show an object of interest in more detail (cf. Pink, 2003). As I was told by one curator, ‘There’s no manual on how to install an exhibition; the only way to learn about installation practice is to follow me around and watch what I do’. Employed as unobtrusively as possible (i.e., at chest or hip height using the adjustable mini-screen to verify the shot), the video recorder represented a means of data collection already comfortable to some curators.<sup>20</sup> Video recording also provided important ‘feedback opportunities’ (cf. Pauwels, 2006; Pink, 2003; Prosser, 1997) for curators to provide structure or interpretation to the recording, which generated trust and rapport, and ensured that appropriate materials were being produced.

Although video was an integral tool for data collection and analysis in this research project, my great expectations were tempered by practical outcomes. To begin, carrying the video camera on my person meant that I had two imperfect options: first, to tape from across the room to capture the widest action possible, which felt generally awkward, and second, to tape nearer to the action as curators ‘showed’ me things, which made it difficult to capture a legible video still for presentation in the thesis. Moreover, as it was impossible to tape during the entirety of the installation (due to limitations in battery power, tape space, as well as the fact that I was there to help), I occasionally experienced the frustration (similarly felt by parents of young children) of narrowly missing the action I hoped to capture on tape. Finally, although I regularly tested and replaced my audio lapel microphone, it failed me at crucial moments during the installations. This was undoubtedly due to the fact that curators in these installations were moving around, bending over, and putting untold stresses upon the microphone’s connection to the recorder. Consequently, I

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<sup>20</sup> Videos with artists or curators are already seen as important parts of the art historical record and can be projected in exhibitions or transcribed for exhibition catalogues.

was unable to do a close, precise conversation analysis of installation feed in this thesis, but relied instead on my records of what was said as captured in fieldnotes and video.

### 3.4 Carrying out the research II: Interviews

The second major part of my research design consisted of interviews with forty-four curators of contemporary art. As described above, in addition to the nine curators and assistant curators at my field sites, I interviewed thirty-five external curators from other institutions in order to corroborate and further explore many of my emerging findings from the ethnographic fieldwork. Taken together, I conducted four genres of interview over the course of this research, which I will explain below.

<i>Interview Type</i>	<i>n=44</i>
<i>1. ethnographic only (field sites)</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>2. semi-structured, video/photo-elicitation</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>3. semi-structured, in exhibition space</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>4. semi-structured, no reference to exhibition</i>	<i>6</i>

**Table 2: Interview breakdown by method**

First, I conducted informal ethnographic interviews with all of the curatorial staff at both field sites over the course of doing ethnography (seven of these individuals were not interviewed again in a more structured setting). Second, I conducted sixteen semi-structured video- and photo-elicitation interviews with the head curators of both field sites and several external institutions, all concerning a specific exhibition. Third, I conducted fourteen semi-structured interviews in the gallery space of a specific exhibition with curators at external institutions. Fourth, I conducted six semi-structured interviews with other external curators for informational purposes, which were not related to a specific exhibition. As Heyl (2001) and Spradley (1979) describe the benefits of ethnographic interviewing in depth, I will focus here on the other genres of interviewing.

My semi-structured interview protocol, located in **Appendix B**, contains a series of questions. To begin, I gave curators free reign to tell me about their personal trajectory and orientation to curating. We then spoke in detail about their particular exhibition at hand, which was oriented at visual materials generated during the installation or a physical tour around the gallery space. (The fourth category of interview, which did not reference a

particular exhibition, excluded this category.) I concluded the interview by asking broader questions about the organizational aspects of their curatorial work.

For each question on the interview protocol (and subsequent follow-up questions on the issue), I endeavoured to ask ‘how’ questions to probe the process of reaching a certain conclusion, rather than asking ‘why’ or provoking curators to ‘account for’ their practice in a certain manner. This helped me to focus on the expressing (or how something is told), not the telling of it. Furthermore, this expressive act is necessarily focused on the artistic object and the specific interactional opportunities that it affords. By encouraging curators to tell me about the history of a particular belief or outcome, and the way that material possibilities conditioned these things, I sought to provoke their aesthetic intelligence rather than lay discourse. While my questions were generally of an exploratory nature, I also found that well-poised ‘leading questions’ could be used to test hypotheses or penetrate fronts (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). I did minimal editing of curators’ quotes included in this thesis in order to preserve the pauses and other speech patterns that formed part and parcel of speaking about the ineffable.

As seen in the following interview excerpt, curators commonly made sense of the tacit through practical examinations of experience, rather than speaking in the abstract.

[12-Line Interview Excerpt Removed]

Here, the curator identified curatorial conventions (such as labelling individual artworks and integrating them in an overarching narrative) only by contrasting them with the actual practice of what the artist did in this monographic exhibition. It also took the curator some time and narrative to come to the central point about the ‘tacit rules of exhibition making’. In this regard, this passage illustrates a common phenomenon observed during my research: curators, like Becker’s (1982) artists, understand conventional knowledge in deeply ingrained, highly practical ways, some of which may only be obvious after the fact. In discourse, conventions often function like strategies of action that curators draw on in real time as resources for meaning making (cf. Billig, 1992; Swidler, 2001). Yet, rather than seeing thinking as essentially formed in discourse, I am interested in how conventional thinking emerges from object interactions. This is closer to Willis’ (1990) formulation of grounded aesthetics, which locates the meaning of an object in the act of an object’s use. Speaking to curators while looking at the visual evidence of particular exhibitions provided a valuable method to link aspects of the material environment to conventional behaviour.

On some occasions, I also invited informants to create visual maps of the contemporary art world as a means of clarifying the role and networks of the curator of contemporary art. One of these maps is located in **Appendix D (Map 2)**. I found that engaging curators in this creative task encouraged them to avoid ready-made answers and take me on a more exploratory, first-person trip around the art world, as they narrated the particular constraints and opportunities they negotiate on a personal level (Bagnoli, 2009). As demonstrated clearly by Wilson-Kovacs (2004), visual maps demonstrate tacitly these important relationships and the curator's background knowledge, without the researcher explicitly asking for it. They also clarify ambiguous relationships and fuzzy knowledge by allowing for overlapping spatial relationships in the social world. This background knowledge of the curator's relationship to the contemporary art world acted as a backbone to the interview. I will now discuss in depth the benefits of engaging more visually-oriented research methods for discussing the development and installation of the exhibition in an interview setting.

#### *3.4.1 The video- and photo-elicitation interview*

Sociology has long understood that in ethnographic research, even when activities seem slow and mundane, something is always happening. As video affords multi-stage analysis, there are repeated opportunities to reflexively unpack this passive action in a collaborative interview setting. At both field sites, I used my video record of the exhibition installation as a concrete talking point to engage in combined data collection and analysis with curatorial informants in a collaborative manner. With curators in other institutions, where I did not have permission to videotape the installation, I used photographs of the installation produced by myself or others in place of video. While this was less ideal, I found that we spoke 'around the photographs' to a significant degree and so were able to broach topics that were not directly captured in a particular image.

Specifically, the video-elicitation interview is a variant on the anthropological photo-elicitation interview, first described by Collier (1967) as a technique to help the researcher better capture the lived reality of the informant by encouraging him or her to verbally reflect on his or her own activities. The educational studies quoted above (Cicourel, et al., 1974; Erickson & Shultz, 1982; Mehan, 1979; Mehan, et al., 1986) note

that this research method also succeeds in making explicit some conditions that are masked in traditional field and interview research, as well as clarifying the subjective basis for many routinely-made decisions.

While immersed in doing, one does not regard one's actions from the point of view of a detached observer. The observer stance permits abstraction and epistemological scepticism of a sort there is no time for while getting practical affairs done from moment to moment. In lived time, the compelling power of everyday life is that people become absorbed in it and take its 'reality' for granted. (Erickson & Shultz, 1982: 56, their emphasis)

The video is the main stimulus for the interview, setting up an atmosphere for reflection on what usually goes unsaid. This also ensures that the researcher's restructuring of an event incorporates how the participants think of it, and that what the researcher locates in analysis is also the phenomenon that orients participants. Moreover, as described by Pauwels (2006: 131), video elicitation allows the researcher to bring forth deeper, more abstract perceptions and values of respondents as individuals involved in the depicted world; 'the focus of attention shifts from external manifestations to an *experience*, an *interior* perspective'. In so doing, the video-elicitation interview builds on the photo-elicitation interview in one important way: while photographs may evoke memories, feelings, and other intimate personal discourses about the moment captured on film (Harper, 2002), videos enable people to speak directly to the action at hand in an ongoing manner to clarify what they were unable to discuss at the time the video was recorded.

As I will demonstrate throughout this thesis, there is quite a bit of 'I know it when I see it' in exhibition planning. Fortunately, the video provides the ability to reference these statements to specific objects and circumstances and the curator can talk about 'how' they chose to do something without switching to a higher-level of thinking to explain 'why'. This method enabled my informants to unearth and convert much of the tacit, nonverbal, or conventional knowledge of curating into discursive form. But, more interestingly, it also enabled them to work outside of the conventional 'accounting for' activity, by pinpointing the moments in the exhibition installation when an object, event, or decision was particularly salient in their own process of meaning making. For example, during one installation the curator constantly stepped back from the artworks to stand in the gallery entrance. In watching this, the curator paused the video and reported that he was 'giving the room the eye' to see if, unconsciously, it felt 'balanced and welcoming'. This information allowed me to give meaning to the curator's subsequent actions in the space, based on when and how he chose to move things after 'giving them the eye'.

As another example below (an excerpt from my fieldnotes) demonstrates, object-oriented research methods enable curators to begin to unpack so-called ‘aesthetic muteness’. The fact that objects prompt orientations and detailed talk directed to them is methodologically significant.

When I asked [the curator] about the concept behind the show and how she came about it she said, ‘It was a process...It’s very hard to explain’, and she faltered for words and began waving her hands. The instant we started looking through the catalogue, however, she began telling me all about the concept and how they went about illuminating it through the show, even pointing out specific artworks in photos and flipping through the book as I held it on my lap. She spoke in such detail as to stop on an installation photograph featuring projections on a wall and to point out where the camera was hung under an opposing rafter, in order to illustrate from which angle it was projected. Everything came out once we looked at the catalogue, whereas nothing appeared in ordinary conversation.

In this example, the curator was literally able to ‘tell me’ more by using the catalogue as an explicative device. As Bateson and Mead (1942) first demonstrated, visual research allows researchers and informants to more reflexively and collaboratively engage with each other. This not only helps to exit the ‘sociology of suspicion’ by opening meaningful dialogues with informants and their knowledge, but also helps the researcher engage with things that informants cannot speak about in direct ways. As in the example above, I found that this engagement works best with the researcher orienting to the materials curators use to make sense of their work, rather than the inverse.

The downside of this interview method, as I experienced, is that the process of watching the video can be ‘boring’. This was combated in part by allowing my informants to choose images that were meaningful to them by stopping the video when they saw something they wanted to discuss or comment on (cf. Erickson & Shultz, 1982). Overall, as Collier (1967) describes, the visual-elicitation interview suggests a collaboration between subject and researcher, because the informant realizes that his or her taken-for-granted understandings are not shared by the researcher. Yet, in the process of explaining these understandings, there is also room for reflection upon them. To take a final, brief example, as a curator and I watched the video of him installing a sculpture and directing a technician to saw off a portion of it such that it would better adapt to the space, he noted, ‘I say “special object” for the people that come; I mean, it is trash, basically!’, and seemed to surprise himself in this spontaneous confession. This brief example demonstrates the ability of the curator-informant him or herself to engage reflexively in issues of relevant sociological concern, rather than being prompted by the researcher to do so in an abstract context.

Though immensely useful, the video-elicitation interview requires significant amounts of time, as well as an extensive commitment on the part of the informant and extensive access on the part of researcher. It is simply not possible for logistical reasons in many situations. While it was well-suited to the ethnographic research at both field sites, and I was able to approximate this method using photographs of installations in the cases of several other interviews, I was not always able to attend the installations of exhibitions prior to interviewing their curators. When this was the case, I turned to a second method of visual interviewing: interviewing the curator while walking through the exhibition.

#### *3.4.2 The interview in the exhibition space*

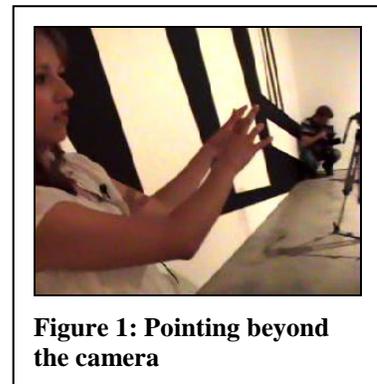
When I did not have access to materials from the installation of an exhibition, I conducted videotaped semi-structured interviews with curators walking around the exhibition space and speaking about the current exhibition at hand. This interview method resembles research in artistic reception (cf. Belcher, 1997; Halle, 1993), where informants give the researcher a personal ‘tour’ around their homes, speaking to the various objects hung within. Similarly, my aim here was to use the final exhibition as a setting to interrogate the process of its making, and the meanings represented in the final product.

In many of the same ways that videotaping the installation provided a behavioural record, here the use of a mobile video camera, held by myself at chest-height, allowed me to include nonverbal language, as well as visual cues and references to works of art by the curator. When curators discussed a decision or change made during the installation, they often pointed around the room and I could follow their gesture with the camera. Speaking with the curator in front of (and often around) artworks in exhibitions provided a final layer of data about what meanings were planned by the curator and which arose spontaneously during the installation process. In one such interview, the curators paused before two artworks in a far corner of the gallery and said, ‘We didn’t intend this, but this grouping of artworks actually maintains a post-colonial dialogue of sorts because this artist is from Mexico and this artist is from South Africa’. A final return to the exhibition space clarified how the curators envisioned the output of their decisions, as well as how the public could possibly make meaning with the exhibition. Focusing on a curator’s memory of the

installation as a ‘running commentary’ also helped to avoid leading informants into the passive exercise of ingrained knowledge or explanation of their activities (Witkin, 1994).

Much like Denzin’s (1989) understanding of the interview as interpretive interactionism — following in the footsteps of the great social interactionists like Becker (1982) — here I could analyze which resources and discourses were pointed to by the curators through examining how they performed their work to me in the interview setting. If there was a specific decision or change made during the installation, I could inquire about it and examine *how* the curators defended or rationalized their decisions. I also discussed with my curatorial informants how they carry their rationale with them and how much freedom they have to enact it in the institution. This interpretive approach focused on the singular, biographical nature of these accounts, emphasizing world making as an individual process.

While the mobile technique allowed us to move around the space and interact with various artworks, the downside is that it was impractical to keep enough distance between the video camera and the informant to get a broader shot. My informants often gestured and oriented to objects in the space to complete their own speech acts. While my camera captured the object being referenced, which was important for my own interpretive understanding of the meaning of their statement, it was difficult for me to simultaneously capture the act of referencing itself because of my close proximity to the interviewee. This problematized the use of video stills drawn from these interviews for the presentation of data in this thesis. **Figure 1** demonstrates the limitations of such an off-camera reference.



**Figure 1: Pointing beyond the camera**

In sum, the mobile video-recorded interview allowed the curators to be specific and concrete in their statements about particular artworks, something which added meaning to their statements that I could understand during the transcription and analysis process. The use of video allowed the curators to feel more comfortable to express themselves naturally and aesthetically, rather than feeling forced to put all sentiments into words. And, it also allowed me to examine the nature of their relationship to particular works of art, as demonstrated through posturing and nonverbal gestures.

### 3.5 Data coding, analysis, and validity

Key to my data analysis was the comparison and cross-analysis of varied data types, as well as an understanding of theoretical development as emergent from this process. Rather than a linear model of data collection followed by analysis, I conceived of both as a cyclical process which interwove ethnographic observation, video data collection, interviewing, hypothesis construction, and theory building (Silverman, 1993; Spradley, 1980: 28-35). Moreover, ethnographic interviewing produces oblique evidence because the particular interview is situated in the larger ethnographic context (Heyl, 2001; Rapley, 2004). This means that in the process of answering specific interview questions, curators also reveal information about related issues. As described above, the video-elicitation interview with curators at both field sites evidences this cyclical process of data analysis by providing a place for the co-analysis of existing video data, the collection of additional data (in the form of curatorial reflections on earlier action), and the development of further questions and hypotheses to be tested in ethnographic observation or interviews with other curators.

I prepared for the formal data analysis process, meaning analysis after all fieldwork was completed, by organizing my data and cross-referencing particular events or areas of interest across varied data types, which could include fieldnotes, audio recordings, video recordings, interview transcripts, and material evidence. For example, data regarding the installation of one artwork was found across months of fieldnotes (as curators learned more about the artwork and developed a plan for its installation), audio recordings and material evidence generated in some of these discussions, a video record of its final installation, and a video-elicitation interview looking at this installation video. At this point, I treated the video record as 'potential data' (Erickson & Shultz, 1982), which was later processed and analyzed alongside fieldnotes and other data types to reveal or more closely examine salient moments. Accordingly, I did not transcribe all of my video and audio data; rather, I indexed, summarized, and tagged this data with codes for ease of comparison in the analytic process.

Once these various paths were constructed through the data, I coded all of these materials following Strauss' (1987) guidelines for the purposes of grounded theory; his 'concept-indicator' model provides for an evolving relationship between the empirical

indicators in the data itself and the conceptual coding of those indicators in an analytical way. In the first instance, I read through my data and observed different activities and themes that occurred in curatorial work. I consolidated these into a variety of *initial codes* and coded my data to identify particular recurring curatorial concepts and significant actions (cf. Charmaz, 2006; Marvasti, 2004: 88).<sup>21</sup> This helped me to parse up large amounts of data into smaller, comparative units. I next read through my research diary, theoretical memos, and the data again, and made a running list of more abstract themes and ideas of interest that emerged repeatedly. I then consolidated this list of themes into *focused codes* and coded my data a second time.<sup>22</sup> Whenever I saw indicators of a new code later in the analysis, I ensured that I returned to my data and coded for it in a comprehensive manner. In this way, my data analysis and development of theoretical concepts went hand in hand with an exploration of the data themselves (cf. Becker, 1969; Dey, 2004; Wolcott, 1994).

### 3.5.1 Multimedia data analysis

I began data analysis by grouping data by initial codes and looking at how the focused codes illuminated certain aspects of these activities. Where particular focused codes were prevalent in an activity, I paid careful attention to the social and material circumstances of the activity itself. I also looked for negative examples of similar activities or situations where the focused code was not present, in an effort to pinpoint when the particular focused code was salient in an activity (King, et al., 1994). My research analysis, therefore, focused both on the salience of a particular focused code, as well as on understanding the situations of work that contributed to its salience.

The particular challenge of my data analysis was to look in depth at the accounts of my informants in the context of their behavioural record and the conventions mediating their social space (cf. Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). In examining curating ‘in everyday life’,

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<sup>21</sup> These initial codes include the following: exhibition design, choosing artworks, catalogue, press, lighting, installation, publics, education, curatorial background, institutional issues, funding, working with the artist, and thoughts on the art world. While most of these codes emerged from the data, others were somewhat hypothesis-driven, in that I looked for indicators of concepts of interest, such as curators’ thoughts about the ‘public’ and instances of ‘choosing artworks’. Yet, these hypothesis-driven codes were applied only after I found a significant number of indicators in the data to support their validity.

<sup>22</sup> These focused codes include the following: conventions, meaning making, power dynamics, translation, tacit knowledge, object interactions, surprise moment, feel vs. think, framing, theory, restricted code, and creating access.

as it were, this research focused on three planes of action: the ‘what’ (the accounts given by curators of their actions, their presentation of self), the ‘do’ (their ideological work and practice in real time), and the ‘how’ (the mechanisms of how things functioned as part of this action). Therefore, I analyzed all of my data in terms of what was said, but also how (and where) it was said, and paid particular attention to the difficulties curators encountered in bringing the two together to form a cohesive presentation of self.

In the realm of object-relations, visual explorations of work practices introduced three important forms of data. First, they revealed the spontaneous way individuals illustrated embodied knowledge through mobilizing ‘off-the-cuff’ sketches or stories to work inside and outside of established convention (cf. Henderson, 1999; Innes, 1998; Lave, 1988). Secondly, they demonstrated that objects in the material world are an important resource for actors in rendering their actions meaningful (cf. Goodwin, 2000; Heath & Hindmarsh, 2000; Hutchins, 1995; Streeck, 1996). As Heath (1997) describes, capturing these practices on video enables the researcher to focus on the observable features of an environment rather than psychological features of its inhabitants. Third, repeated and slow-motion analysis of the video record allowed me to pinpoint precisely *when* and *where* particular aspects of the environment became meaningful in interaction (Heath & Hindmarsh, 2002).

Additionally, I realized that it was impossible to isolate the speech of curators from their gestures, postures, and expressions without losing the meaning of what was said. While this is always the case to some degree (cf. Goodwin, 1980), it is particularly so in the visual arts. For instance, listening to the audio record of one curator explaining how to install a particular artwork, I heard, ‘You can make that look like that by just doing that’. But what did this mean? Looking at video of this excerpt shed light on the hidden dialogue, revealing that the curator was actually experimenting with hanging an artwork using hinges on its frame, such that both sides of the work would be visible to the viewer. Seen in this way, the video record acted as ‘extrasomatic memory’ (Mehan, 1979), or a ‘check on fieldnotes’ (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983: 161), allowing me to pinpoint the resources for meaning making in the real-time action.

Moreover, art worlds are ‘textually mediated social organizations’ (cf. Smith, 1990; Watson, 1997). Whenever I asked curators questions about the genesis of their exhibitions, their concept, and how it related to the artworks included, I was regularly handed pieces of paper. As one curator stated, ‘If you are conducting research, documentation is

indispensable'. As with the video record, this 'textual record' provided a contrast structure to look at what was said (in perpetuity) versus what was said and created in action. Throughout the data analysis process, my continued navigation of multimedia data forms helped me to elaborate my focused codes into more nuanced theoretical concepts buttressed with thick description.

### *3.5.2 Validity and the presentation of data*

The multi-faceted approach I employed in data analysis meant that I conceived of the outcome of the exhibition planning process as resulting from the interaction of the behaviour record (film and ethnographic fieldnotes), accounts by the participants (fieldnotes, interviews, and exhibition texts), and the pre-conceived categories or conventions of the museum world (as observed through ethnography, participant observation, and texts). The multitude of instruments employed in my research were not an attempt at triangulating the 'true meaning' of curatorial work, but rather, looking at the *nature* of the data collected using these different methods itself shed light on the bigger questions emerging through my study. This variety of data collection techniques provided 'indefinite triangulation' (Cicourel, 1973), or multiple details on how various interpretations of a situation were assembled from different perspectives using different resources.

I will give a brief example of how this 'indefinite triangulation' led to the development of one theoretical concept. My early data analysis, stemming back to my pilot studies, highlighted the variance of different modes of communicating about art (including nonverbal communications, such as gestures, drawings, and posturing, as well as differences between 'feeling' and 'thinking'). My research coding identified common incidents of these interesting phenomena (focused codes) in particular curatorial activities (initial codes), and I have picked illustrative examples from these to present to the reader in this thesis. I then returned to the literature to understand how these focused codes allowed me to develop or build on concepts of larger theoretical interest in the sociology of culture.

In fact, the organization of my central data chapters (Chapters Five through Eight) illustrates this analytical method. In each chapter, I begin by describing general findings from my data at large, and then turn to key, microethnographic incidents to unpack these

findings with reference to specific temporal and spatial data. I then conclude each chapter by collecting and analyzing these findings with reference to theoretical development.

Ultimately, it is important to ask two questions to ensure good data quality: are the data reliable (consistent) and valid (the right concept is measured) (Procter, 1993)? As Saukko (2003) describes, all qualitative methodologies provide grounds for ‘contextual validity’, exploring the social, economic, and political contexts of the subject of research; furthermore, ethnographic study in particular expresses ‘dialogic validity’, in managing to understand the lived realities of others. In addition, there are many ways in which I attempted to reduce bias and enhance validity and reliability, including the peer-review of my research data, self-reflection and questioning my work through a research diary, collecting multiple data types, and verifying emerging interpretations of data in curatorial interviews. In sum, I endeavoured to evaluate my research design and methodology over the course of the research process. Most importantly, I aim to enhance reliability by reporting contextual observation in great detail throughout this thesis. I also had a native speaking colleague double check my coding and interpretations of the data collected in a foreign language.

### **3.6 Research ethics and privacy**

Curators are very visible, public individuals, which makes them highly identifiable in any synthetic text. And, my research instruments aimed to delve as deep as possible into their personal emotions, thoughts, and practices. Prior to embarking on fieldwork or an interview, I gave each informant a letter describing my research project and made it clear how I would collect data. I also informed each curator that I would ask for his or her informed consent *following* the interview or period of fieldwork, so that he or she could choose to give or withhold permission following our conversation (based on what was said) and address any particular concerns at that time.

Visual documentation is particularly sensitive as it offers increased possibilities for misrepresenting informants. In the case of videotaped interviews, several curators were nervous when I pulled out the video camera, fearing that the footage would be publicly disseminated somehow. To address any fears, I attempted to be as open and honest as possible with my informants about my aims and how I planned to use the video. In the consent form, I detailed three specific uses of video footage and stills, allowing each

informant the opportunity to reserve footage from publication or presentation, or edit further. (See **Appendix C** for an English-language copy of the consent form.) Most of my interviewees did not give me permission to display video footage in any way beyond personal use, although most permitted the use of stills derived from this footage. I took the added step of blurring the images of all individuals appearing in the video stills and photographs, including any technicians or others in the gallery space. My detailed plan for the protection of those who participated in my research was approved in full by the School of Humanities and Social Sciences' Ethics Committee in June, 2005.

In any ethnographic or interview environment, the researcher is told things that informants prefer to keep private. My informants wished to keep thoughts private in two particular areas: personal critiques of an artist's work, and ideas or plans for upcoming exhibitions. In fact, I had to sign confidentiality agreements at both field sites reflecting these concerns.<sup>23</sup> Occasionally, my informants said something was 'off the record'. At these times, I turned off my recording device immediately. When they finished speaking in confidence, I would turn the recorder on again and, often, they would give a more structured account 'on the record' of what they had just told me in confidence. I have ensured that no off-the-record comments appear in this thesis.

Overall, no curators requested general anonymity, and two requested the right to approve quotes and images before they were used in formal presentation or writing. [The redactions in this online version of the defended dissertation reflect my adherence to their wishes.] In fact, most of my curatorial informants said that they preferred not to be anonymous, considering the public nature of their work and the fact that details of the exhibition were vital to the thorough presentation and analysis of data. Given the growing visibility of curatorial work, however, I elected to remove all identifying marks not vital to the reader's understanding of the sociological analysis of the examples presented in this dissertation.

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<sup>23</sup> These obligatory privacy contracts specified that I must avoid sharing any kind of contact information (including contacts of artists, funders, and lenders), 'conceptual information' about upcoming exhibitions (particularly the names of artists under consideration), and any budget-related information that I encountered.

### 3.7 Conclusion: Reflections on the research relationship

In outlining an aesthetic methodology, I have drawn on object-oriented methods from a variety of other social sciences and disciplines and applied them to the micro-study of exhibition making in contemporary art. My goal as a researcher was to provide the tools and means to enable my informants to reflect upon their own work in as much detail as possible. As Latour (1996: 36) emphasized in his own fieldwork processes, researchers will never know as much about what actors do as they do, so researchers must always acquire the original documents and assume ‘that people are right, even if you have to stretch the point a bit’. This what Garfinkel, et al. (1981) refer to as ‘performative objectivity’, that the objectivity of an object or belief at any time is ‘true’, in so far as its trueness is performed within an active belief system. Rather than interpreting curatorial actions using *my* presumptions of culture (established representations, static meanings, etc.) as resources, I sought to instead look at how the curators themselves make links and produced cultural significance in everyday life, to illuminate *their* resources as *they* locate them. When analyzing fieldnotes and interview transcripts, I also paid particular attention to the *experiences* of my informants in carrying out their work. As Campbell (1998) describes, these experiences are an important form of data that speak to how individuals conceive of their social world and the social relations that sustain their work.

Rather than conducting research *on* a particular environment or group of individuals, this work demonstrates my view of the sociologist’s role as setting up the conditions for research to take place. As a sociologist, I possess a unique methodological skill set that can provide curators with a unique perspective on their work, thereby enabling my informants to identify and elaborate topics and questions of sociological concern. For instance, I was often thanked for helping curators to clarify issues ‘that had been troubling them for some time’, or simply for the enjoyment of having someone ‘to talk about these things with’. Yet, this was very much a two-way process; and I was encouraged to think ‘artistically’ about my work in turn. In practical terms, this meant sharing literature, having lengthy conversations about sociological texts and issues, and co-authoring occasional op-ed pieces in contemporary art publications.

Moreover, there are political implications regarding where sociologists choose to discuss the issues and concepts in their work. Ingrained in context, visual sociology is a

useful device to avoid scientific colonialism, defined by Hymes (1972) as assuming that the center of acquiring knowledge about a people is located elsewhere than where they are. Discussing curatorial practice in the physical setting of where the action is occurring (e.g., in the gallery space) is markedly different than discussing it in a more 'neutral' or distant setting. Here, references to distinct objects can enable precise, grounded, and relevant dialogue. Crucially, visual research is an opportunity for an active, reflexive, and collaborative engagement between the researcher as image-maker and the research informants (Banks, 2001; Pauwels, 2006; Prosser, 1997). Interestingly, both field sites asked me to make copies of the video stills and photographs I collected for preservation in the exhibition archive. Given that social science suffers from a 'marginality of the visual' in terms of images in its publications (Emmison & Smith, 2000), particularly in the study of work activities (Strangleman, 2004), I will endeavour to correct this by referring regularly to visual data throughout this thesis. Before beginning a detailed visual examination of the exhibition-planning process, I will use the next chapter to examine the conventional and organizational context of curating, in order to understand the composition of curatorial agency.

#### 4. THE CURATOR IN THE MUSEUM

One of the signifiers of contemporary art's power is the fame its chief proponents enjoy.

(Millard, 2001: 73)

The word curate can be traced to the Latin word *cura*, meaning spiritual charge or care, and the expanded *accurare*, meaning 'to expend care on' or 'to take care of'. The phrase 'to curate', then, refers not only to the act of managing a museum establishment, but also to the duty and mission to actively care for the exhibition or artefacts in the museum. Given the increasing number of tasks and responsibilities that this entails, the field of curating in the fine arts today is far from a distinct and easily codified profession (Octobre, 1996b; Tobelem, 2005).

In particular, the role of the curator of fine arts has evolved significantly over the past two centuries and changed dramatically in the past thirty years.<sup>24</sup> Curators of contemporary art come from a wide assortment of educational and career trajectories and are employed in a variety of positions in institutions, government, private businesses, non-profit foundations, universities, and publishing houses (Octobre, 2001). Contemporary curating also has a strong freelance component. Despite espousing quite different conceptions of the profession and personal curatorial mission, curators of contemporary art are united by their common activity as 'exhibition makers' (cf. Szeemann, 1996), and exhibit a widespread belief that curating 'cannot be taught'. In order to better understand the vague and often contested practice that 'exhibition making' implies, this chapter sets the stage for the presentation of ethnographic data in later chapters by examining the history, background, and institutional organization of curating.

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<sup>24</sup> Three Ph.D. theses have looked extensively at the history of curatorial practice and inform this chapter empirically. Octobre (1996a) chronicles the history and professionalization of museum curatorship. (Where possible, I have cited publications resulting from Octobre's thesis rather than the thesis itself, although the thesis presents all of the published material in a comprehensive way.) Secondly, Blais' (2006) exhaustive history of the artist/curator relationship demonstrates the importance of artistic ideas and concepts to the curatorial profession. Finally, Hénaut's (2008) study of the history and professionalization of art restorers parallels and sheds light on the professional evolution of the museum curator.

#### 4.1 A very brief history of exhibition making

The role of the curator in the museum has very traditional connotations. In contrast to the plural, dynamic understanding of contemporary curatorship, the profession has its origins in another word and activity altogether. The first application of the activity was introduced into the French language during the fourteenth century, not from *cura*, but from the Latin *conservator*, meaning ‘one who conserves’ (stemming from *conserve*, meaning ‘I preserve’) (Blais, 2006). While the linguistic difference between the words may be slight, ‘preserve’ versus ‘care for’, the dual terminology to describe curatorial activities can be seen in enduring professional divisions in the fine art world between so-called ‘art historical’ curators interested in the ‘objective’ presentation of art historical knowledge, and more charismatic curators who see their role as pushing the limits of display, interpretation, and exhibition design. It is the gradual evolution and emergence of the latter category of curator that is of interest to this thesis.

The Louvre Museum in Paris emerged as the first grand public institution for the visual arts in 1793. Subsequently, the first museum professionals generally described by the term ‘curator’, or rather the French *conservateur*, are the original curatorial agents at the Louvre: Hubert Robert, Jacques-Louis David, Dominique Vivant Denon, and Alexandre Lenoir (Schubert, 2000). These curators, formerly practicing artists themselves, were responsible for inventorying, preserving, describing, classifying, communicating, and exhibiting works of art (Blais, 2006). As McClellan (1994) describes at the outset of his historical portrait of the Louvre, it was here that the classification and display of objects was first articulated. The Louvre emerged as the ground for the ‘first community of professional museum men everywhere recognized’ (Duncan, 2003: 261).

Robert, David, Denon, and Lenoir shaped a curatorial function that had yet to be formally defined, in terms of exhibition design. In particular, Robert transformed the Louvre into a suitable exhibition hall, and Denon moved from displaying paintings according to size or formal elements to providing a historical course on the art of painting (McClellan, 1994: 140). In contrast, Lenoir (in his directorship at the Musée des Monuments Français) exerted more creative license by inserting ‘inauthentic goods’ into chronological sequences and was subsequently criticized for having an ‘artistic vision’

(Blais, 2006). Seen in this way, Lenoir was perhaps a curator in the contemporary sense of the word, as ‘author’ of his or her own exhibition (cf. Heinich & Pollak, 1989a).

The curatorial profession became standardized in the nineteenth century, hand in hand with the advent of the modern museum. As Bourdieu (1993 [1987]: 204) explains, the ‘emergence of the entire set of specific institutions’ (including the museum) and an array of ‘specialized agents’ (e.g., curators, critics, dealers, and collectors) shaped the ‘necessary conditions for the functioning of the economy of cultural goods’. Over the course of the twentieth century, the museum was transformed from a private collection to the site of nationally-sponsored education, the source of aesthetic pleasure for a broad public, and the symbol of a virtuous state (Bennett, 1995). The museum was no longer to be a storehouse presenting miscellaneous collections of curiosities to learned scholars and collectors. Rather, this new mission for museums increased the need for display practices that ‘framed’ collections appropriately to help others interpret meaning (Holt, 1979).

Among all specialized museum agents, curators became crucial actors ‘capable of imposing a specific measure of the value of the artist and his products’ (Bourdieu, 1993 [1987]: 204). For Bourdieu, museum curators were indispensable in elaborating an artistic language key to this framing process. The second half of the twentieth century witnessed an escalating professionalization of the curator’s role, as the advanced study of art history (and in France a national examination, *le concours*) became a prerequisite for entry into this profession in both private and public museums throughout Western Europe and North America.<sup>25</sup> Professional societies for curation blossomed, as seen in the development of the International Council of Museums and the American Associations of Museums, among others (DiMaggio, 1991).

With the professionalization of the curator came the development of conventions for museum display and exhibition making. The principle of curatorial interpretation, of combining works by different artists to give selective readings on art and on the history of art, is one of the fundamental principles that have underwritten curatorial practice since the mid-nineteenth century (Serota, 1996: 8-9). As traditional art curators overwhelmingly hold advanced degrees in art history, they generally mount exhibitions that are scholarly in nature, rather than more ‘popularly accessible’ exhibitions (Alexander, 1996b; DiMaggio,

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<sup>25</sup> In France, the curatorial profession was professionalized as the exclusive mediator of high culture with the equivalent of a national formation course in 1882 (Octobre, 1999a). This is illustrated by the results of Octobre’s (1996a: II, 66) study of curators in French art museums, in which she found that 94% were highly educated professionals with standardized academic formation in art history or archaeology.

1991; Octobre, 1999a; Zolberg, 1981). In terms of display, continental practice, as well as the belief that public institutions have an educational mission, led to the conventions of displaying artworks by school, with pictures hung at or slightly above eye level (Serota, 1996). The heavily scholarly nature of current curatorship in the fine arts is reflected in the art historical nature of museum display, where exhibitions generally display artworks in a linear fashion within an overall historical perspective, which performs the skill set required. This convention was widespread in the fine arts until the 1980s.

The 1960s and 1970s, however, witnessed the emergence of a new breed of curators, particularly in the contemporary art world. This era was ushered in by a handful of adventurous curators who worked independently across Europe, including Harald Szeemann, Pontus Hulten, Lars Nitty, and others. These early curators of contemporary art maintained an international presence, many of them moving from post to post in different countries while simultaneously engaging in freelance work. Rather than base their approach to exhibition making on art historical conventions, these curators engaged in critical curatorial practice, experimenting with the very nature of the exhibition format (Brenson, 1998; Obrist, 2009; Szeemann, 1996).<sup>26</sup> In other words, the avant-garde movement among artists was met by an avant-garde movement in curating. The complicated relationship of these individuals to the established institutions in the contemporary art field is best represented through the curatorial map located in **Appendix D**.

Several strong sociological studies have closely examined the changing nature of expertise for the curator of contemporary art (cf. Boissier, 2005; Heinich & Pollak, 1989a; Moulin & Quemin, 1993, 2001; Octobre, 1999b). Instead of being codified by a Ph.D. in art history, expertise in contemporary art is defined largely by a widespread and current familiarity with the international art context.<sup>27</sup> Curators are expert networkers; as one independent curator stated, ‘I spend almost 100% of my time in front of the computer,

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<sup>26</sup> A variety of publications within the art world have also addressed the changing and ambiguous relationship between contemporary art, curators, and institutions. Many of these take the form of conference proceedings or reflections by innovative curators (cf. Gillick & Lind, 2005; Harding, 1997; Hiller & Martin, 2000, 2001; Marincola, 2001; Martin & Hiller, 2001; Möntmann, 2006; Müller & Schafhausen, 2006; O’Neill, 2007; Rugg & Sedgwick, 2007; Schmidt & Richter, 1998; White, 1996).

<sup>27</sup> The curatorial profession in France was reformed in 1990 to instate a ‘concours’ for all museum curators interested in contemporary art at France’s new and centralized École National du Patrimoine (Bady, 2000). As Moulin (1992) points out, this allowed some curators working in this area prior to 1990 to bypass France’s strict concourse, and enter institutions instead via an alternative path or ‘external tour’.

because my entire job is based around being in communication with people'.<sup>28</sup> In her microethnographic study of a public art commission, Heinich (1997b; 1997c) confirms these characteristics, observing the way curators draw on their familiarity with art world actors, knowledge of market prices, and awareness of recent exhibitions when making decisions about the value of contemporary artworks. Furthermore, some international star curators use their charisma itself as part of the 'production of belief' in their decisions (Crow, 1996; Moulin, 1992: 67), something which implies the suspicion that an artwork is good 'because they say it is'. As Suchy (1999) notes in her study of contemporary museum managers, the growing role of charisma in arts management may not be 'self-serving', per se, but may simply reflect the increased importance of 'emotional intelligence' in the cultural industries.

Although museum curatorship was highly codified as an art historical practice, by the turn of the millennium, the highly educated specialized background of museum curators began to be questioned in light of the growing institutional need to create entertaining events, connect with communities, increase the international visibility of institutional programming, and remain fiscally competitive with more 'popular' cultural offerings (Heinich, 1995; Tobelem, 2005; Vander Gucht, 1990). Like stage producers or orchestra conductors, individuals in the new 'breed' of contemporary curator 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.<sup>29</sup> As Heinich and Pollack (1989a) explain, these curators are often 'rented' as consultants to plan temporary exhibitions, which can include choosing the theme and/or artists, as well as overseeing the installation and production of accompanying materials. Additionally, given the enormous symbolic

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<sup>28</sup> This definition of contemporary curatorial expertise actually differs little from traditional curatorial expertise, as described by curator J. Paton in an 1895 speech to the Museums Association. Here, Paton (1895: 102) notes that the curator's formal education and technical internship must be supplemented with a *Wanderjahr* (or 'year of wandering'); 'He must above all see things, must learn by looking [...] He must absorb ideas; wherever he goes he must appropriate the knowledge, the experience and the ingenuity of other men in the most unblushing manner. [...] The man who has seen most, who has most sympathetically extracted information from others, and who has got others willingly to do work for him, is the most successful provincial museum curator'.

<sup>29</sup> Although 'star' curators are predominantly employed by institutions of contemporary art, many traditional museums of fine art also employ their services to increase the visibility of existing collections. The Louvre, for instance, maintains an office of contemporary art run by curator Marie-Laure Bernadac, who is charged with providing a new perspective on its artworks and artefacts at the Louvre, creating temporary exhibitions, and providing visitors with a link between ancient and classical art practice and contemporary art. Curators in positions such as this help uninitiated publics to discover contemporary art.

value of exhibiting a work of contemporary art in a prestigious museum, Bernier (2002) surmises that hiring external curators is also a way for these museums to share the responsibility and risks of artistic consecration by leaving the selection process to someone else.

Despite the necessarily freelance role of the curator of contemporary art, around the turn of the twentieth century, many independent curators began to take up permanent posts in institutions. A variety of reasons contributed to this and varied from curator to curator in my interview sample. The most common include: fiscal stability, access to a steady stream of resources and curatorial assistants, the opportunity to publish exhibition catalogues, and the opportunity to reach a wider public and take part in developing the legacy of a renowned institution. Indeed, curators of contemporary art carefully balance their own freedom and independent work with their need for financial stability. The security provided by a permanent position also allows curators to continue their freelance work outside of the institution.

As predicted, the advent of new actors in the artistic field (e.g., the ‘star’ curator of contemporary art) arrived hand in hand with the advent of new art institutions (such as the Biennale, Documenta, and Manifesta) (cf. Vanderlinden & Filipovic, 2006). Consequently, the conventions in museum programming and exhibition making also began to shift by the 1980s and early 1990s. 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 & Pollak, 1989a).<sup>30</sup> 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, 1996a: 231).

In contrast to the taxonomical or art historical approach to exhibiting fine art, the exhibition process in modern and contemporary art is integral to the meaning of the artwork (cf. Caillet, et al., 2002; Ducret, et al., 1990). Significantly, its role of mediation is one of communication; the exhibition *communicates* the object by contributing another layer of meaning or interpretation to the artist’s original intention (Davallon, 2002: 49, my

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<sup>30</sup> The temporary or ahistorical exhibition is not unique to contemporary art, but can also be seen in the increased prevalence of so-called ‘blockbuster exhibitions’ or ‘experimental exhibitions’ on a variety of art historical, ethnographic, or other subjects (MacDonald & Basu, 2007; McCarthy et al., 2005; Tobelem, 2005).

emphasis), which may be hazy to begin with (cf. Becker, et al., 2006). Consequently, the institution of contemporary art is no longer a single ground from which the understandings of visual culture are made, but a site to display shifting cultural, artistic, social, and power relations (Crimp, 1984; Davallon, 1999; Greenberg, et al., 1996; Harding, 1997; Luke, 2002). In what follows, I will look more closely at curators' self-conceptions of their work in order to shed more light on what the nature of this work entails.

#### **4.2 Training and trajectories for the curator of contemporary art**

Curating is a multidisciplinary practice, and the curatorial role can vary significantly based on several factors: the kind of museum one works in, the type of exhibition (monographic or group) one is planning, one's personal background and trajectory, and individual personality (Octobre, 2001).<sup>31</sup> Curators themselves categorize their peers in a number of different ways, including the 'very institutional curators' (who spend years conducting detailed art historical research prior to an exhibition), 'socially engaged curators' (who promote artists working for social change and social intervention in the city), and 'experimental curators' (who push the limits of exhibition-design). There are curators who see their role only to help artists realize their ideas, and curators who create the conceptual context in which an artist's work is seen. As Octobre (1999b) discovered, even within the museum, different curators of contemporary art see their missions in different ways; younger curators follow a more historical model, while older others may be highly theoretical, pedagogical in focus, or see themselves more as 'animators' than mediators. As I was told, 'There are as many concepts of curating as curators and shows', and 'every project is different because every artist is different'. In professional writings as well as the popular press, curators of contemporary art are referred to in a variety of ways, including: archivist, librarian, impresario, publicist, publisher, director, producer, social worker, DJ, and anthropologist, to name only a few.

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<sup>31</sup> One instance of this plurality is the confusion of terms employed to describe curatorial agents in France. There is no French translation for 'curator'. Rather, the relevant duties can be divided into the traditional profession of museum *conservateur* (the individual charged with managing permanent collections of art) and the burgeoning role of the *commissaire d'exposition* (the individual responsible for organising and mounting a temporary exhibition). Not only are these roles increasingly blurred by contemporary exhibition-making practices, but many of the French curators I spoke with believe that the titles of *commissaire* and *conservateur* are too bureaucratic and that 'curator' is a more appropriate term to describe their professional activity.

In the past decade, a large number of conferences and publications have borne witness to the effort among curators to understand the greater phenomenon of which they are part (cf. Hiller & Martin, 2001; Kuoni, 2001; O'Neill, 2007; Thea, 2001). While it is not my intention to reproduce this work here, the following quote from one curator summarizes many of these publications in a nutshell:

I don't know what I do so I don't know how to teach it. As far as I'm concerned, I just do projects. It's true that curating is a genre in itself, and there are all of these antithetical methodologies within curating. There are lots of approaches to curating that are all brought to bear on solving the issue of contemporary art. Really, the way I see it, curating as a profession is growing up on a parallel track to contemporary art. Both are progressing and curating is definitely learning to deal with contemporary art.

While classifying curatorial practice is difficult, taken together, curators are called in to mediate between artists and publics in order to *produce* an exhibition. As one young curator reminded me, 'While the approach, meaning, and intent of the curating is very different, the exhibition-making practice is the same'. As Octobre (1999b: 104) discusses in some detail, in turning away from the criteria of art history and towards a zone for free action, curators of contemporary art define their role as threefold: 'savoir' (they produce knowledge about the artwork, which distinguishes them from artists), 'faire' (they know how to physically instantiate this knowledge), and 'faire savoir' (they are responsible for transmitting this knowledge to publics). The following chapters will examine how this 'faire' and 'savoir' are enacted in the material environment of the museum.

In her analysis of matriculation patterns for museum curators (of all genres), Octobre (1999a: 359) observes that becoming a curator is not simply a process of integration into an established order, but rather, that biographical trajectories play a important role in the cultural construction of an identity, especially given the importance of experience in constituting competence. Rather than provide a typology of the complicated profession of curating contemporary art, I will use curators' accounts of their own personal trajectories to explore how they came to become curators, and in doing so, what their role involves.

The word curator hasn't been around for a very long time. It didn't use to mean what it does now. I've been around art since 1960 or so, and most of what I've done has been writing, but every now and then I have curated a show...organized a show [he quickly chooses another word], something I've proposed. I've never really sought out to do things like this; it's just something that I like to do.

I was roped into it [curating] by young artists in the early 90s. It was my first experience working on putting together an exhibition, at which point I wouldn't necessarily apply the term 'curator'. I wouldn't now either. It was really great for me, actually. It was very not far off art school. I did go to art school. It was a lot about smoking roll-ups and looking at things on the wall for ages and [someone] tacking things up, nailing potatoes, or saying

‘what about that?’ And I was going, ‘hmm, noo, you’re not’. So, in this exhibition, we all clubbed together and chipped in for a lot of things; we got the beer through someone... It got good reviews, it was well-attended, and so on. And that was really my first experience. But, in a funnier way, it was like being roped into it. The artists were very good. I think artists really invent more than just their own work. They invent dealers, they invent curators, writers, all sorts. And the art world has this funny habit of creating and generating itself.

Mine was the case of the accidental curator. I was in a year off between school and university, and I had intended to study English literature. I needed a job, and I ended up being a trainee technician at [a gallery]. I had such a great time and just loved dealing with visual images. And I went to university to do English literature, when poststructuralism had just hit the ground, and I got this intellectual or aesthetic appreciation for the nonverbal. But I got very disillusioned because I thought that we weren’t really dealing with the text, we were dealing with theoretical constructs imposed on the text. After a year, I thought, ‘What am I doing here?’ So, I switched to art history to be closer to visual images. [...] It was the mid-80s, so it was all post-modernism, but it was a really, really good course to be on. Then I did a Masters in art history, and I started looking at the work of [an ethnic group of] artists, a new generation of [this ethnic group of] artists who had been born and brought up here, and there was basically nothing written, so there was nothing to read. So, I just went and found them and interviewed them and started talking to them. And I think that was the point when I started writing and getting published. And then I got into art education and worked with some amazing artists, and ended up, really, just... That’s how it happened. It just all went like that. So, it was not a conscious decision. There was no formal curatorial... The word ‘curator’ didn’t really exist twenty years ago. It’s a very new profession, relatively speaking. There’s the old kind of ‘conservator’ in the museum, but the sense to which contemporary curatorship is understood just didn’t exist then. It wasn’t a career or thing anyone taught.

As the quotes above demonstrate, many in the emerging generation of curators of contemporary art were simply attracted to the passion and dynamism of contemporary artistic practice at that time. Rather than study the art historical approach to situating art, these curators were interested in meeting artists and spending time in studios. As stated in a recent documentary on the subject, to curate contemporary art is literally to ‘be contemporary’ (cf. Rosen, 2006). Consequently, the curator of contemporary art may have a much more subjective relationship to the art with which they work than traditional curators, as well as an affinity with artistic practice and regular, sustained relationships with artists (Moulin & Quemin, 1993; Octobre, 1999b). While the first two quotes above treat curating as the work of enabling or assisting artists to exhibit their work, the third quote reveals the importance of another curatorial skill: writing.

Given the gradual formalization of artistic training over the second half of the twentieth century (cf. Corse & Alexander, 1993; Singerman, 1999), cultural studies and other analytical concepts have become increasingly important in the contemporary art world. As one curator said of his Ph.D. thesis on an avant-garde writer, ‘This has been really helpful for me because it allowed me to develop all of these discourses that can cope with contemporary art’. Indeed, many members of the freelancing ‘star’ generation of

curators had very little or no training in art history, something confirmed by Octobre (1999a), who found that over 60% of those in her sample started out in another domain (although 68% had university degrees, and, on the whole, curators of contemporary art had a higher level of education than other curators). Indeed, the curators in my sample have advanced degrees in a wide variety of fields, including artistic practice, literature, philosophy, economics, political science, sociology, classics, theatre, and even journalism and clinical psychology. The introduction of these varied knowledge sets into the contemporary art world demonstrates that curating is not merely about the practical organization of exhibitions, it is also about the conceptual framing of contemporary artworks and artistic practice using a wide array of theoretical tools.

[4-Line Interview Excerpt Removed]

... for my work on philosophy and aesthetics, I absolutely must sustain a dialog with new creation. It's not at all an exterior or normative point of view. To the contrary, the goal is to establish a dialog, a philosophical point of view with the creator.

I studied sociology in school. What interests me is to have — or to be able to have — a certain distance vis-à-vis the artworks. It's a sociological process of sorts, to see a milieu, and you survey it from a bit of a distance to see its complexity and complication.

As demonstrated in the perspectives above, flagship curators of contemporary art are immensely impacted by their personal backgrounds and studies in other fields, something which they connect with their curatorial practice in very deep, fundamental ways. For some curators, their cultivation of other fields provides important skills for writing, communication, and reflection. For others, their backgrounds provide precise analytical resources and tools, such as philosophy and critical cultural theory, that directly influence how they look at and frame works of art. These analytical and transferable skills enable curators to invent and converse with theoretical discussions around artistic practice and artistic works. Yet, this is not to say that art history and contemporary art are incompatible. Art history can itself be the background for the theoretical framing of a work of art or exhibition.<sup>32</sup> What is clear, however, is that curators have very personal, subjective relationships with the art they like, based on their unique orientations and interests.

As with the creation and growth of any profession, the contemporary curatorial world has recently witnessed an institutionalization of its role, prompted first and foremost

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<sup>32</sup> As one curator pointed out, 'It's essential to study art history here to become a curator of contemporary art. But, also, it's important because to really understand the *concept* of an artwork in an exhibition, you really have to understand art history. Otherwise, what would the criteria be? It could be anything, whatever is in style, your personal whims!'. As several other curators pointed out, some exhibitions simply call for an art historical approach, while others do not.

by the immense, global growth of university-based curatorial programs, often founded by these same pioneering individuals in the 1990s. This return to an academic and institutional professionalization of curating has necessarily brought about a return to a dominant art-theoretical discourse in the field, as well as an emphasis on formal training and management (Tobelem, 2005). Yet, I also heard repeatedly that the essence of curating ‘cannot be taught’. If star curators cannot ‘teach’ curating, then what do these curatorial programs actually do?

...curating cannot be taught. All that we can actually teach are things that may help people to become a curator, or to work as a curator. But ultimately the essence of this profession is something that is very vague and has a lot to do with curiosity, inspiration, and the ambition to immerse yourself in a particular context. [...] It’s not like becoming, I don’t know, a successful hedge-fund manager.

Regarding [my] curating course, of course you can’t teach curating. So, the way we’ve proceeded is to let the students develop a reading list that works for them. Obviously, this is very different than [another] curating course, which does it properly by teaching them about art history, theory, etc. Basically, my generation of curators is the very last generation of curators who can curate without having taken a course in curating. It’s just like artists: they didn’t used to need to go to school, but now they do. But, we are resisting any sort of orthodoxy or moulding the students to be like us. We’re not trying to produce mini-me’s or [mini versions of well-known star curators]. Instead, we’ve recently moved the curating program into the same space as the art students’ studios. So, physically, we demonstrate the need for curators and artists to be constantly interacting, and that the role of the curator is to be around art and, more importantly, artists.

Curating, of course, can’t be taught. Curating is something that is coming out of — let me think how you would say that — experience, or conditioning even, or listening, whatever that may be. But, you can definitely teach other aspects that may be useful for a curator. You could teach theory, reading, the history of exhibitions, analyzing a work of art...

As these curators emphasize, curating is an experience or instinct. Training, then, takes a practical shape (spending time with artists or mounting an exhibition), as much as an art theoretical shape (giving students conceptual tools derived from theory).<sup>33</sup>

I also heard that the new emphasis on formal training in curatorship has had the effect of elevating the importance of concept and theory in mediating art.

The [star] generation of curators were more like organizers or publicists — they are a franchise. You can’t be that kind of curator anymore; instead, it’s going back to the idea that curators are caretakers of artworks. Younger curators are doing more and more with how to think and write theoretically about art.

Ironically, it is because of this belief that one can only learn how to curate from experience that many of the younger curators in my sample have opted for history and writing-intensive curatorial courses, rather than more practice-oriented courses. Writing and history are what one young curator termed ‘transferable art world skills’.

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<sup>33</sup> See, in particular, the autumn/winter 2004 issue of *Manifesta Journal* (volume 4) on ‘Teaching Curatorship’, in which the articles debate whether curatorial programs should teach students about the workings of the contemporary art world or give them critical tools to build their own conceptual practice.

Indeed, many of the younger curators in my sample have educational backgrounds in more theoretical tracks, such as interdisciplinary literature courses that featured literary theory, feminist theory, or visual culture. Those who enrolled in curatorial training courses that emphasized these skills preferred to gain their practical experience through internships and on-the-job training. Again, the phrase ‘accidental curator’ is popular even among these newer curators, as they describe ‘finding’ their way to curating via other activities in publishing and cultural heritage work. For these younger individuals, a crucial point at which one becomes a curator, rather than an apprentice, is in learning how to write in a cohesive manner about contemporary artistic practice.

How did I become a curator? By accident...by default. I don't feel like I had any particular career plan. I didn't actually know what being a curator was. I was just interested in art and followed my nose to a large extent. I studied art at school, and it was the thing that I really liked. I was good at drawing, and that was really how you knew you were into art. [...] But after my art foundation course, I didn't feel like I wanted to go to art college and become a practicing artist. I was interested more in the art history side, in writing. So I did art history at [university], and afterwards I didn't really know what I wanted to do exactly. I applied through [a newspaper jobs section] for a six-month curatorial assistantship job at [a museum] in Medieval and Later Antiquities, because I'd studied medieval stained glass at [university]. I was writing about the installation experience of stained glass, and I felt if I had known about Dan Flavin, that's what I would've been writing about. But, I didn't really have access in a coherent way to recent art practice, so I was coming from this odd angle, combining the theory that I had read with old art history in a strange way. So, working in the museum was extremely antiquated, but the thing I did notice there was that the combination of the practicality of curating exhibitions — the full dimensionality of it — with the writing really appealed to me more than the publishing side. And, I went back to do an M.A. after I'd worked for about a year and a half. I really wanted to hone in on writing again. I was deciding between [two curating courses]. I thought that I could probably get a lot of the experience from the curating course through working, which I have to do anyway to earn money. And since I'd get the writing side in a more intensive way from [one course] M.A., I went for that. Well, in a way I think the curating course probably does give you other things, like connections, but I decided to go for the more full-blown art history M.A., because I had been limited to only a year of studying art history in my degree. While I was there, I got a job working for [a gallery] part time. And, that was actually a brilliant combination for me, because I was at the gallery and meeting the artists. I wasn't really doing any work, just things like opening the door. The job itself wasn't demanding, but just being exposed to how that system worked was really interesting. It was a really good parallel with looking at 1960s Minimalism in New York and how that scene worked, and seeing how things are working through this gallery and how much they're actually the agents of introducing new work, and so on. So, I did that for a couple of years, and then I was beginning to consolidate what the idea of curating was much more, and how the practice of writing and bringing ideas together through writing might be manifested through an exhibition. And, I got a job at [a contemporary arts center] as a curatorial assistant, and was there for three years. Then I was promoted to assistant curator.

I abandoned my artistic practice, because it was weighing me down. I lost interest in it, I guess. But at the same time, I became more interested in the economy of culture. Plus, that allowed me to go to university and find the means — like writing — to understand and express all of the things that were interesting me. And, I found this to be increasingly more fruitful than the engagement I had with these ideas back in art school.

As illustrated in these two trajectories above (of which there were many similar examples), even by the turn of the century, the definition of ‘curator’ was still sufficiently vague. These two young curators ‘discovered’ and cultivated curating as a professional calling through their exposure to two main activities: art theory and writing skills, and practical expertise in internships. The process of gradually becoming a curator is described by many as finding a way to organize, understand, and put into practice all of the ideas, theories, and interests that curators developed in their studies and life experiences.

For this younger generation of curators, there is an additional skill that is needed for curating beyond practical experience and theoretical and writing skills. As demonstrated by the accounts below, more art history-oriented courses may also play an important role beyond strictly theory; they actually teach you to *look* at artworks.

I studied art history at [one university] while also studying philosophy at [another university]. I wanted the two subjects to complement each other, because I found in philosophy what seemed to be missing in art history. While I felt in general that the [art history course] was a waste of time, I did learn something very important there: the physical sense of looking at artwork, the confrontation with the artwork. This sounds dumb, but I realize that it really did give me a more material and spatial sense of objects. In philosophy, by contrast, the only objects we deal with are in books, in little boxes. But, to see artworks firsthand, it teaches you how to relate to them somehow.

I did a [diploma course] in the decorative arts, in order to finish up my qualifying studies. In this course, we focused on ‘developing our eye’ in a very non-academic manner. They taught us how to look at art and other objects. The approach was much more oriented towards connoisseurship than any sort of academic approach. It wasn’t about art history and theory, but rather just how to look at things and understand and appreciate all of the layers constituting their meaning. This was great, because otherwise, you never get the opportunity in your daily life to look at things in this sort of structural way. And, even better, I realized that I could do it, that I had a good knack for really dissecting images and objects. So, I applied to do a curating course at [a university]. In my interview, they showed me pictures of artworks and asked me, ‘What do you see? And, as I just said, I was very familiar from my diploma course with doing this and I knew how to. So, I got in without a problem.

Many curators are introduced to the skills involved in physically ‘looking at’ artworks and visually ‘dissecting them’ on curatorial training courses or in professional work. The importance of these skills to complement a more theoretical education demonstrates the uniquely visual work involved in curating and the importance of a visual analytical skill set.

To summarize these varied tracks and orientations to curating contemporary art, there are a variety of ‘tacit’ learning activities that can make up the process of becoming a curator: networking, learning how to write about art, learning how to look at art, and learning how to engage with artists. As Henderson (1999: 8) notes, ‘The knowledge used in everyday work is grounded in practice, the learning of practice, the history of a given practice, and the cultural, technical, and organizational constraints constructed around

practice'. Although one cannot teach curating, the informal learning that takes place through internships and curator-led training courses demonstrates that curating in contemporary art is, in many ways, best seen as a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The knowledge of how to be a curator is not codified through abstract guidelines and principles, but rather, is suspended in the sphere of engagement. This means that experiential engagement through social and material interaction plays an important role in learning the practice-based knowledge comprising curatorial work, as well as how to perform it successfully (Hindmarsh & Pilnick, 2002). On the surface, young curators appear to be learning the conventions of the art world in a very practical manner, which contributes to their appearance as 'imaginary feedback loops'. Yet, in the process, they are actually taking lessons in much deeper forms of knowledge connected to material consciousness and ethical values (cf. Cook & Yanow, 1993; Sennett, 2008).

### **4.3 Institutional constraints**

Although there is no firm definition of contemporary curatorship, Bourdieu (1993 [1983]) argues that curators nevertheless exist in a common field of cultural production in relations of competition with other agents. Particularly in public museums, even freelance curators of contemporary art have to deal with heteronomous forces and interests in the field made manifest in the exhibition-making process (Banks, 2007; Kahn & Garden, 1993; Szylak & Szczerski, 2007). These external forces include the preferences of private or public exhibition sponsors and the galleries representing exhibiting artists, the administrative requirements of museums or marketing departments, the curator's desire to get along with the artist(s), and taste expectations emanating from the museum trustees and curator's peer group (Alexander, 1996a,b; Alexander & Rueschemeyer, 2005; Alloway, 1996; Becker, 1982; Haacke, 2006; Octobre, 1996a; Tobelem, 2005). Moreover, pressures for increased visitation and financial accountability have led to an increased emphasis on management skills (McCarthy, et al., 2005; Schubert, 2000). Curators regularly complained of the need to exit these institutional constraints and demands to accomplish their real curatorial work. Although the personal philosophy and aesthetic sensibility of the individual curator is a determinant of the allocation of museum department funds

(Rosenblum, 1978), this field is the context within which curatorial action and agency operates and, indeed, is made possible.

Museum curators are primarily subject to the dollar; this is particularly the case in contemporary art where the museum and market are no longer independent (Moureau & Sagot-Duvaurox, 2006; Vander Gucht, 1990).<sup>34</sup> As a result, there can be conflicts between the artistic goals of cultural organizations and their business requirements, the latter of which involve a focus on marketing a product to attract ‘middlebrow’ visitors (Alexander, 1996a). As Alexander (1996a) demonstrates clearly, the available financial resources in a museum reflect the social organization of art worlds and become part of the pattern of constraints and possibilities that shapes the art produced. For instance, the transportation or insurance costs of an artwork must be taken into consideration when deciding to include it in an exhibition. Similarly, it is cheaper to borrow existing artworks on loan than underwrite the production of newly-commissioned pieces.

A second, interwoven constraint for the museum curator is what Zolberg (1981) refers to as the ‘tension of missions’ in the museum between populist education and elitist conservation. Although there have been several recent movements across Europe and the U.S. to emphasize the former, the latter is generally privileged among museum professionals (cf. Alexander, 1996b; DiMaggio, 1991; Hooper-Greenhill, 1991; Pearce, 1995; Zolberg, 1992).<sup>35</sup> As defined by Pick (1980: 112), the main concern of the arts administrator is for the nature of art and its immediate meaning for the public; most administrators seem to share an inwardness with the art form, sensitivity to shades of public comprehension of the art, and the ability to make an aesthetic contract between art and appropriate audience. Yet, arts administrators also have obligations to act on behalf of the museum or nation to enrich its profile in the contemporary art world, which can involve appealing to elite peer groups rather than general audiences (Abbing, 2002; Vander Gucht, 1990).

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<sup>34</sup> Several curators accused the rising importance of the market in the contemporary art world as putting the museum at a financial deficit. Similarly, there is a perception that curators can exert more freedom in commercial galleries due to the absence of permanent collections and museum restrictions (cf. Alexander, 1996a). These perceptions are confirmed by Crane (1987), who notes that nonprofit organizations are less likely to produce innovation because they are subject to financial pressures, as well as Peterson (1986), who notes that these pressures force creative ‘impresarios’ to become bureaucratic over time. As one curator stated, ‘I remember when the galleries used to be sniffed at and no serious curator would consider working in a gallery. But now, galleries have become a very sensible alternative. They have money, really excellent spaces, and do get good audiences and publicity. I completely understand [a colleague’s] move to the gallery’.

<sup>35</sup> This has also been shown to be the case, more recently, in science museums (Tlili, 2008).

In museums, you have huge obligations to the audience. In particular, all of the texts and things in museums are based on the concept of 'over-explicitation'. What I mean is that in museums, they tell people what it is. In contrast, here [a private collection], 'it just is'. We don't have to spell it all out for the audience; they can just take what they want out of it. What's funny is that the museum grew very much out of the tradition of the private collection, but with public funding comes audience obligations.

Despite the increased democratic mission of museums, as outlined in the quote above, the curator's double existence as expert globetrotter ensures that he or she is far more familiar with artists than publics. Given their international status, the mediation work of many exhibition curators is not oriented at the grand public. In contrast, their 'primary interlocutors' (Ottobri, 1996a: 238) are the artist(s), their peers, and the contemporary art world (Moulin, 1992: 65; Ottobri, 1999b: 94). It is not surprising, then, that the educational functions of 'spelling it out for the audience' are often given to other individuals in the museum (cf. Charman, 2005; Pequignot, 2008). Yet, giving educational functions to others is dangerous in that it makes curators align more with the market than with audiences (Alloway, 1996), and privileges gatekeepers over 'gate-passers' in the museum organisation (Zolberg, 1992). It also gives rise to complaints that museums do not offer members of the general public what they need to experience art (cf. Berleant, 1990; Dobbs, 1990). These concerns have given birth to a 'new museology' with an emphasis on the social direction of museums and their audiences, rather than on seeing museums as sites for scholarly activity (cf. MacDonald & Fyfe, 1996; McClellan, 2003; Sandell, 1998; Vergo, 1989; Weil, 1990).<sup>36</sup>

A third constraint faced by curators is one shaped by the nature of the museum itself. According to Duncan (1995: 107), curators 'are constrained to program their galleries within a cultural construct, one that is never fully of their making but for which they will be held responsible by their superiors in the museum, by the views of the other art-world professionals, and by the variously informed, often conservative publics they serve, publics whose expectations are barely touched by the new or revisionist art-historical thinking'. Traditionally, this cultural construct is represented by physical and discursive formalities in the exhibition (e.g., white walls, the consistent spacing of artworks, and explanatory notes on the artworks), something which many modern and contemporary artists seek to reverse or engage in a destructive process (Appleyard, 1984; Battcock, 1977; Danto, 1997;

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<sup>36</sup> In France, a new 'law on museums' adopted on January 4, 2002 requires all museums recognized by the state to adopt a mission of 'public service'. For more information on the history and immediate outcome of this ruling, see Poulard (2003).

Octobre, 1999a; Wallis, 1984).<sup>37</sup> As contemporary art becomes less object-centered and more experience- or process-centered, this challenges traditional museum display practices (Haapalainen, 2006; Putnam, 2001). As one curator stated, ‘If we are to pretend that the museum has any role in democracy whatsoever, we absolutely have to get people to question the institution’. Yet, questioning the institution and disrupting exhibition formalities disrupts the tacit, ritual conventions that allow people to approach the artwork. Hence, institutional curators become responsible for what Heinich (1998b: 79) terms ‘managing the irreconcilable’, negotiating the contradiction between the civic logic of an institutional consensus regarding public interest, and the contemporary artistic logic of the transgression of established codes and traditions (cf. Blazwick, et al., 1997).<sup>38</sup>

Posing a fourth constraint, the museum represents the codification of artistic knowledge. While the curator may make private choices about contemporary artworks informed by his or her personal taste, he or she will have to immediately justify this choice within museum codes or conventions.<sup>39</sup> In the study of the publishing house editor, Powell (1985: 158) describes editorial discretion as a ‘negotiated order, a continual process of interaction and redefinition between an editor’s preferences and the house’s tradition and operating preferences’. Similarly, Heinich (1997b), Octobre (1999b), and Gielen (2005) demonstrate that curators ultimately refer to ‘objective’ criteria like the history of an artwork or its place in other museum collections in order to justify their choice of inclusion, although their initial arguments may be about more subjective criteria, such as its ‘appeal’.

Fifth, on a physical level, curators, especially those in multidisciplinary institutions, are subject to the needs of other arts administrators in that institution who may have other events vying for event space and facilities resources. What they can exhibit is also dependent upon the conventions of the space: no nudity or open flame, for instance. Additionally, most institutions commonly plan a year or more ahead and require curators to think about their budgets for painting and building temporary walls at this time, which makes it difficult to commission new artworks or work spontaneously. Available time and

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<sup>37</sup> Note, for instance, the post 1960s Duchampian tradition of institutional critique and the work of Marcel Broodthaers, Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren, Christian Boltanski, Fred Wilson, Maud Sulter, Gerald McMaster, Louise Lawler, Melvin Charney, Barbara Steinman, Irene Whittome, Group Material, Renee Green, Joseph Kosuth, Annette Messager, James Luna, Barbara Kruger, Krzysztof Wodiczko, and Trinh T. Minh-Ha, among others (Welchman, 2006).

<sup>38</sup> A special 1989 issue of *Les Cahiers du Musée National d’Art Moderne* on the topic of ‘Contemporary Art and the Museum’ deals with this disjuncture in detail, as does Heinich (1998c).

<sup>39</sup> For a detailed, visual, and ethnographic exploration at taste at work in the production of culture, see Lantz (2005).

manpower in the institution is another limiting factor, as gallery technicians must be hired and scheduled for installations and take downs.

By combining the charismatic background of the curator with the institutional restraints of the museum, I suggest seeing the curator of contemporary art as a public intellectual, in the sense of Coser (1965). As intellectuals are absorbed into the establishment, they risk ceasing to be creative and critical; unattached intellectuals are able to provide some of the most groundbreaking ideas that often spread to policy and wider society because they are not limited by institutional pressure or affiliation (cf. Adler, 1979; Coser, 1965; Giddens, 1991; Peterson, 1986). As one curator of a private foundation stated, ‘The soul and the magic disappears when too many people become involved. That’s to be expected. [...] That’s why I defend the importance of the independent, private viewpoint’. And yet, Coser (1965) also describes how the institutional setting is an important buffer for intellectuals from general publics and outside interference. Institutions can protect and censor intellectuals simultaneously, and curators therefore tread a careful, middle-ground path. Although my curatorial informants complained vociferously of the difficulties of working within institutional restraints (including the financial and other material restrictions on producing art), many also saw these as ‘productive possibilities’ for their own creative intervention.

Curators have a variety of strategies for finding ‘wobble room’ within the institutional limits on their work. As Alexander (1996b) surmised from a quantitative, historical study of art exhibitions and their funding sources, larger numbers of alternative sources of funds have increased the leverage curators have in mounting exhibitions by locating funders to match the work they would like to do. This is confirmed by my qualitative work, as illustrated by one curator below:

[3-Line Interview Excerpt Removed]

Ultimately, money is an important enabler of curatorial freedom. Many curators work to unite particular artworks or exhibitions with related funding sources. For example, for one exhibition featuring a golden theme, the curatorial team approached a high-end jewellery company as a potential sponsor. As well as locating additional funding, another strategy curators employ is alternating popular exhibitions with more scholarly exhibitions, or exhibiting travelling ‘prefabricated’ exhibitions in order to divert money to more radical shows (Alexander, 1996b). I equally observed this strategy firsthand in my ethnographic work.

Another strategy for enhanced manoeuvrability entails curators working closely with the artist, blending innovation in exhibition making with the artist's own innovative practice, so that the two become indiscernible. Indeed, as Bilton (2007) points out, increasingly creativity in the contemporary cultural industries is located in the relationships between individuals (as located in systems and organizations), not in individuals themselves. As one curator spoke of another's collaboration with an artist:

[7-Line Interview Excerpt Removed]

In this case, a curator's personal friendship and intimacy with an artist was introduced into the institutional sphere, and in doing so, this relationship may have led to an unintended extension of the curator's own curatorial agency.

A further strategy for retaining curatorial freedom is maintaining a freelance career on the side, dipping in and out of different museums, or working simultaneously as a critic, writer, and teacher, among other professions in the art world (Tobelem, 2005). It is uncommon for curators of contemporary art to stay in one institution permanently; rather, those in my sample overwhelmingly had made several moves in search of a 'fresh space'. For curators who choose this path, they remain both institutional insiders and outsiders at the same time.

The curator's position is at the nexus of all of these enablers and restrictions.<sup>40</sup> The questions then become, how do curators reconcile their preferences with institutional prerogative? How do curators create an everyday space for freedom and creativity within institutional constraints? Before turning to answer this question with a close study of the material context of exhibition planning, I will briefly introduce some of the other curatorial staff members party to the action.

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<sup>40</sup> The different mechanisms for artistic support and funding across Europe (as well as different visitor patterns) lend this study towards a comparative analysis of the two field sites. As I indicated in Section 3.2.2, however, the more interesting comparison is how curators in a variety of institutions across these countries encounter similar obstacles in curating contemporary art due to the material nature of this work. For readers interested in state support for contemporary art, much work has examined Britain (c.f. Alexander, 1996a; Editorial, 1987; Gray, 2000; Hooper-Greenhill, 1991; Jenkins, 1979b; Lloyd & Thomas, 1998; Pearson, 1982; Pick, 1980; Pointon, 1994; Roodhouse, 1998; Shaw, 1987; White, 1975) and France (c.f. Boylan, 1992a,b, 1996; DeRoo, 2006; Mesnard, 1974; Michaud, 1987; Mollard, 2001; Poulard, 2005; Poulot, 2001; Tobelem, 2005; Urfalino, 1996), for example.

#### 4.3.1 Institutional organization

As Becker (1982) demonstrates, the stability of art worlds is made possible by established conventions. While the curator of contemporary art is a profession in evolution, the museum of modern and contemporary art remains a highly institutionalized space where many of these conventions are perceived as objective fact (cf. Zucker, 1977). The main curator of contemporary art, who has a primary allegiance to the artist(s) and international contemporary art scene, produces the conceptual and theoretical frame for the exhibition. Yet, there are a variety of other individuals who contribute to the curatorial outcome in supporting roles. These are the more traditional ‘museum administrators’, including museum directors, assistant or staff curators, and, occasionally, gallery managers, who are collectively responsible for the management and logistical organization of exhibitions (Tobelem, 2005).

The primary allegiance of the curatorial staff is to the institution and its mass public. They are responsible for maintaining organizational documents (in the form of files, Excel spreadsheets, and archives) and for mediating between budget officers, representative galleries, contractors, press liaisons, gallery technicians, publishers, educators, and others involved in mounting an exhibition. This division of creative and logistical labour is evidenced by the following quote by an assistant curator:

To be honest, this job isn't really what I want to do in curating. It's far too much about spreadsheets and budgets and transport and logistics. I am really not involved at all in the real curating and concept-based side of things. And I am hoping to get there, but will likely have to find a new job to do that.

In other words, even at small museums, behind every curator are very good assistant curators (who generally have come up through the ranks of the institution and who may have a more formal training in art history or administration). These individuals are responsible for much of the logistical work in organising the exhibition and helping the chief curators to realize their ideas. I had the pleasure of observing very caring and constructive relationships between chief and assistant curators in both field sites.<sup>41</sup>

As Octobre (1996b; 1999b; 2001) and Tobelem (2005) demonstrate, the disassociation of creative and theoretical work (e.g., research, exhibition design, and concept) from practical knowhow (e.g., management, administration, and communication) is at the base of curatorial practice, and this disassociation is more pronounced the larger

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<sup>41</sup>[Interview Excerpt Removed]

the institution. In many cases, this organizational structure is reflected in a ‘spatial hierarchy’ in the building (e.g., museum directorship on the top floor, curator offices below, and education and gallery management lower or perhaps underground). Curators are therefore in an ambivalent place in the institution: they report to directors but delegate to staffs; in both cases, decisions slide from their hands to others (Alloway, 1996). Yet, the decisions made by others can impact the exhibition in important ways.

The following quote, taken from an interview with an independent curator as he reflected upon his recent exhibition, demonstrates the significant role played by curatorial staff in his last role as a guest-curator.

The main thing is to keep the artist within budget. Otherwise, an independent curator doesn’t have an institutional role to play. I don’t have to say, ‘Well, we can’t do that stuff’, so I’m free to just bring this thing together. But, there are lots of negotiations in an institution.

As alluded to by the independent curator above, on an organizational level, the charismatic nature of curatorial authority is regulated and *conventionalized* by the existence of surrounding staff members who take responsibility for particular institutional responsibilities. It is with these individuals that the curator (in the sense of the individual author or *commissaire* of the exhibition) often has to negotiate.

Yet, this strict divide between creativity and organization is clearly blurred in the plural venture of exhibition making. This multitude of institutional actors performs their roles in a variety of ways and may be responsible for more or less creative aspects of the process. For example, one gallery manager conceived of his work as a form of ‘end-curation’, because he makes all of the final choices about how the artworks actually fit and get put up in the space, such as mounting a sculpture in a particular place to avoid blocking the fire exit sign. In another situation, I witnessed an artist circumventing the curator by contacting the gallery manager directly to see ‘what was really possible’ to do in the space practically (versus conceptually). As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, it is in these and other gaps in the institutional structure where curators and others build moments of unconventional action.

#### **4.4 Conclusion: A profession in flux**

To collect the argument I have been developing here, the curator of contemporary art emerged as an important character in the contemporary art world for a variety of

reasons, including the rise of the temporary exhibition for attracting museum visitors, the need for highly-networked individuals to keep abreast of emerging artists and artworks in the field, and the importance of non-historical approaches in valorising and framing contemporary artworks. This is similar to the rising importance of music producers in the mainstreaming of music markets (cf. Hennion, 1989 [1983]; Peterson, 1997). As several curators noted, there is an increasing need for curators to have more and more skills; ‘there’s a tendency now for curators to be a curator *and* an interviewer *and* a theorist *and* a communicator *and* a fundraiser...One head wears several hats’, observed one senior curator. In the absence of a strict, professionalized skill set, curators themselves introduce and carry out new tasks in mediation as they become useful or necessary. Although museum curators work in highly conventionalized organizations, their work is far from codified, as demonstrated by the importance of ‘practice’ and ‘exposure’ in their training.

I argue that the reason why sociology has amassed so little information on curators is because it treats them as mere ‘editors’ or rational, goal-oriented individuals, as intermediaries, not true mediators in the sense of actor-network theory. In this chapter, I have mapped out a variety of ‘resources’ (Barnes & Bloor, 1982) with which curators are able to act, including expert knowledge of the artistic milieu, charismatic strategies, and institutional support. By incorporating the embodied dimensions of curatorial practice and perception, or *how* these resources actually enter into the practical work of exhibition making, I will demonstrate that curators are not simply rational individuals operating within institutional constraints, values, and elite cultural codes, but are also gut-driven, aesthetic individuals responsive to material surroundings.

## 5. EXHIBITION PLANNING

Marc: It started some time ago [your art snobbery]. To be precise, it started on the day we were discussing some work of art and you uttered, quite seriously, the word *deconstruction*. It wasn't so much the word *deconstruction* which upset me, it was the air of solemnity you imbued it with. You said, humourlessly, unapologetically, without a trace of irony, the word *deconstruction*, you, my friend.

(Reza, 1994: 26-27)

The curator is responsible for providing three elements in the design and planning of an exhibition: the overall theme, its stylistic organization, and an interpretation of included artworks (Heinich & Pollak, 1989a: 39-40). Yet, this heuristic simplification ignores the immense amount of micro-level work necessary to tie the exhibition theme, included artworks, and installation design together into a cohesive whole for public consumption. As Heinich (1998c: 38) explains, there is a good deal of interpretive and mediating effort that underlines the construction of artistic legitimacy and cultural 'normality' in the institution. Exhibition planning is a grounded, work situation that involves a good deal of practical negotiation.

In organizing an exhibition: a curator creates two physical products: the physical installation and the textual mediation around the exhibition (which can include press releases, a catalogue, visitor guides, wall labels, translations of text-based artworks into the local language, and other documents).<sup>42</sup> Both of these activities feed into the overarching narrative of the exhibition and are subject to the general institutional constraints described in Section 4.3. In looking at the exhibition planning process in detail here, I will demonstrate how these general constraints become activated through the accomplishment of particular tasks. What is unique to the exhibition planning process in contemporary art is that curators often do much of their work in the absence of seeing the actual artworks themselves (because they may belong to private lenders, have not yet been fabricated, or have never before been exhibited), and living artists are often involved in the planning process (and may alter artworks to be included in the exhibition or have preferences about how their work is discussed in exhibition texts). The inherent flexibility demanded by these

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<sup>42</sup> Increasingly, many exhibitions also include a large 'performative' component, which can feature extensive graphic design, paraphernalia for sale, performance events, and even costumes worn by museum invigilators, all in keeping with the exhibition's theme and stylistic organization. Staniszewski (1998) speaks about these more 'experimental' installations in detail. As this is not universal, I will speak only about the physical installation and typical textual documentation that accompanied the exhibitions in my research sample.

characteristics means that curators turn to a variety of ‘proxies’ for the artwork to accomplish their work and planning in the lead up to the physical installation. Before looking at the work of planning an installation or composing exhibition documentation in detail, I will briefly discuss the exhibition-making process as a general evolution in concept and form.

### **5.1 The evolving exhibition**

An exhibition of contemporary art is a subtle, delicate balance between its overall thematic and the particular artworks included. As I was told repeatedly and experienced firsthand at both ethnographic sites, the narrative around the exhibition changes during the process of conceiving, planning, and installing an exhibition. As discussed in Section 4.2, there are a variety of curatorial concepts and approaches, and the organisational differences between monographic and group shows can be enormous. Exhibitions are born in many different ways, and curators vary widely as to the extent of their curatorial interventions. Yet, based on the large number of coinciding accounts in my research, I propose one commonality in exhibition planning: exhibitions develop in a time-sensitive process involving preconceived notions, available opportunities, evolving information, artist input, and new information-seeking activities.

The exhibition entails an ‘improvisational’ process for many curators, in which their own curatorial ideas are linked to the artistic practice they follow, in contrast to the more discrete curatorial model of ‘choosing an idea, and then choosing artists or artworks that fit with it’. In the quote below, one curator reflects on the interaction of his/her own ideas and new information gleaned about included artworks.

It [this exhibition] is just work I liked by artists who I’ve worked with before, mostly. Um, and through that, the theme became apparent to me, this idea of the emblem. Partly it was the context of the show... what represents [this city]. So, I thought about this idea of the family crest, and how the works might add up to one image. And, I was going to do it more explicitly, making it almost arranged symmetrically, but as ever, when you’re curating, the artists change the work they want to show. That didn’t quite work out, but my idea was making some kind of three-dimensional emblematic... badge... out of the works, and, at the same time, thinking how that concept of the emblem was evident in each of the individual artist’s works, so there were two layers in that sense. They added up to an aesthetic commonality, but at the same time their works engaged with my concept.

As reflected above, curators use evolving information about artists, artworks, and institutional opportunities to locate and elaborate their previously-conceived ideas of the

exhibition theme. They do this by drawing on different elements in the artist's work, important historical exhibitions, and existing curatorial ideas to plan certain exhibition themes or formats. In doing so, they work to rigorously create harmony between these available practicalities and their curatorial concepts about the nature of the exhibition.

Moulin and Quemin (1993; 2001) emphasize that the base of curatorial expertise is an expansive knowledge of the international context of contemporary art. In planning exhibitions, curators are also specialists in a different kind of context, the local context of the exhibition time and space. They are experts in weaving together institutional possibilities, world events, exhibition history, audience needs, and the artist's career, and bringing these together, synergistically, in a meaningful whole. This ability to mobilize available opportunities in the meaning-making process is perhaps what Bourdieu (1993 [1968]) was referring to when he described avant-garde curatorial work as a creative knowledge of the 'code of the codes'. Before moving on to discuss how this synergy takes place through the evolution of installation design and the composition of exhibition texts, I will first briefly detail the complexities of working with unseen artworks and the participation of living artists.

### *5.1.1 Choosing and seeing artworks*

The question of how curators come to choose artists and artworks to exhibit is, in itself, an extensive and context-driven topic which cannot be discussed here at length (cf. Acord, 2009). Instead, I will examine the more discrete question of the structural issues and limitations that govern the availability of particular artworks for exhibition, and how proxies for these artworks play a necessary role in the exhibition planning process. The two biggest institutional issues shaping the selection of artworks are money and security.

Securing and organizing the display of artworks is a vast, detail-oriented task, which includes managing budgets and fundraising, liaising with representative galleries on behalf of private collectors, issues of technical staffing, and even locating storage space. Unsurprisingly, money is the biggest obstacle to including particular artworks for exhibition, generally because it would cost too much money to have a particular artwork

shipped, insured, or duplicated for exhibition.<sup>43</sup> A second obstacle is owners unwilling to lend particular artworks for exhibition. In this case, the institution can negotiate with the owner and pay to have a duplicate artwork fabricated, but not signed, by the artist, while still crediting the owner for the loan. The duplicate is destroyed following the exhibition.

Even more complicated, however, is figuring out what particular artworks look like for planning purposes. Permission for the acquisition and distribution of official images of artworks (for example, in press or exhibition material) must be requested from galleries and lenders. This, in itself, is a time consuming process equivalent to that of locating and securing loans of the artworks themselves. In the meantime, for planning purposes, curators turn to a variety of proxies for the artwork, including the following: past catalogues of the artist, press clippings from past exhibitions, Google searches for images of the artwork, informal photographs of the artwork in fabrication, interviews with the artist describing the artwork, emails from the artist describing the artwork in fabrication, discussions with gallery representatives who have seen and are familiar with the artwork, studio visits, and ‘checklists of work’ or ‘status reports’ (detailed descriptions of the artwork’s dimensions, media, and packing materials). In many museums, these commented proxies are organized and made available centrally in hard copy and on a password-protected internal network for use by different individuals to carry out different tasks.

While much of the planning process is based on the curators’ and others’ understandings of the conceptual importance of the artworks and their physical dimensions, it is important to actually *see* the artworks for a variety of reasons. Curators need to have a visual sense of the materials they are working with, both for richly describing the artist’s work in catalogue texts, as well as planning visually interesting installations that include artworks in a variety of media. This is evidenced in one telephone interchange:

Curator: What colour is the [this artwork]?

Gallerist: White.

Curator: Can you be more specific? White isn’t always white.

As seen here, an accurate visual conception of an artwork is important for the curator as he or she plans the exhibition installation in his or her ‘mind’s eye’. These visual details also play an important role in the curator’s evolving mental evolution of the exhibition narrative.

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<sup>43</sup> It is common for museums to have an ‘exhibition copy’ made of fragile artworks, rather than placing the original artworks on exhibition. This is particularly the case for film- or media-based artworks, where the physical screening of the artwork would subject it to repeated stresses.

Indeed, I saw curators change their mind about particular artworks to include in an exhibition after seeing images of them, even when they had previously decided to include an artwork based on an artist's or gallery's recommendation. I will briefly evidence the importance of seeing visual proxies of artworks through the example of a curatorial planning meeting at one fieldwork site. First, I will present a fieldnotes excerpt to set the scene:

A curator and assistant curator push their chairs together between their desks and have the image file (in a binder) out on their laps between them. They continuously turn pages and point to various images. The assistant curator also has the exhibition binder and a notebook as well, and refers to the status report to answer questions that the curator asks, such as questions about the size of artworks, the period of loan, or the concept behind the piece. There is some interrupting and talking over one another — mostly the curator over the assistant curator — but generally it's quite calm.

Now, in a detailed excerpt from the conversation itself, the curator and assistant curator look at and discuss images of various artworks, compiled in a binder, page by page. In the process, they make decisions about which artworks to include (and where they might be displayed) in the monographic exhibition.

[14-Line Recording Transcript Excerpt Removed]

As seen in the interchange above, the image-based conversation unearthed a variety of contextual cues vital to the creation of the emergent exhibition narrative (in both textual and physical form). These included: stories behind particular artworks ('The artist made it for his/her parent'), observations about their material nature ('It's exactly the same material surface as [another artwork that references a fellow artist]'), links between various artworks ('sets of different families'), and realizations that the curators know much less about some artworks ('I really want to understand them better', or, 'There's certainly a reference, but I don't know what it is'). The curators' embodied and intellectual responses to these images prompted the emergence of various thematic codes in the exhibition from the presentation of particular artworks, in particular, the theme of 'family' in the artist's work. Moreover, other artworks were marginalised in this process because they did not fit into these themes ('I don't like this piece', or, 'We need something less obscure'). This moment of visually-based conversation marked a key point in the emergence of the exhibition as a physical reality, versus a concept inside the curator's head.

### 5.1.2 Working with living artists

Along with the difficulty of planning exhibitions without seeing the artworks, curators of contemporary art may also be faced with regular interchange and compromise in working with living artists.<sup>44</sup> Just as there are near-limitless models of exhibition making, there are radically different models of how curators work with artists. There is no one ‘breed’ of artist; each artist works differently, maintains a different input into the exhibition, and conceives of the curatorial role differently. As a result, curating can entail everything from ‘social work’ and in-depth collaboration, to being a ‘cleaning lady’ and organizing late-night ‘booze ups’. As one curator stated, ‘Who *curates* Rachel Whiteread, I mean, come’on!’.

Very generally speaking, the relationship between curator and artist is that between the knowledge of a space (including its physical capabilities, institutional conventions, audience, and the larger theoretical ‘context’ in which the exhibition takes place) and the knowledge of the artworks being displayed. A common explanation of the curator’s role, particularly in a monographic exhibition, is that they ‘accompany’ the artist by working within institutional constraints to help the artist achieve his or her goals.<sup>45</sup> Yet, to speak of curating as a secondary task disguises the value-added contribution played by the curator in the exhibition-planning process. Alloway (1996: 225, his emphasis) complains of the ‘weakness’ of many curators who are too subservient to artists, ‘Artists are not themselves best placed to understand how their work is seen or even what it means, production and consumption (interpretation) *are* different acts’. Hence, a longitudinal familiarity with an artist, his or her influences, and oeuvre is an important curatorial asset. Yet, this knowledge and expertise may be exercised in somewhat passive ways.

Many curators describe monographic exhibitions, in particular, as collaborations: the result of a ‘very good dialogue with the artist’, or a ‘dialogue’ working ‘arm in arm’. Curators explain that artists ‘shift their perspective’. Key here is the notion of ‘trust’, in that artists themselves may not yet know what they are producing for an upcoming exhibition,

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<sup>44</sup> Several studies have looked at the impact of contemporary art on the artist/curator relationship, and my intent here is not to replicate them (cf. Blais, 2006; Coulter, 2006; 2007; Michaud, 1991). Rather, I am interested in how the presence of a living artist impacts curatorial strategies for carrying out their work of exhibition making.

<sup>45</sup> None of this discussion is meant to imply that the curator replaces or inhabits the actual role of the artist in the exhibition. As Heinich (1995: 71) describes, since the artist is the sacred figure in the contemporary art world, the curator conceives of him or herself as the artist’s ‘servant’.

even though curators are required to write the texts far in advance. As one curator noted, ‘I’m a writer and that’s my oeuvre’. The discursive framing work done by the curator is the foundation for real collaborations with the artist.

...when you have the artist and the intellectual, in a sense, sharing the ignorance of everyone, and aiming at another task — which is to re-present the space in a different way — the conversation can be open. Because it’s not the intellectual giving something to the artist or the artist aestheticising something; it’s actually a common quandary in which we both are...It’s the social sciences and the arts put together.

In the most intimate collaborations, curators and artists work together to develop the meaning of the exhibition and the artworks within a particular space and time (Becker, et al., 2006). While every exhibition is not a process of collaboration in the sense described above, it requires some collaboration insofar as the curator needs certain pieces of information to do his or her work that only the artist can provide. These include descriptions of the process of creating an artwork, an artist’s influences and inspirations, and the meaning of the artwork as perceived by the artist.

Consequently, curators describe knowing what an artist is ‘up to’, and they are often closely involved in a dialogue around the creation or elaboration of individual artworks, as well as the artist’s oeuvre of work as a whole. As one curator pointed out, ‘There are hours of talking with the artist about this work throughout the process, so there’s lots of us in this stuff’. The question remains, then, as to how curators articulate and represent this conversation to the public when textually framing the exhibition. In the following interview excerpt, one curator demonstrates that this process may be more complicated than expected:

It just feels right! [laughs] Does it feel uncomfortable to you? Do you have to rationalize it? [...] I mean, I think [the artist] is doing a lot of pastiche in this installation. It’s interesting, because, well, trying to analyze that a bit more, it is quite an intimate relationship between a curator and an artist. It’s about understanding, and, in a way, it’s almost as if — I don’t mean to sound arrogant — but I think that because [the artist] knows that I can understand quite a lot of what s/he’s up to...not necessarily express it as you can tell [laughs], it’s almost kind of amplified the pastiche, kind of knocking out the surfaceness of it. [...] And I think [the artist’s] response to this space and to my invitation has been quite a strong sort of difficult installation. [...] I had no idea what [the artist] was going to do. I trusted [the artist], that’s what you have to do.

In the quote above, the experiential familiarity this curator develops with the artist’s work — which is the uniquely defining trait of his or her expertise according to Moulin and Quemin (1993; 2001) — may be experienced in a deeply internal way. The presence of the living artist in the exhibition-making process, ironically, may serve to cloud the explanation of his or her work by the curator rather than to clarify it. The transition between the curator’s deeply-seated working relationship with the artist, and his or her institutional

obligation to the public audience of the exhibition, is one of the fundamental dilemmas in curating exhibitions of contemporary art.

In planning an exhibition, the head curator of an exhibition is responsible for everything and yet nothing at all. The curator is responsible for developing the concept behind the exhibition, choosing artworks, laying out the installation, and framing it discursively. Yet, there are many other people ‘behind the scenes’ who actually *do* these things, often on the curator’s instructions, because the curator him or herself is too busy negotiating institutional bureaucracy and artistic license to physically accomplish all of the details personally. The curator may also not have the specific expertise necessary to fulfil all of these tasks.

In larger museums, there are specialized individuals charged with the tasks of overseeing particular parts of exhibition planning, such as a gallery manager, a press liaison, an educational team, or an assistant curator in charge of the catalogue, among others. These individuals need to know about the artworks and exhibition in as much detail as possible in order to conduct their jobs efficiently. The press officer needs to have a sense of the ‘hook’ of the exhibition and images of the artworks for publicity purposes early on in the process. The gallery manager needs a comprehensive list of finalized artworks in order to plan the condition checking, foreshadow storage logistics, organize the necessary installation materials, and schedule gallery technicians for work. Transportation companies need to have a sense of the artworks they are picking up. The education officer needs to know enough about the main themes in the artist’s work to plan gallery talks. The box office manager needs to have a sense of the scale of the exhibition to schedule invigilators. The museum director needs to know enough about the exhibition and the artworks to be included to ‘drop hints’ at dinner parties. The assistant curators need enough details about the artworks to begin writing catalogue texts and planning visitor guides. And graphic artists, lighting technicians, caterers, musicians, and a whole host of other external individuals need to be given advance knowledge if their services are required.

The head curator of an exhibition, therefore, must mediate between the great unknowns presented by the absence of physical artworks and the presence of the artist, and these varied needs and institutional requirements which must be addressed far in advance. Consequently, curators plan ‘conventional action’ almost in a hypothetical sense. They must go forth with planning the installation and writing the textual documentation, and as

they learn more details about the artworks in the exhibition, they are able to develop and extend the exhibition as a physical and narrative frame. By closely examining the process of planning the installation and composing the textual documentation, I will investigate the ways in which ‘new information’ (introduced by better proxies for artworks, artists’ desires for the framing of their work, and curators’ own information-seeking activities) is negotiated within institutional convention.

## **5.2 Planning the installation**

The planning of an installation begins at the same time as the planning of an exhibition. This is because plans for the space have to be prepared and budgeted for well in advance (e.g., building temporary walls, polishing floors, hiring invigilators, and other environmental details), and specific artworks may be sought or commissioned for particular exhibition spaces in the museum. I heard repeatedly that a monographic exhibition of a living artist begins with a two-step discussion between the artist and the curator: first, a brainstorming session about the concept behind the exhibition, and second, a conversation about the practicalities of what is possible in the gallery space. Then, the museum gives the artist a blank check to work in ‘total freedom’ within these established bounds. As artworks are chosen or created for the exhibition, however, they introduce the question of how to physically exhibit them. The artist has ideas, but the curator knows what works best in the space, and the gallery manager knows the details of feasibility (and cost). Ultimately, the final design of the exhibition installation incorporates both the artist’s wishes and the curator’s suggestions, with additional input from museum technicians and the artist’s assistants.

Much of the planning of an installation takes place in curatorial offices, cafes, or conference rooms, and involves both pre-scheduled and spontaneous meetings between curators, gallery managers, and, sometimes, the artist(s). The most striking thing about these meetings is the rampant use of gestures, postures, and local objects in communicating about artworks and gallery spaces (cf. Goodwin, 2000; Gumperz, 1992; McNeill, 1999; Streeck, 1996). The preparation of a final ‘gallery plan’ entails a lengthy work process in which curators evoke local knowledge and resources in situational, and often spontaneous, ways through visual representation. In what follows, I use a selection of these

representations to explore how ideas are communicated and plans are made within a limited information environment.

### 5.2.1 Gesture

As Schegloff (1984) describes, gestures — particularly hand gestures — are integral to conversation in a variety of ways. In installation planning, gestures play an important role to index or emphasize a particular point, such as the need to ‘push’ artworks or move them to ‘the right side’ of a gallery. In other cases, as described in a fieldnotes excerpt below, gestures may add new information to the discussion by providing a visual proxy for an artwork.

In a meeting with members of the educational department, one woman spoke up quietly and said that she had a ‘stupid question’, and proceeded to ask if they should be worried about people getting [injured] by [an artwork]. [The assistant curator] stood up, stretched her arms out to either side, and began twisting her hips and shoulders to the left and right in a very slow waltz, demonstrating in this way that the contours of the [artwork] were slow and solid and not frenetic and dangerous. After a second or two, she began to verbally narrate her motion by explaining that the [artwork] ‘moved [...] slowly and calmly’.

In the excerpt above, the gestural enactment of the moving artwork by the curator supplements the verbal information. Seen in this way, gestures can be what Schegloff (1984) terms ‘projection spaces’ in conversation by acting as a placeholder for a speaker’s talk. Here, the gesture foreshadowed talk that developed seconds later to explain and narrate the movement.

Additionally, gestures can be used as more permanent projection spaces, by filling in where talk leaves off. A second example from a field site demonstrates the crucial role played by visual information in lieu of verbal explanation in the planning discussion. Here, two curators are looking at the list of artworks they have requested for an exhibition and are making tentative plans for installing them in a particular gallery.

[12-Line Conversation Transcript Excerpt Removed]

As seen above, the assistant curator first receives an unsatisfactory answer to a question about the relative size of particular artworks to the gallery. When the assistant curator re-states the question a second time, ‘Is there enough space in the *space?*’, s/he emphasizes the need to have specific details on the spatial dimension of the artworks. The curator responds by demonstrating, literally, how big the projections are with a hand gesture. When the assistant curator asks a third question, whether any artworks are so large that they require their own gallery space, the curator does not know and drops the hand gesture in lieu of making a tentative verbal plan to set aside an entire gallery. In this exchange, the hand

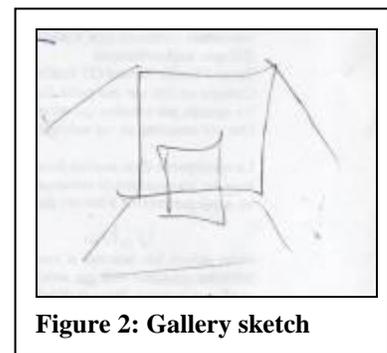
gesture of the makeshift slide projection size is the only satisfactory way to relate the artwork to the physical space of the gallery and inform concrete plans for the installation.

For Schegloff (1984), gesture is seen to play an important role in communication when the amount of verbal information communicated by one speaker is insufficient to explain another speaker's response. One assumes that additional information necessary for comprehension must have been communicated in a visual way. In both examples above, gesture was used by curators to mobilize their visual knowledge about an artwork to answer distinctly spatial questions asked by an educational liaison and an assistant curator, respectively (cf. McNeill, 1999: section two). For brief moments, the curators' bodies became sites to represent and communicate relevant properties of the artworks referenced in the preceding conversations.

### 5.2.2 'Off-the-cuff' sketches

As Henderson (1999) describes in the visual culture of design engineering, spontaneous, hand-made visual representations play a key role in communicating, indexing, and translating tacit knowledge among participants. Similarly, planning an exhibition installation is successfully accomplished through the use of various off-the-cuff drawings and sketches. These often play an important role in resolving debates and questions in exhibition planning, particularly around the nature of artworks and installation devices in relation to other art works and viewers. An excerpt from my fieldnotes illustrates this.

[An assistant curator] and I are drafting a letter to a private donor who was potentially interested in underwriting the cost of [a sculpture], a newly-commissioned artwork for the exhibition. In the middle of our work, [a curator] comes in and asks us what the sculpture would look like. The only information we had been given about this artwork was an email from the artist's assistant the day before [which gives cursory details of the medium of the sculpture and its general composition and location in the exhibition]. After I read this email out loud, the assistant immediately grabs my open notebook, turns to a blank page, and sketches a small room in three dimensions using nine lines on the back of the page, with a two-dimensional box in the middle of it representing the sculpture [Figure 2]. [The curator] glances at it, says, 'Thank you, that gives me a sense'. [The curator] then stares at the drawing for a moment longer and tells us, 'It's important to know what relationship the artwork will have to the public', and uses a pen to point to the square in the middle of the sketched room. We go on to discuss how visible this sculpture will look [in relation to the gallery space]. We then incorporate this information into the letter to the private donor in order to, as the assistant put it, 'better valorise his or her contribution'.



**Figure 2: Gallery sketch**

In this example, an off-the-cuff sketch served as a way to resolve the curator's question about 'what the sculpture would look like', in order for the curator to have a visual sense of how the artwork would function in the spatial context of the exhibition. But, in looking at the sketch representing the artwork in the gallery, the assistant curator and I were also transported into the gaze of a third-party viewer. The sketch became an 'externalized retina' (Lynch, 1988), functioning to both simplify the object of study, while also potentially altering or reframing it. In this case, literally 'seeing' the sculpture provided the necessary inspiration to better verbally describe it and its placement in the exhibition for the potential donor. Moreover, although I have divided installation planning and composing exhibition texts into two parts in this chapter for the purposes of presentation, this example demonstrates that both can be highly interrelated activities that hinge on the ability of curators and others to mobilize their visual knowledge of artworks between the 'mind's eye' and communicative representations.

### 5.2.3 *In the mind's eye*

Equipped with more knowledge about the size and technical logistics of pieces, as well as what they look like, curators begin to plan the installation. Planning an installation involves a detailed process of arranging artworks based on physical and discursive characteristics, but these can be mutually-informing. In the example below from my fieldnotes, the curator draws on low-grade images of artworks and his/her own spontaneous associations between them in the process of mentally composing a possible installation plan.

[9-Line Fieldnotes Excerpt Removed]

In this particular meeting, the curator mentally positioned artworks chosen for the exhibition in the gallery space based on two factors: what they looked like and the mental associations s/he drew between them. After reflecting upon this mental composition, the curator noted that something else should be added, an artwork that s/he referred to by a nickname (but a nickname which both curators understood referred to a particular artwork). Yet, there was no further discussion of how this artwork fit into the evolving narrative about the exhibition, indicating that they may serve a purpose as an element of visual composition.

This too-brief example introduces two themes that will be developed throughout this and later chapters. First, curators can only plan the exhibition in so far as they have concrete compositional elements with which to work, which may be found or ‘discovered’ in available materials. And second, building an installation involves a mutually informing consideration of the aesthetic properties of artworks and the discursive reactions they invoke in a particular space and time.

#### *5.2.4 Making the gallery plan with the artist*

Although the process of planning a monographic exhibition can take the form of a ‘year-long conversation with the artist’, the curator actually has limited in-person time with the artist to physically plan the specific installation. The limitations of proxies for the artwork, such as low-resolution images or details about its construction, become apparent quickly when the artist arrives on site. In the installation planning meetings I observed, it became quickly evident that much of this external documentation failed to convey the true movements, meanings, and affordances of the artworks in question. Brief examples of this will be given from an artist/curator planning meeting at one field site, where I was granted permission to videotape.

[3-Page Data Excerpt Removed, Including Images and Accompanying Video Transcript.

This transcript examined how the curators and artists in a particular meeting used hand gestures to visually demonstrate their knowledge about an artwork to one another. There were several instances over the course of my research where curators noted that they never quite ‘understood’ something until the artist demonstrated it for them. In some cases, learning more about an artwork in this manner changed the curator’s perception of it as well as his/her plans for its installation. The reason for this discrepancy is because there is a sometimes significant difference between gallery installation descriptions about artworks (e.g., ‘hung from ceiling, moves’) and the physical, embodied knowledge needed to imagine how it will actually be perceived in relation to other artworks in a gallery space.]

Taken as a whole, this example demonstrates how the curator, artist, and others mobilize a wide variety of gestures, references to images, and local objects to facilitate, and indeed enable, the communication of tacit, visual, and embodied knowledge in the conversation. The curators and artist pointed to the list of artworks or images of the artwork when talking about them and how to install them. They also drew on the gallery plan with pencils and their fingers when describing the artworks and their placement. This nonverbal communication was tied together through the use of restricted codes (like part of a title of

an artwork or its geographic location, rather than the full title of an artwork), which were elaborated through these physical actions.

In tandem with the discussions between curator and artist about what would work where in the installation, the gallery manager spoke about what was logistically possible in the space to confirm or problematize their decisions, and the assistant curator synchronized their conversation with the detailed checklist of artworks to be printed in the catalogue. It is interesting to note, however, that this conversation ended with the curators deciding on the general placements of the larger artworks, but also deciding to leave the rest of the placements vague until the day of the installation. This indicates the degree of slippage between the planning process and proxies for the artworks, and the work of the real installation.

Indeed, as with gallery plan in this example above, the gallery layout plans made during the exhibition planning process are often sketched by hand, sometimes overlaying hand-drawn images or “x”s to mark artworks onto a schematic template of the gallery site. The general placements of the main artworks are indicated with minimal two and three-dimensional sketches and labelled using local nicknames, such as ‘red piece’ and ‘film’. These approximate indications of placement serve the function of orienting curatorial staff to the basic layout of the exhibition, such that curators can plan visitor guides and gallery managers can mobilize technicians and tools to appropriate sites in the galleries. As described in Chapters Six and Seven, the precise decisions about exactly where artworks are installed are always made later, ‘by eye’.

#### *5.2.5 Going into the gallery space*

At a certain point, even the ‘mind’s eye’ and the gallery plan fail to be an adequate proxy for representing the space of exhibition. In preparing for the arrival of artworks, or in the final moments before physically installing them, it is common for curators to return to the gallery space a final time to put their final conceptions of artworks and space into practice. Moreover, walking around the gallery space can also serve to address lingering questions about whether or not an artwork will ‘work’ in a particular area.

The next example concerns the work of an assistant curator at one field site set to design and place signage in a gallery during the course of an exhibition installation. As we sat in the curatorial offices above the gallery, the assistant curator exclaimed, ‘I’m trying to visualize how the [signs] on the wall will work. Can we just try it?’. The assistant curator and curator entered into the gallery equipped with the dimensions of the proposed signage and a tape measure. The process began with the curator asking the assistant curator how large the sign would be. The assistant replied with outstretched hands (Figure 3). They then walked around the gallery as the assistant curator measured various spaces and the curator looked around, imaging where it would be best in the ‘overall composition’ of the installation. After several trials and errors — where they found a location that fit the sign, they both measured the distance of this location to ensure that the sign would fit in the space.



**Figure 3: Planning the placement of signage**

In this example, several translations took place between the curator’s ‘eye’ and the practical dimensions of the signage. The signage began as dimensions on a piece of paper, which the assistant curator translated into an approximate visual representation using his/her arms. In this way the technical specifications on paper were converted into a visual resource for planning in the ‘mind’s eye’. The curator then used this visual proxy for the sign in the work of surveying the room. When the curator identified a spot that worked visually for the signage, they then re-translated the sign into numeric digits by verifying that space with the tape measure. The process of deciding ‘how the [signs] on the wall will work’, then, involved not only ensuring that the signage physically fit into an existing space in the gallery, but also how that physical space fit conceptually into the curator’s evolving understanding of the ‘overall composition of the room’. Reciprocally, the curator’s sense of the ‘overall composition’ was itself informed by the mobilization of the signage as another element in the compositional process.

I have presented a variety of examples here to document how dependent the communication of knowledge in installation planning is on the mobilization of local resources. These resources include miniature versions of the gallery and artworks, as well as local human-generated proxies for artworks and spaces. As Latour and Woolgar (1979) observe in scientific work, inscriptions and visual representations play an important role in

the knowledge-production process, and moreover, what is shown in these representations may be a political decision made by the mediating party. Similarly, curators use visual representations and their orientations to them as part of their agenda of emphasizing particular aspects of objects and exhibition spaces. In the embodied work of picking these particular characteristics out of all of the available opportunities, they index the meaning and importance of an artwork in the physical plan for its exhibition. Whether these actions inform the work of composing the exhibition documentation depends on a variety of factors, including when installation plans are made, who is present, and how they are communicated.

### **5.3 Composing the exhibition documentation**

The textual documentation of an exhibition comes in several forms, including exhibition catalogues, viewing notes or visitor guides, press releases, wall texts, and labels for individual artworks. Museums also commonly have in-house bookstores, and increasingly a dedicated documentation gallery in the exhibition itself, where visitors can browse catalogues and other publications to learn more about an artist's work. The production of exhibition materials under the curator's aegis involves a dedicated staff of authors, translators, editors, graphic designers, gallerists, education staff, press officers, assistant curators, and others.<sup>46</sup> They produce texts of two kinds: texts dedicated to the interpretation of particular artworks, and texts dedicated to the interpretation of the exhibition as a whole. Both may involve situating the artwork or exhibition within the artist's overall oeuvre of work. Although the interlocutors for this mediation can vary throughout the planning process (including potential funding or institutional bodies), here I will focus purely on texts intended for public dissemination.

Documentation serves both to 'explain' the artworks and exhibition to visitors (as a discursive frame for the physical installation), and to extend the exhibition itself. The catalogue, in particular, performs this latter function; it is the repository of research and the critical ideas formed in contact with artworks (Alloway, 1996). The catalogue is also the

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<sup>46</sup> Exhibition texts are both physical and discursive products. The expert work of graphic designers is responsible for 'translating' the conceptual frame of an exhibition into a material and stylistic frame for its documentation via the strategic choices of fonts, layout, and the physical shape or form that texts take. This work is highly skilled and of great interest to the study of tacit knowledge and embodied articulation in its own right, but for purposes of space, I will only examine the discursive properties of exhibition texts here.

‘afterlife’ of the exhibition and the way in which curators share their work with those who are not able to attend the exhibition. As one curator described, ‘You can only go so far, but your literature gives you a virtual presence elsewhere’. In a monographic exhibition, the catalogue commonly includes a curatorial preface, articles by commissioned writers, an interview with the artist, biographical information on the artist, and details and high-resolution photographs of the artworks exhibited. The chief organizational concerns for the production of catalogues and other documentation are timing (e.g., synchronizing the catalogue publication with important contemporary art book fairs or meeting deadlines for cultural publications in the press) and cost (particularly in keeping catalogue prices accessible for ‘middlebrow’ visitors, which also means keeping texts within a tight word limit).

As with the physical installation of an exhibition, it is not uncommon for curators to write these texts prior to actually seeing the particular artworks that will be included in the exhibition. Indeed, many activities crucial to exhibition planning, such as soliciting funding and advertising space, depend on early conceptions of the exhibition while it is still very much in progress, and tight printing deadlines leave very little room for last-minute changes. The textual mediation is also subject to institutional restraint and the emergence of new or changing information in the planning process. The interesting thing is to see how, on a micro-level, these changes make their way into the official narrative performed in the exhibition texts for the public. As I will show below, writing exhibition texts entails multiple levels of work to decide what to write about an artwork, as well as how to finesse these ideas into specific language.

### *5.3.1 But what does it all mean? Evolving narratives and the pressure to get it right*

In addressing their audience, curators of contemporary art tend less towards making an art historical thesis and more towards offering a point of view on the exhibition, such that the artworks elaborate an ‘essay’ of sorts of the curator’s ideas (Octobre, 1999b: 98-100). Critically, in response to any questions I had about the meaning, theme, or origin of an exhibition, curators pointed me to their curatorial essay in the catalogue. [Interview Excerpt Removed.] The exhibition overview text is the most important discursive intervention made by the curator, and, when finalized, appears in the catalogue. As I will

describe below, excerpts from this master overview text are also worked into a number of other exhibition texts, including the wall text and press releases.

An exhibition text is an important mediator between artists or artworks and the public because it performs a service to both. On the one hand, it engages in a deep discussion with the artist's work and the artist's thoughts about his or her work, while, on the other hand, it tries to explain these to the public in a clear manner. According to another curator, 'It's in how you write about a work where the work becomes important'. Key to the writing process is a sometimes lengthy process of translation between a curator's personal experience with a work of art and the framing and presentation of this for others. As one curator described to me, 'It takes a very long time to write about art, but you get interested initially in an artwork in a very short time. You don't stand in front of an artwork for an hour and wonder "Is it interesting or is it not?"' As this curator notes, even for an 'expert', it is relatively easy to 'decode' an artwork. And yet, the process of writing about this same artwork takes a significant amount of time. This is a common theme, that laying out one's *thoughts* about an exhibition in written form is difficult and entails a lengthy process of conversation (with artists, other individuals, and books or other published work) before they can 'come to light in a clear manner' (as described by one young curator).

With [the current exhibition], I couldn't write the essay until I felt comfortable with it...until I realized, 'Now I know why we are doing this and what this is about', because it changed so much from the beginning to the end. But, once I wrote the essay I had it again, it was mine again. I knew what it was.

The process of a curator's discernment regarding the concept of an exhibition is gradual, as described by the curator directly above, but the planning process cannot stop and wait for a curator's ideas to clarify. Indeed, it is the planning process itself that lends clarity to the conceptual framing of the exhibition by bringing additional information and details to light. The question remains: how do curators move from the individual artistic experience to something transferable to other parties?

This question is particularly problematic for two reasons. First, compared to the relatively vague plans that can be made for the physical installation, printed materials need to be submitted much earlier to the printer in order to be ready for the exhibition opening. Second, the assistant curators and curatorial staff responsible for the printed material may be entirely different from those responsible for the installation (particularly at larger institutions), so much so that their offices can be located on different levels of the building; in an institutional sense, the necessary knowledge about the changing physical properties

artworks may not always be transferred effectively. The press department is particularly susceptible to these problems, given how far in advance these individuals must work to secure spots for the exhibition in daily newspapers, art magazines, and other events listings, and to carry out promotional work such as mailing out large numbers of invitations for private events.<sup>47</sup> As illustrated below, for the assistant curators and other individuals charged with the practical levels of writing these texts and liaising with the press, the vague and evolving information they are given makes their jobs difficult.

On my way out of the center to the bus stop, I walk with the assistant curator, who says that s/he feels 'so out of control' regarding [the next exhibition]. The assistant curator says that s/he's spoken with the [curators] about what's going on, and thinks it's 'cool' and there are 'interesting things happening'...but keeps asking them, 'What does it mean?', and they don't answer that question. The assistant curator says 'I *get* it, but I just don't know what it all means'. S/He feels out of control because s/he cannot get a handle on how to organize the exhibition and write copy for the press.

The center's press liaison and assistant curator have finished writing the press release, using all of the pre-approved phrases by the artist and curator, but now they have to edit it for sense. They read it off the assistant curator's computer screen out loud, with many silent pauses and much looking off into the air. At one point, the assistant curator reads a phrase in the draft press release [describing an artwork]. The assistant curator turns to the press liaison and says that s/he doesn't agree with this; the [artwork's appearance seems to contradict this description]. [...] In the last paragraph of the draft press release, they become stuck on [another 3-word phrase describing the exhibition], and another assistant curator who has been working on something else across the room asks them if s/he can suggest a word. The press liaison replies that 'it's more a concept', and furthermore that 'we don't understand it', which is why 'we can't find the word'.

Of key interest in these fieldnote excerpts are the ways in which assistant curators may understand the nature of their work on a very deep level, but are still in the dark about certain key issues and concepts crucial to meaning making. In the first excerpt above, the assistant curator notes, 'I get it, but I just don't know what it all means', and similarly, the press liaison and assistant curators in the second excerpt above realize they are trying to put forth a difficult 'concept' but do not understand the meaning behind it. And, yet, their work must go ahead regardless.

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<sup>47</sup> At both field sites, press liaisons maintained a close relationship to curatorial work, often attending early 'conceptual' planning meetings to collect 'little paragraphs' of information. During one exhibition, the press liaison reported difficulties 'selling' the artist to the press; the press liaison said to the curator, 'we need a "hook" to introduce [the artist]'. Correspondingly, there can be major pressures on museum press departments to convey curatorial messages to mass audiences. As one curator said of a poorly-attended exhibition, 'The press department [...] didn't get the subtlety of the message across'.

The installation planning process also constantly informs the process of composing documentation. At several field and interview sites, changing information regarding the physical availability of particular artworks led to momentary ‘breakdowns’ in the discursive performance of the seamless exhibition.

[2, 4-Line Fieldnotes Excerpts Removed. One excerpt referred to a mismatch between artworks included in exhibition publicity and exhibition installation, and the second referred to a need to re-write the exhibition publicity at the last moment to account for a changing installation scenario.]

The uncertainties inherent in the planning process create an extra pressure ‘to get it right’ with the textual documentation. In some cases, texts are written in a reactive way to conceptually account for unpredictable changes in the planning process. In parallel to my focus on the physical proxies used for planning the installation, next I will focus on the ‘textual’ proxies curators turn to in their work of ‘getting it right’, which can include theoretical work, conversations with the artist, and past catalogues or published work.

### 5.3.2 *Theory vs. clarity: Writing for which public?*

Throughout the exhibition planning process, curators and others draw largely on informal and restricted discourse, such as referring to artworks by pet names, describing them by references to other artists or artworks, or describing them in a nonverbal manner (e.g., by posturing to imitate the pose of a particular sculpture). In this ‘shop talk’, as Lynch (1985) terms it, curators’ use of restricted codes performs their identity in a shared discursive community (Bernstein, 1971). Epistemic cultures, however, are also engaged in the production of *new* knowledge which requires, by necessity, the use of an elaborated code. As I was told by one gallery curator, ‘You’ve got to be able to talk about it [the artwork], in order to really expect to sell it. If you can’t talk about it, what good is it really as art?’. There is also a widely held notion among museum curators that being able to talk about art is a crucial part of combating the stereotypically obtuse, estranged, and clinical world of contemporary art. The task of selling both artworks and concepts, though, raises the question of exactly how to write about art.

Many, though certainly not all, curators have an educational background in critical, social, cultural, or literary theory. They may draw heavily on this repertoire in making sense

of an artist's work and building their own unique intervention in the exhibition.<sup>48</sup> In some cases, reading and learning can play an important part in the curatorial meaning-making process as curators seek new information in their quest to discover 'just what it all means'.

I don't think of theory first – but it's true that art often connects to what people say theoretically and I may very well read something and think, 'Hey, I've found in this book what I'm thinking about with this work of art'.

As exhibited in the quote above, reading other texts in a variety of genres may help curators put words to feelings and thoughts that were previously in development or held in deeply-felt ways. These texts interact with curatorial thoughts in a mutually-elaborating way. Yet, as one curator said of theoretically-informed discourse, 'This isn't the sort of thing that really gets butts in the seats'. The dilemma is, therefore, to negotiate between how curators might make personal sense of an artist's work, and how publics (particularly those with less familiarity with this terrain) may do so. Practically speaking, local 'shop talk' arises out of common experiences and so would be incomprehensible to outside observers (Lynch, 1985).

In public institutions, texts are highly contentious and must be right down to the letter. Curators have to 'be true to the concept', and 'single words can give the wrong sense of the exhibition'. This process of choosing the right words is made considerably more difficult the greater the number of curatorial parties involved in the exhibition, particularly when the artist him or herself has strong feelings about what is written. The importance of pointing out particular words and passages is reflected in a visual sense, as demonstrated in the images in Figure 4, taken from an editing session between artist and assistant curator:



**Figure 4: Pointing to find the right words**

In Figure 4, the assistant curator uses a pinkie finger to indicate to the artist that a particular word needs to be changed because it has a connotation that is often linked to the art market. The artist then uses a pen to point to the sentences surrounding the statement while explaining that the word refers to a different context entirely. Yet, a word's connotation is

<sup>48</sup> The September 2009 issue of *Frieze* magazine, a magazine for 'contemporary art and culture', examines the role of theory in contemporary art in an issue entitled 'Whatever happened to theory?' (issue 125). Available at: [http://www.frieze.com/issue/category/issue\\_125/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/category/issue_125/) [Accessed 10 September 2009].

in the eye of the beholder, and terms that could evoke the art market were banned from both exhibitions. Words also have to be changed if they are too ‘ugly’, ‘flowery’, nuanced, or, conversely, too abstract.

When assistant curators are having trouble locating the correct word to use, or there is disagreement about best usage, there are a variety of strategies available to them. First and foremost, they draw on already ‘approved’ texts: texts already finalized by curators and artists in earlier stages of exhibition planning. They also draw on earlier texts from published catalogues or critical (but favourable) pieces about the artist’s work in formal publications. Additionally, one curatorial interviewee confessed to me that, when translating a text into English, s/he instructed an assistant to use ‘e-flux words’ (i.e., copy terms used in the popular *e-flux* email listserv for advertisements in contemporary art). On another occasion, a press liaison settled a debate with the artist by suggesting the word ‘imaginary’ to describe the exhibition, because, as she said, ‘I’ve seen it used many times before in the art press’. Like scientists, curators work to ‘convert’ their resources into the currency of the field, in order to insert their work into the ongoing production of knowledge (Knorr Cetina, 1981).

Texts represent the museum’s unique contribution to the artist’s work, and therefore, they must be validated by a variety of relevant bodies: curators, artist, galleries, museum director, copyeditors, translators, etc. Here, different parties can exercise a different amount of clout. A head or assistant curator, for instance, cannot contradict the preferences of an artist, but a higher authority, such as a museum director or administrator, can, as illustrated in the following fieldnotes excerpts chronicling the evolution of a press release at one field site.

The curator reads the new press release, but doesn’t understand the description of the exhibition as being a [three-word phrase]. I ask what [the phrase] means, and the curator uses his/her hands to explain that it refers to [a geographic form]. I say, ‘Ah, so it’s a bit conceptual in terms of exhibition format.’ The curator stops abruptly, raises his/her voice (and slightly winking), says that, ‘Whatever you do, do not say that it is conceptual!’ (The curator goes on to explain that conceptual art evokes accusations of elitism and incomprehension in the center’s publics.) The curator then turns to the assistant curator and the press liaison and complains that it is not at all evident what you will see when you come to the exhibition: ‘it is very unclear and poorly phrased’. But when the assistant curator explains that they simply copied the artist’s own words, the curator drops his/her objection.

[10-Line Fieldnotes Excerpt Removed. This excerpt followed the previous excerpt by about an hour, and evidenced how a museum administrator can critique and ask for edits to the artist’s words in a press release because of the center’s commitment to describing the work for an unfamiliar public.]

This case of ‘too many cooks’ means that much ‘validated’ text ends up being repeated over and over again in different documents because it’s quicker to recycle approved text than get new text approved. From the point of view of meaning making, however, this means that the discursive work of framing the exhibition may not always evolve in close parallel with the exhibition itself. Instead, earlier texts are reproduced throughout later stages of exhibition planning. Consequently, compromise on what is ‘politically correct’ may take precedent over more interpretive revisions.

In addition, assistant curators who may not quite understand the concept often do not speak up. As one assistant curator confessed to me, s/he had to read the curatorial preface several times before s/he could understand it, because it was extremely theoretical. Another assistant curator present at this discussion agreed, but also stated more positively that ‘members of the public can also discover things from reading a different genre of text than they are used to’. As DeNora (2003: 38-43) observes in musical mediation, the musical expert has the power to reveal things about music to his or her audiences by positioning it in relation to other music and other critical observations; in doing so, criticism may draw upon something that the music affords and reorients new readers within the community of musicology and beyond. Yet, this practice clearly privileges initiated and well-read interlocutors (Heinich, 1998c: 307).

An additional obstacle was raised, ironically, by an academic curator, who questioned the importance and value of clarity in textual mediation:

The problem with the theorization of art is that it makes things too clear. There is wildness in knowledge, and it is not that clear.

As Paul Valéry (1931: 155) notes in the ‘Problem of museums’, in fine art, ‘erudition is a fault of sorts: it clarifies what is not the most delicate, it details what is not at all essential. In doing so, it substitutes its hypotheses for sensation; its prodigious memory for the presence of wonder; and it attaches a giant library to the museum. Venus becomes a document’. In attempting to clarify what is delicate and detail what is essential, the curators in charge of textual production grapple with conflicting pressures, such as the artist’s artistic license, the vagueness or restricted nature of one’s own thoughts (in the sense of restricted code), and the preferences of others.

As Morgan (1991: 344) describes, the best catalogues clarify visitors’ experience with the exhibited artworks by providing the ‘necessary glue to the discourse of signs’ on exhibit, but most catalogues take their theoretical contributions too far and actually create

distance between the catalogue and exhibit instead. Although this may well be a curator's intention in some cases, here I have offered an alternative explanation. There are a wide variety of organizational and personal reasons that explain why an exhibition text may be perceived as less than completely user friendly or directly linked to the exhibition.

### 5.3.3 *In the artist's own words?*

In contrast to the curatorial preface or exhibition narrative, many curators look to give the parole to the artist directly to make the descriptions of his or her works accessible to the public. One museum curator I spoke with does this by featuring televisions showing interviews with artists in the gallery space instead of texts written by curators; this provides a more 'grounded discourse' rather than the 'meta language of contemporary art' (as phrased by one senior curator).<sup>49</sup> Indeed, interviews with the artist have emerged in exhibition documentation as an important way to present this information. There is precedent for such an approach; as Octobre (1996a: 237) describes, curators commonly turn to so-called 'documentary research' when explaining why they chose certain artworks to include in expos. Seen in this way, letting the artist describe his or her work is a way of making the curator's own expertise transparent and the visitation process more democratic.

It's better to just let the artist tell the stories of his works in the interview setting, than us trying to do it in the visitor guide or catalogue. It just never works right that way. The description that we give it just doesn't quite fit with the work. There are too many layers of interpretation.

The problem with [the artist's] work is that sometimes you need to know [some intimate stories] to understand some pieces. And if you're a visitor that comes in, you see something like [this series of artworks], and you need to know that [they represent certain themes, people, and places]. That's a real challenge, I think, with [the artist's] work. [...] The first time I got [the artist's] work was when I read [a gallery publication about the artist], and it had [a funny personal story told about the artist's family ], and it made me think, 'Oh I got it now, I get it!', the work is really about this.

Although the curators quoted above see the artist's words as an important way to provide unmediated access to the exhibition, the words of artists are seldom completely unmediated. As one curator told me, 'I like what this artist *does*, it's great, but how [the

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<sup>49</sup> Returning home from the University of Exeter campus one evening following my fieldwork period, I happened upon the BBC's coverage of the 2005 Turner Prize, in which they invited a member of the public to comment upon the artworks in the competition. Speaking about Simon Starling's *Shedboatshed (Mobile Architecture No 2)* (2005), the guest commentator said that the visitor would never know the story behind the artwork if they did not read the blurb on the wall. The host of the BBC show replied, 'Oh, you mean the blurb written by the artist?', and the guest commentator replied that, no, these blurbs are always written by curators, who write 'horrible drivel' about how the artist is exploring 'obtuse and abstract concepts' (and he used some big words to point fun at them).

artist] writes about it is horrible; [the artist] is an artist, not a writer'. Many curators in my sample do not necessarily think that the words an artist uses are the best way to convey the idea, or even 'true to what went on in the piece' (according to one curator). There may be extensive print editing of such prosaic accounts by curators (and sometimes the artist as well) in an attempt to clean up particular speech patterns and/or make these accounts sound a little more 'official'.

In contrast to the exhibition overview text, which is written by the head curator(s) to describe the exhibition concept, assistant curators get the job of describing the artworks. These descriptions appear in the viewing notes for the visitor and catalogue. Using an example from a meeting between an assistant curator and artist at one field site, I will briefly explore how the process of describing artworks may elaborate on their meaning.

[12-Line Video Transcript Excerpt Removed]

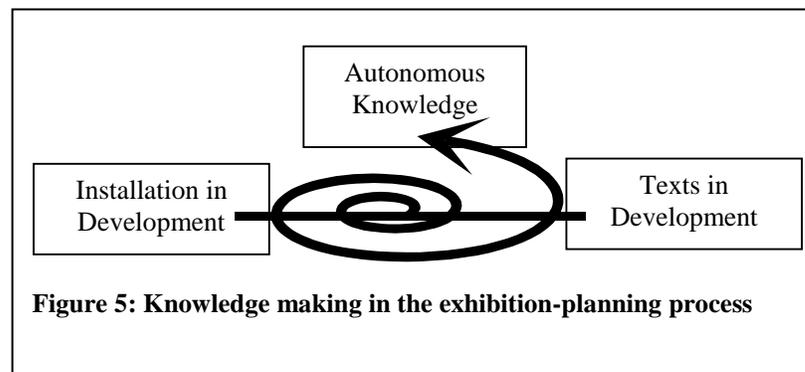
In the conversation above, the artist regularly explained his/her work by talking about a 'funny' inspiration or the fact that something 'interested' him/her. The curator, in contrast, was seeking a more analytical description of the work's 'meaning'. After several questions and answers, in which the curator asked questions and did not receive direct responses, the artist acquiesced and ventured a thought about the art historical meaning of the piece. There is therefore a step in meaning making that takes place between the simple description of an artist's process, and the framing of this process in the meaning-laden context of the exhibition. Much description is given only because it's needed, but in its elaboration, the meaning may be changed as it is reframed.

The process of discursively framing an artwork and exhibition in the museum is not unlike the process of textual codification common to scientific work, where scientists 'produce order' and 'persuade' others as to the validity of their work through its contents (cf. Knorr Cetina, 1981: chap. 5; Latour & Woolgar, 1979). As described above, framing the exhibition textually also requires a lengthy process (though limited by deadlines) in which the curator and others draw on a variety of resources to themselves understand the artist's work, and then reflexively try to perform that understanding to the public. Yet, composing documentation in art worlds is particularly problematic in that close study reveals the difficulty of putting aesthetic and artistic experience (which may be constantly evolving) into words. This is particularly the case when large numbers of people are involved in reaching some sort of a consensus. The work of preparing textual

documentation for an exhibition, then, is limited by the available information, approval by key decision-makers, time, and the available categories of institutional meaning making.<sup>50</sup>

#### 5.4 Discussion: Emergent understandings and grey boxes

The exhibition installation and textual mediation are developed in tandem throughout the exhibition planning process, and the overall concept of the exhibition narrative evolves to reconcile both into a complete whole. The gradual emergence of information about the artworks and the artist's wishes entails a constantly adaptive stance by the curator. As such, an investigation of objects in their systems of inscription is not unlike a detective story (cf. Austrin & Farnsworth, 2005), wherein material objects are conjured and implicated in new turns of events. Access to better and better proxies of an artwork constantly affects how curators perceive and write about it, which then affects how it is perceived in turn. At some point, such as a printer's deadline or exhibition opening, the exhibition narrative exits this context and becomes an object apart, autonomous from this system of meaning making. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 5.



The narrative of the exhibition is represented by the spiral line in this diagram. Artworks and exhibition developments are discursively framed to be part of 'the concept', but in the process of interacting with new information about the installation of particular artworks or their discursive meaning, the concept itself evolves.

<sup>50</sup> In his study of school psychologists, Mehan (1986: 107-119) also discovered that decision makers face 'cognitive limitations' in the form of inadequate information, too much information, too little time, and other situational circumstances. As a consequence, final decisions are not made solely in terms of a student's disability, but in accordance with the availability of categories. This results in a 'systematic confirmation process' embedded in the decision-making process.

The situated work of planning an exhibition also sheds some light on how concerted action is organized in the meaning-making process. As work in science studies has demonstrated (cf. Knorr Cetina, 1981: 131-132), no shared cognitions, morals, or interests are needed to account for social cooperation; rather, there are ‘temporary fusions of interests’ through which scientists see results as convertible resources of their own. Although Knorr Cetina refers to scientific papers as providing these convertible opportunities, in the world of exhibition planning, these fusions often take place around ‘boundary objects’ (Star & Griesemer, 1989), such as an artist’s dossier, images of artworks, and technical specifications of artworks. In the absence of the artworks themselves, these proxies enable a form of cooperation that looks very much like conventionally-produced behaviour, even though each curator, assistant curator, and gallery manager is using the object to accomplish a different goal. A past catalogue of an artist’s work, for example, is used by one curator to get a sense of the size and colour of a work of art for installation purposes, while another uses it as text-mining for a catalogue text. These various proxies for artworks, however, cannot completely take the place of the artworks they represent.

Although curators and others involved in the exhibition planning process certainly may adhere to particular museum conventions and may speak in ‘restricted code’ (Bernstein, 1971) at times, a significant amount of much more *elaborated* information is needed to accomplish situated work. In the presentation of data above, curators regularly turned to off-the-cuff sketches, gestures, bodily enactments, texts, and other proxies to represent the knowledge they had of the artwork or exhibition at that point in time. These proxies, and curators’ sometimes inarticulate relationship to them, act as ‘grey boxes’ in the exhibition planning process. As Saferstein (2007) describes, while ‘black boxes’ represent a group’s commonly-held knowledge of something, the use of grey boxes is an indication that individuals are not completely sure what they are talking about. In the absence of complete understanding, the ‘grey box’ of the temporary artwork proxy acts as a stop-gap measure for curators to carry on with their work of exhibition planning in the absence of completely codified knowledge.

Visual and discursive proxies of artistic works underwrite concerted action by acting simultaneously as ‘boundary objects’, unifying various interests, and ‘grey boxes’, giving enough information for tentative ideas to be formed and current work to proceed. But curators and assistant curators also operate on a ‘need-to-know basis’. When they need

more information to do their work, they turn to these forms. But, when they do not actively seek out more information or clarification, it does not mean that they completely understand, tacitly, what is going on with the exhibition. In some cases, when curators do not seek further information or clarification about their work, it may simply be because they *do not need to know*. In many cases, a partial understanding of the exhibition is enough for assistant curators, in particular, to write basic texts (supplanted with ‘e-flux words’), and for curators to have a mental sense of the installation.

### **5.5 Conclusion: Mixed materials for building meaning**

This chapter sets the scene for understanding the importance of ‘mixed practices’ (Henderson, 1999) as a way in which curators engage not only their discursive vocabulary, but also their somatic vocabulary. Decision making in curating contemporary art is predicated upon the availability of close visual proxies for objects and materials. In so far as these proxies are imperfect substitutions, much of this framing work in planning an exhibition is, necessarily, vague and hypothetical: exhibition texts are written in a ‘poetic’ way, press releases are left intentionally vague, and installations are planned only so far. The outcome of the process of planning an exhibition highlights how curators work within set art world conventions, but this is because there may be few other materials with which to build action.

The role of the imagined public is ubiquitous throughout the exhibition-planning process (Bennett, 1995). When curators imagine the exhibition installation ‘in their mind’s eye’, they are mentally putting themselves in their visitors’ shoes. When curators print out an exhibition text to copyedit it or read through it, they are putting themselves into the place of the reader. Yet these small moments of ‘transportation’ are also platforms for further change, as curators move things around or search for better words.

In sum, mediators do not simply mediate between artists and publics, but they also mediate between various interests in the museum. Mediation is fuzzy, blurry, and not easily isolated as a midsection between two points. In this process, curators play a very important role, charismatically speaking, in making decisions, running ahead with them, and everyone else plays along. In the next chapter, I will explore how these best-laid plans are put into

motion when the exhibition moves from being in the 'mind's eye' to the physical gallery space.

## 6. INSTALLATION I: THE EMERGENT EXHIBITION

Marc: ... We haven't seen much of one another recently. I've been away and you started mixing with the great and the good...the Ropses...the Desprez-Couderts...that dentist, Guy Hallié...he's the one who...

Serge: No, no, no, no, not at all, he's from another world, he only likes Conceptual Art.

(Reza, 1994: 53)

In the contemporary art world, curators often have a fair degree of power, including power over what the audience experiences. As Irvin (2006) and Marontate (2006) demonstrate, the physical ways in which curators decide to display a work of art can have significant implications for the meaning communicated to the audience. In his discussion of 'editing', Becker (1982: 194-204) shows that an artwork takes the form it does at a particular moment because of the small and large choices made by the artist and other members of the art world, which may involve direct negotiation, collaboration, or anticipation of the evaluations, preferences, or objections of others (and may be automatic, conscious, semi-conscious, or subject to the mercy of 'cooperative agents' such as the strength of a museum floor). Nowhere in the exhibition-making process is the physical editing of the artwork (or exhibition as artwork) more visible than in the installation. As one curator noted succinctly:

In contemporary art, far more than in modern or ancient art, the installation is the sense of the artwork. It is in its installation that the artwork has one sense or another. This is indeed the definition, or one of the definitions, of contemporary art.

Tobelem (2005) echoes this belief, observing that the curator's knowledge about an artwork is generally conflated with the knowledge of how to present it to the public. The latter is assumed to be part and parcel of the former. And, as with the general absence of art historical codes in contemporary artistic meaning making, there are few, if any, formal guidelines on displaying contemporary art. Consequently, curators are able to exercise a fair amount of agency in the context of the installation, although they may vary somewhat in the degree to which they are concerned with details of placement and appearance.

As demonstrated by Yaneva (2001; 2003a; 2003b) in her ethnographic study of contemporary art installations, the installation process does not merely conform to existing limitations and museum codes, but actually creates opportunities for the unexpected usage and new functional possibilities of artworks and other objects in the gallery space. These opportunities arise in the course of the decision making described by Becker (1982), but are

born specifically from the fact that every ecological arrangement of artworks, actors, and environment presents a unique possibility for meaning making (Becker, 2006; Heath, et al., 2002). The ways in which an artwork — as well as the collective artworks working together to perform the larger exhibition — is performed to the public thus depends significantly on the indexical particularities of the installation process.

Given the shifting presence of local information, exhibition installation is best seen as a combination of ‘plans and situated actions’ (Suchman, 1987). 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. While 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’ — I will explore how the spontaneous nature of these situated actions may catch even them by surprise. In doing so, this chapter sets a foundation for Chapter Seven, which will extend the research presented here around the interactions of curators and artworks to look more broadly at how situated action is managed socially among other human participants in the exhibition installation.

## 6.1 The evolving exhibition

As described in Section 5.2, curators often spend days in and outside of the gallery working with gallery managers, artists, and others to map out the placements of artworks in advance. But when the artworks are removed from their crates and curators begin to physically look at these items and move them around the space, they may change their mind about earlier decisions, or commonly, find that the installation process suddenly becomes much more difficult in reality than it had seemed on paper. Typical curatorial remarks include noticing the ‘real’ size of artworks, although measurements had been consulted prior. A common observation from curators during the installation is that the space had looked quite small when it was empty, but began to grow and grow as they moved the artworks inside.

Well, we had an idea of what we wanted in this room, but ultimately, the final decisions are always done with the eye once we see the works in here. I mean, the plans you draw on paper just can’t show you the scale of the rooms with the works in them...so you always have to adjust once you get them in here.

Consequently, the installation of an exhibition of contemporary art is often referred to by curators as an ‘organic’ or ‘evolving’ situation. (Alternative adjectives include ‘tedious’ and ‘nerve-wracking’.) This focus on the magical and intuitive, observed here, will be vital as I explore how meanings emerge through situated actions.

I’d seen the gallery before, so I knew exactly what was going to be there, and I also had a plan. But, in the end we did the spacing...as it began to go up. I mean, the whole thing started to come around. There was this transition from it just being in your mind...It was better than I had expected. [...] And the moment when the works started arriving and just the physical emergence of the works, you suddenly realize that...it’s a very unique...The material qualities of the museum and things, to see what it looks like and hangs like...

[Curator 1] As we’re setting up, what’s amazing for us is how surprising it’s been to find out how visually impacting this whole show is...because our whole research and starting point is not necessarily always the visual. It’s something about a process and a strategy for change, or a critique, or a play, or a playfulness, so there’s all these different ways of working that we wanted to bring together. And as we’re bringing it together, it’s like, ‘this is actually going to look quite amazing’ as well as... [Curator 2] And there are so many works that we talked about for so long, and we’d not really thought about how they’re going to look. It’s weird, it’s like we talk about the ideas around the work...like, [this artist] in the same office as us, and she’s been working on these photographs for weeks, and we’ve seen glimpses of them, but it’s pretty different when you see the whole twenty minute run of them and see the prints. And [this artist’s] piece, we had a vague idea, but it’s got a completely different presence. And that was that thing about having that half an hour [in the gallery to ourselves] on Monday, was that we actually need to see what everything actually looked like. It’s weird with that, though, because things just seem to sort of happen, and it’s almost like, what’s the word, magic, or intuition, or something, because things just seem to sort of...settle.

Curators commonly describe artworks, as well as the exhibition as a whole, as ‘far better than they could have expected’. Artworks are said to take on new physical presences and emergent lives in the gallery space, and the exhibition itself emerges ‘magically’ as a material entity from their interactions.

There are several reasons that curators need to see ‘what everything actually looks like’, as the curatorial team put it in the second quote above. First, many exhibitions of contemporary art feature newly commissioned artworks. Although curators engage in lengthy, detailed discussions with artists about the medium and nature of the artwork, curators can not know the final outcome in advance, nor prepare for what they will experience in their first encounter with the finished artwork. On a more practical level, artists may change their minds and ‘edit’ artworks in progress so that they diverge from earlier specifications. Second, visual decisions about placement made by looking at artworks in or on image files, catalogues, portfolios, DVDs, or websites can be very different than those made upon seeing the artworks in person. This may have to do with a lack of appreciation for the scale of the artwork, its true colour, 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 in the affordances of their own institutional gallery space, artworks may necessitate adjustments upon appearance with relation to space restrictions, lighting systems, and display capabilities. The placements of artworks by rough marks or sketches 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 artworks next to each other that draw too much attention away from the remainder of the exhibition, the impossibility of installing two audio pieces side by side, or the logistical difficulties of hanging a video-based artwork too far from an electrical outlet. For these reasons, as well as others overlooked here, in designing and mounting an exhibition of contemporary art ‘everything always happens at the very last moment’ (as phrased by a senior curator).

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’. Yet, to treat the exhibition as a naturally emerging entity, as the curators do in their accounts above, masks the considerable amount of situated work that goes into physically juxtapositioning artworks, and through that process, consciously and subconsciously bringing out particular relationships and identifying them as such. As one curator described, installing an exhibition takes a significant amount of time, and ‘you have to move things around quite a bit until you are happy with them’. How this ‘happiness’ comes to be defined as the result of physical interactions with objects, environments, and other actors in the exhibition space is of key interest in this and the following chapter. The focus will be on the following questions: how do curators ‘know’ when something ‘works’ or does not ‘work’? What resources do they draw on in the process of deciding ‘what works’? And, finally, how is consensus achieved as to ‘what works’ among all of the participants in the installation?

The installation requires a transition from the mental work of the curator to the material, visual, and tactile engagement with artworks in space. To repeat a curator already quoted above, ‘the transition from it just being in your mind...to seeing what it looks like’. Although the competencies of writing about and installing artworks are generally conflated, installing art nevertheless requires a different range of competencies than those described in the previous chapter.

What you are doing when you are installing an exhibition is entirely different from presenting something to an audience — which is somehow putting it in a historical perspective or something — versus being physically kind of doing the thing.

This task of curating requires a knowledge of space, an ability to make quick decisions (versus careful reflection through writing), and a process of simultaneously bearing several issues in mind: audience, artworks, artists, relationships between artworks, safety, logistics, and the exhibition as a whole.

Curators have a variety of tasks to accomplish in the installation, which involves varied responsibilities to many different agents. Their responsibilities to future visitors include creating a dynamic and informed installation that clearly guides members of the public around a series of artworks. Their responsibilities to the artworks include ensuring that there is sufficient physical space for each to be displayed and appreciated individually and appropriately. Their responsibilities to the exhibition include ensuring that appropriate relationships are drawn between artworks and that the space, conceived as a whole, conveys a sense of the bigger picture. (Indeed, the importance of the ‘bigger picture’ can lead to aesthetic-based controversies with artists and others in the space, something to be discussed at length in Section 7.2.) Finally, curators’ responsibilities to the institution involve obeying safety guidelines and the dominant aesthetics of display. The installation of an exhibition of contemporary art necessitates an alternating series of action and reflection: making both substantial and incremental choices in the positioning of artworks, and reflecting upon those choices to achieve final placement.

The highly adaptive nature of the installation does not preclude the drawing on of conventional resources or ‘plans’ in the installation process. Curators have definite ideas about the installation of the exhibition as the tangible outcome of previous work, along with precise strategies to communicate this work to the visitor in the physical installation. In focusing first on these plans (as investigated through post-installation interviews), what is interesting is how curators report achieving them through the situated mobilisation of artworks and local resources.

## 6.2 Viewer intéressement

Exhibition installation may be seen as a step-by-step process of encoding meaning in the material layout of the exhibition so that it can be deciphered correctly by visitors,

something that requires a host of conscious and tacit assumptions about one's public by the curator (Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1993 [1968]). As Edelman (2002: 48-49) observes, the stylistic component of the exhibition design requires a visitor to follow a particular path, which functionally integrates the visitor into the exhibition *qua oeuvre*. More than any other aspect of exhibition installation, curators draw on preconceived notions and plans when envisioning their potential viewers. Indeed, most curators refer to the public as exactly that, 'the public', 'the visitor', or 'people'. When pressed, many curators will say that they aim to get specific publics involved in the exhibition depending on its content. Some also put themselves in the shoes of the visitor, imagining how he or she would walk through the exhibition and what they would want to see as they turn a corner. While most institutionally-linked curators do not aim at participation, *per se*, they do intend to offer interesting artworks that can be approached at a variety of physical and intellectual levels. Although contemporary art may be in a 'period of continued rupture' (Bourdieu, 1993 [1968]) or 'drift' (Becker, 1982), there remains a particular (largely tacit, given the methodological difficulty of unearthing it) grammar of visitor communication and seduction in the museum exhibition.<sup>51</sup>

My interest in this section lies in how curators engage in *intéressement* by shaping and delimiting visitors' possible encounters with artworks in the physical and interpretive space of the exhibition. Described by Callon (1986), the principle of 'intéressement' from actor-network theory describes the work of mediators to capture the attention of others and encourage them to accept the mediator's role or definition of a situation. DeNora (2000: 94) uses this concept to describe the use of music by aerobics instructors to encourage entry into aerobic activity, and Hennion (1989 [1983]) draws on it to examine the work of music producers to engage recording artists in conventional behaviour. Here, I will use the concept to examine how curators use and position artworks to entice viewers to enter into the exhibition and to influence their actions in the gallery space.

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<sup>51</sup> It is worth noting here that conscious instances of curators imagining the outcome of their work in the installation (e.g., by envisioning a potential viewer) were few and far between, and most of these data emerged from interviews of curators observing their work in installation video or photographs. This is not surprising, given that Suchman (1987) sees individuals as using post-action accounts to reconstruct situated action and make it appear to conform to a more coherent 'plan'.

### 6.2.1 Creating the 'good gallery'

Most curatorial decisions are made when curators step back roughly three meters from the artwork or, more commonly, to the entrance of the gallery itself. As several curators pointed out, from this initial vantage point, the visitor has their first glimpse of the space and it must feel open and welcoming, as well as be visually enticing; 'I think, even unconsciously, they get an overview...it's a really quick moment, but they feel that this is right...somehow...that this works'.<sup>52</sup> Like contemporary artists, contemporary mediators rely on others in a reflexive way to carry out their work, by envisioning their opinions in terms of form and content (Hennion, 2007: 102-103). One curator describes this predilection in the negative example below.

My real issue that first day of the installation...it wasn't really functioning as a gallery space. There was this horrible line where you'd walk in and then the [benches and display objects] weren't really working. I don't know...they just didn't seem to be in sequence, and it really irritated me that there weren't really any rules for it. And the center space, it just seemed like you walked in and you'd then hit a wall. The [plinths] formed this barrier within the space, and then everything else was pushed out, and it felt like you were sort of herded in. You'd come in and be herded to one side. As an experience, it didn't feel very open or welcoming. Like, you'd wander around and think, 'As a visitor, which way do I go in now?'. And I just felt like I came to a halt every time I walked into that space. It's quite tricky because you felt like you had to be invited, but at the same time...one of my jobs, I always feel, is to protect the work, and you have to make good relations with the lenders. And one thing that really occupies me is, in one way, you signal to people that it's a really open space, but at the same time you signal to them that, actually, it's quite structured.

As described in the quote above, the curator's goal is to create an open and welcoming composition that nonetheless provides tacit directions for the visitor's movements. This means carefully composing an initial glimpse for the visitor, and making sure, for example, that their first look at the exhibition is not 'the back of a monitor'. The curator above is aware of the plan to make the space open and inviting, but can only judge whether s/he has met this goal by putting him/herself in the shoes of the visitor and walking around the space. In so doing, the curator bases his/her own judgment on the perceived opinions of her imaginary viewers. In creating and evaluating a 'functioning gallery space', curators learn to mobilize artworks in a variety of ways.

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<sup>52</sup> Of course, the entrance to an exhibition is also the position from which most installation shots are taken of the exhibition, which provides a complimentary reason to perfect the gallery's view from this angle.

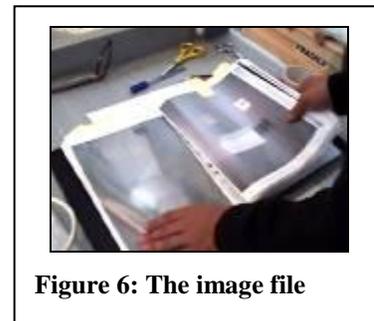
### 6.2.2 *Drawing the visitor into the space*

One common move in *intéressement* is to choose an artwork that is visually appealing or enticing in some manner as a ‘hook’ to capture a visitor’s attention and draw them into the gallery. For example, I was told repeatedly that the design of a good contemporary art space was one in which the galleries were visible from the street, which would visually draw people in to see the exhibition. As demonstrated in the two examples that follow, what works to draw people into the gallery differs by space and place. An ‘entry’ artwork for a gallery with a narrow entrance is very different than the ‘entry’ artwork best suited to a large rectangular gallery.

[1-Page Data Excerpt Removed, Which Combined Interview Excerpts and Video Transcripts. This excerpt examined how a curator thumbed through low-resolution images of artworks in the binder of images of the artworks to be exhibited, in order to locate an artwork that might work well in a particular space.]

The image in Figure 6 also demonstrates the varied quality that images play as proxies for actual artworks. Some images show an artwork installed, while others are close-ups or excerpts from an individual artwork (such as a video still). As the curator here demonstrates, choosing an artwork for the entryway is a combination of factors: it must ‘fit’ visually, but it must also ‘make sense’ among all of the other artworks, as a gateway to the exhibition. Yet, because of the narrow and unlit entry to this gallery, the physical properties of this artwork played a particularly salient role in its choice as entry object. As demonstrated by qualitative work on aesthetic consumption (cf. DeNora, 2000; Halle, 1993; Willis, 1990), curators may orient to artworks in unconventional ways (e.g., outside of the art historical ‘codes’) based on the particular resonances the artworks have with the particular action and space at hand. These resonances may be aesthetic as well as semiotic.

Generally speaking, the entry artwork is a visual preparedness of sorts for the visitor to enter into the exhibition. In some cases, it performs an important role in setting the tone of the exhibition. As detailed in the second example below, the curator chose to hang the entry artwork strategically to convey a larger point in the exhibition (Figure 7).



**Figure 6: The image file**

The first work you saw when you came into the space was [...] intentionally hung quite high, so that you had a sense of something [...] superimposed on the cityscape. [...] A lot of the works I chose dealt very prominently with [the city] in a very physical sense, or referenced [the city]. And, I really wanted to do that. So, that was sort of a reference point for some of the themes in the show, about race, about the city, about how the city frames race, and how race is framed by the city as well. [...] And the way [other artworks] were specifically installed on these...plinths of different heights, it was supposed to echo the idea of the city and different blocks of buildings and so on.



**Figure 7: Plinths as cityscape**

In some cases, an exhibition makes a visual argument in itself, based on the display techniques used to present different artworks. As the curator discussed the rationale for the installation in Figure 7, s/he noted a desire to subliminally inscribe the exhibition with a greater, thematic message, meant to be experienced in embodied form. Again, while this message was implicit (i.e., no mention of this installation device was provided in the accompanying documentation), it represented a unique interpretation by the curator of the expected orientation to tacit museum conventions to draw the visitor in and achieve the successful performance of the ‘good gallery’ as both open and structured. While the conventions for viewer intressement are static — ‘make the gallery open and welcoming and draw the visitor in’ — curators orient to this expectation in highly personal ways based on their own curatorial interests, the aesthetic properties of particular artworks, and the physical layout of the gallery.

### 6.2.3 *Indicating a trajectory*

The physical design of galleries influences visitor trajectories (Bourdeau & Chebat, 2001). Most uninitiated visitors to an art museum will walk into a gallery, turn either right or left, and automatically conduct their visit by hugging the wall and circling the room in this way (Bourdeau & Chebat, 2001; Loer, 2005; Melton, 1933). Curators often plan other trajectories for visitors, but understand that visitors are not forced into these and expect that they may deviate significantly. Many curators believe that good exhibition design encourages visitors to ‘come upon’ objects in the gallery space and create a dynamic trajectory for them to do so (Heath & Hindmarsh, 2000).

This belief is demonstrated in the example below, where a curatorial assistant discusses the process the curatorial and artistic team went through to install a particular sculpture displayed upon a plinth:

The idea is that when a visitor enters, we want him to be able to have an equally independent and interesting rapport with each of the artworks. We don't want one particular artwork to draw more attention than the others. This way, you get an even sense of the space and you can choose where you'd like to go and what you'd like to look at first. It's



also important to give the visitor little things to discover...you don't want them to be able to see everything right away. For instance, with this artwork [artwork A], we tried to position [it first with the body] parallel to the entrance [Figure 8, image 1, the curator uses a right hand to indicate position], but then we discovered that in fact it was better like this [Figure 8, image 2, again the hand gestures the plane of final positioning]. [SKA: For whom?] Well, it was a question of appreciation [Figure 8, image 3, the curator uses hand gestures to reinforce the vague sense of the word 'appreciation'], and, personally, I find that now when you enter, you see only a small bit of the sculpture and you are obliged to go closer and move around the work to discover it. It's not all visible at once.

As described in this example, those installing the artwork put themselves in the visitor's shoes, assuming a shared sense of 'appreciation' when strategically installing the artwork to create a visual interest. The artwork was positioned by imagining that visitors would literally be forced to enter into the space in order to see it head-on. In this exhibition, those installing the artwork combined the creation of a sense of openness in the exhibition with a sense of visual intrigue to draw users into the space.

Curators may also strategically position artworks to encourage users to follow a planned trajectory through the exhibition. In Figure 9, for example, the small works in the right foreground were used by the curators to 'create an interruption of space to guide the visitors in another direction'. A floor-mounted sculpture [not shown] was used in a similar way, as narrated below:

I also think about the way I want the audience to walk through the room. So, I place something in the middle of the entrance...like [artwork A] and by that I direct them to the right, and then they go further right, right, right, and move around this, and you can also do this with another piece the other way around, because you want them to experience a succession of pieces in this way. Hardly anyone moves out of that, and most of the people do the same routine, so you can really direct them with that, and it gives you another possibility of really shaping the show.



The purpose of physically guiding visitors around the gallery space is to indicate particular relationships among artworks that the curators have planned and/or observed, and attempted to make available in a visual manner. As indicated by the quote above, curators attempt to guide viewers to experience artworks in a certain order, so that they can observe relationships between pieces that may be hung in close proximity, or displayed in such a way that they are visually related (one in front of the other, for example).

As discussed in Chapters Four and Five, the head curator of an exhibition tends to be more concerned with the relationships between artworks and meaning creation in the exhibition, while assistant curators and other museum staff are concerned first and foremost with the security of artworks and visitor safety. The same division of labour occurs in the installation process itself. While the head curators are concerned with creating trajectories, other curators (as well as gallery managers) have their most uninitiated publics in mind. They realize that these individuals will be expecting neutral artworks hung appropriately, and are careful to point out problems with displaying small sculptures, for example, on the floor (where people will not expect to encounter them). Indeed, as one exhibition staff member told me: ‘It’s fine to have something radical when it’s the “art-world” public, but when it’s the grand public, it’s better to keep everything to the codes’. Curators’ *intéressement* strategies may be limited by traditional patterns of museum interaction for some visitors.

As seen in the examples above, taken from interviews with curators post-installation, many curators explain the outcome of the exhibition by describing their plans of viewer *intéressement* or attributing agency to the artworks in the exhibition: ‘the artworks really just found their own places’, for instance. This is not unlike the practice of opera singers explaining that their voice ‘knows what to do’ (cf. Atkinson, 2006). Yet accepting this explanation means ignoring all of the ethnomethodological work involved to reflect upon and make sense of aesthetic decisions in cognitive ways. The ‘good gallery’, with its key artworks and physical trajectories, emerges through a combination of the aesthetic and symbolic affordances of the artworks as they are mobilized by curators in the exhibition space during the temporal frame of the installation. In the next section, I use interviews with curators asking about the *process* (not simply the outcome) of installation in order to unpack how they make situational work appear to align to existing plans or museum conventions for the ‘good gallery’.

### 6.3 The work of relating: A series of ‘surprise moments’

The reflections on organizing the exhibition space above, given after the fact, make the installation process sound much more codified and organized than it actually is. During the installation itself, it takes a considerable amount of work to achieve this satisfactory result. Due to their size, artistic significance, or the logistics of their installation, the position of some artworks must be determined well in advance of the installation. Other artworks, however, are moved around on the day of installation. In this process, the curator generally pays attention to four details: the physical space necessary for a visitor to appreciate each object individually, the relationships between objects, the relationship between objects and the exhibition, and the life of the exhibition as a whole.<sup>53</sup> Negotiating these criteria requires a conversation with both the aesthetic and textual/symbolic presences of artworks and exhibition.

Everyday reasoning combines visual, auditory, and other sensory experience with non-sensory information and verbal and symbolic modes of expression. The mediation of contemporary art is no different. The accounts below, drawn from interviews in the gallery space, interrogate this multidimensional reasoning during the installation process.

[Curator 1] These in a sense are materials for a composition, and until you’ve actually got them in a visual space, you can draw as many maps as you like, but your eyes are always going to be slightly off, and you’ll notice things about the particular colour of a work...

[Curator 2] And a space has to feel right...it has to be kind of ‘tuned’ in a sense. It has to feel right, and sometimes you need to lay everything out and kind of...and then you start to...you know...it’s quite an intuitive thing, and relationships start to happen, they start to...You can’t do that beforehand, before you have... [Curator 1] I can understand doing that if you’re doing a show of Picasso from birth to death...We’re not that kind of curator at all. It’s not about it being something that could be a book or a Picasso resume. It’s about particular relationships between pieces.

And, also, the other thing is what happens when two works are placed side by side — what is the chemistry between the works — is another fascinating aspect of curating...very creative. This is very true of this show, because if you take them individually, the effigies...some aren’t so interesting as others. But, something happens when you put them all together. It’s a spectacular sort of richness.

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<sup>53</sup> The goal of the gallery space, as stated by one curator, is to best ‘articulate’ the artworks. As demonstrated by DiMaggio (1982b) and O’Doherty (1999 [1976]), the main defining element of the institutionalization of high art is the isolation of different artworks from each other. (This display convention in the museum contrasts sharply with the walls of artworks in closely confined spaces that one sees in an art fair, for example.) Similarly, much work in the installation ensures that each artwork has ‘its own life and presence’ and has ‘room to breathe’. It is not always the physical size of the work that determines its spacing, but rather its ‘symbolic size’ matters as well. For instance, a small but significant artwork in an exhibition will be given more surrounding space than a much larger but ‘less important’ artwork.

[Curator 1] And then there's something which is much more exciting, but completely goes hand in hand with the logistical things, which is how the works actually relate to each other... which can, in a way, only fully come out when you have everything up. [SKA: Which you had planned to a large degree, how the works would converse with each other?] Yeah, kind of, which is why we chose the people to work with, I guess, but I don't think completely... there's always surprises like that, as well. [Curator 2] Like having [one artist's] piece there, next to [another artist's] piece, was not planned... but after everything was up we had a realization that it was nice...

As evidenced in the quotes above, curating is also a creative process, and relationships between artworks emerge in the course of installation; they are not all pre-configured. Rather, as one curator states, 'One thing conditions the next'.

Here I will explore how curators draw on various parts of the space, artworks, and neighbouring artworks in an attempt to achieve a satisfied sense of the space 'feeling right'. Like jazz improvisation, they may just 'know it when they see it', but what is interesting sociologically is how they discover or recognize what it is that they 'know' by manipulating artworks and other objects in the installation environment. This process blurs aesthetic considerations such as colour and size, with more 'symbolic' considerations such as artistic significance and history. As one curator pointed out, 'It's true that you are constantly making aesthetic judgments on artworks in the space; I mean, at the end of the day, these are aesthetic objects'. In particular, the ways in which curators orient to particular works of art in particular places functions to draw out the significance of particular artworks, the relationships between them, and a better understanding of the exhibition concept as a whole.

### *6.3.1 Editing artworks as we go*

In every one of the installations I observed, curators made last minute changes to the physical display of individual artworks due to constraints of space and their impression that the artworks did not quite 'work' in the space (considered both physically and conceptually).

[10-Line Data Example Removed, Which Included Images and Narration. This example examined how a series of framed works installed at shoulder height along two walls were initially laid out leaning against the bottom of the walls to perfect their spacing for the hanging. When it was found, however, that the series comprised far more works than could neatly fit in the corner set aside for them, the curator drew on a theme in the artist's work to suggest a way to arrange and filter the number of works to be installed.]

This example is representative of other situations of physical editing of artworks during the installation, which largely entailed adjusting artworks (which did not 'work' for aesthetic or

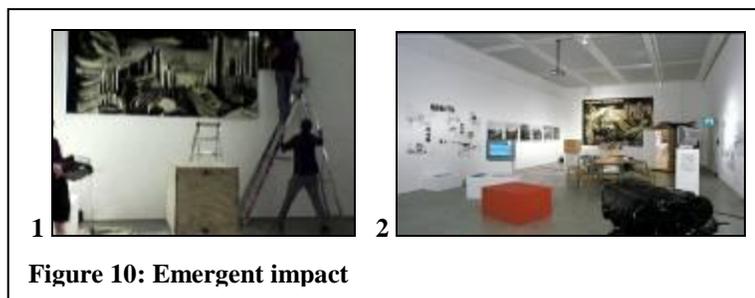
other logistical reasons) by bringing them in line with the signifying practices of the exhibition. The common denominator in all of these cases is that curators drew on indexical particularities in the temporal and spatial location of the physical exhibition (e.g., from one city to another) as a resource for solving what was otherwise a simple problem of physical resources and space in the gallery. In doing so, the curators killed two birds with one stone: solving the space constraint, and solving the problem of relating the artwork to the micro-context of the particular exhibition.

### 6.3.2 *Restraint as a resource*

Similar to the discussion above, in which the physical gallery space influences opportunities for meaning making with the artworks within, the physical emergence of the artworks themselves, and the ways in which curators relate to them in the space, affords particular occasions of interpretation. In the next three examples, I demonstrate how curators develop the narratives or plots behind how they choose to configure the space and identify so-called pinnacle pieces using physical artworks as conceptual resources. All narrative descriptions of the exhibitions are taken from the exhibition overview text in the catalogue or visitor guide.

The first example concerns an exhibition focused on the use and ownership of urban resources, specifically processes of commercial ‘gentrification’ in the inner city resulting in the expulsion or marginalisation of local artist communities. As seen in the following quote, the large poster artwork on the far wall emerged, physically, as the ‘backbone’ of the exhibition.

[Curator 1] I guess when the text...just realizing the scale of it as well, and deciding on it being relatively high like that, it was good to know that it’s going to make an impression on people when they come in. [Curator 2] And then remembering that this work has been shown before [at this space]... It starts to make sense how this piece is sort of the ‘backbone’ to the whole exhibition. It feels like, in terms of where we’ve come from, how far we’ve come, going back to newer works in the space which are about regeneration in the [inner city], and in relation to this, what similar messages there are, despite having such different aesthetics. And, I think that’s something that we’ve always been interested in with this project. It just feels so urgent and relevant today.



The poster arrived and was installed as a series of small panels (Figure 10, image 1), and thus its ‘sheer impact’ literally emerged as the installation progressed. As the curators reflect above, seeing the visual impact of the piece, and the sheer size of its message, made them realize how important it was, not only to the topic of the exhibition, but as a visual orienting device for other artworks. This led to the second thought the curators expressed, which was a remembrance of the fact that this poster was shown previously in this space and provided a historical backbone to several of the more recent artworks in the exhibition, which concern more recent urban projects. In this case, the immense physical presence of the poster acted to convey the main theme of the exhibition and hold together artworks in a variety of other media, such as video-based artworks, sketches, and smaller photographs.

In the second example below, the exhibition brought together a range of artworks by contemporary local artists interested in architecture and the physical representation of private space, as informed by historic artists and heraldic devices. As the curator demonstrates below, the evolution of these artworks in the installation setting did not necessarily lend them to the strictly symmetrical hanging s/he had envisioned.

...I was going to make it more symmetrical. [...] I was thinking of this idea of the emblem, and how some of the artists already use symmetry in their work anyway, like [these three artists in the show, who arrange their work in a certain way]. But really, when I was in there with the reality of the work, this [pointing to the standing screen-based artwork in the photo] needed white space around it. We were going to have a different screen [by the artist] that was long and curved, but then we couldn't get it. And then the two pieces [by another artist] that I really liked and whose texts made the most sense were not the same: one was [one medium] and one was [another medium], where it was going to be two [of the same medium]. So, it's always the way where the work doesn't fit in with the idea of your idealized conception. But, that ends up being a productive thing so often. And I think actually this allowed the individual work to not be too hemmed in by my concept...which I was always a bit uneasy about anyway, over-determining the arrangement according to an exhibition theme. So, I think, yeah, it did let them be themselves a bit more [the artists and artworks]. And I think it ended up probably not feeling so tightly diagrammatic, in the way that I'd imagined it, according to this idea of heraldry, or if you were looking down from above sort of thing: these as composite elements in a picture. But, it did have a feeling of monument in urban space for me, in a way that I'd kind of thought about.

Although the artworks, installed, did not necessarily fit in with the curator's ‘idealized conception’ of the space, the curator noted that the exhibition as a whole, nevertheless, ‘kind of’ related, in a way, to his/her thoughts on urban space and monuments. Urban space was indeed mentioned as a subtheme in the visitor guide, which might explain why the curator drew on this theme as a way to explain and justify the outcome of the installation process. Although the artworks defied the curator's original plans and theme, s/he treated this as ‘productive’, and reined the evolved meaning of the space (as influenced through

unexpected encounters with physical artworks) back into the curatorial concept by relating them to urban space, rather than symmetry.

A third and final example of the relationship of physical restraint to narrative development follows in an example from an installation below.

[22-Line Data Example Removed, Which Included Video Transcript and Interview Transcript. This example began with a description from the catalogue text about the various themes that the artist uses in his/her work. It then examined how the curator selected two themes to emphasize in a particular gallery installation. After the installation of these planned works was complete, however, the curator stepped back and noticed that the objects in the installation also unexpectedly narrated a third theme in the artist's work, which was a seen as serendipitous.]

This and the other examples above demonstrate the importance of the visual and spatial installation of artworks in complementing, completing, and sometimes extending the textual narrative of the exhibition in an emergent way. Artworks 'activate the space', according to one curator, but, as demonstrated above, they activate both the physical *and discursive space* of the exhibition. In the examples above, curators reigned in these installation surprises to fit with their overall conception of the artists' work and exhibition narrative. The artworks reflected what had already been written in the exhibition texts, but illuminated it in unforeseen ways.

In some exhibitions, there were also 'surprise moments' that moved curators beyond their original understanding of the relationships between particular artworks. In these moments, curators realized that different artworks related in ways they had never before considered. Another quote from an interview with a curatorial team broaches this theme.

And actually it's so mundane and so fun as well, just realizing 'Oh my God, I hadn't even thought of how that connected to that', in terms of the issues of the works we're dealing with and certain constructs, and, like visually, I love all that green when you come in—it's really welcoming. I hadn't actually really thought about that before, with the garland, and all of those green panels, and that whole gardening theme that was totally not planned. So, I'm really pleased about all of that. I love those 'happy accidents' that happen; they're so exciting. And, it's funny, because we spent probably 40-50% of our year fundraising, and maybe 60% working on research and writing books, but actually, when you come to something like this, you think 'Oh my God! This is what it's all about! This is it! This is the meat in the sandwich'.

In the quote above, the meaning of the exhibition performed for the public was not based simply on the curator's original intentions or ideas for the artworks, but instead the unexpected opportunity to use the exhibition to speak to an entirely different subject, a 'gardening theme'. In this and the other examples above, relationships between artworks emerge as a combination of plans and 'surprises'. But these surprise moments are produced by the ways in which curators grapple with the artworks and space at hand. I heard repeatedly that physical restrictions in the gallery space were actually 'productive

moments' (as stated by one curatorial team), because they often led to such surprises. Meanings in the artwork and tacit codes in the exhibition entered into curatorial action in an entirely unexpected way, through the affordances of objects.

Artworks are chosen for inclusion in exhibitions for both conceptual and aesthetic reasons. Yet, while the theoretical importance of artworks is featured in the exhibition documentation, aesthetic criteria equally enter into the installation discussion. In their work to see the artworks 'harmonizing' (as coined by one curator), curators demonstrate that artworks are both symbolic and aesthetic objects. The emergent surprise moment is a kind of indexical 'opportunism', resulting from the curator's 'tinkering' with a space and its 'local idiosyncrasies' (cf. Knorr Cetina, 1979). As Knorr Cetina (1981: 144) further explains with reference to scientific research, concretizing the 'outcome' of a research process is itself a process of meaning making: one must first recognize a micro-outcome as an instance of something, and then, secondly, the scientist must 'make sense' of this interpretation. The meaning of this 'something' is established with reference to the context of the situation. In the case of contemporary art, curators also recognize new or interesting developments when they occur in the installation and then make sense of them, often with reference to the exhibition concept but not always. Curators do not have endless options or capacities to orient to objects, so they instead exercise freedom in the way that they reconfigure these constraints into resources for their cognitive work of conceptualizing the exhibition as a frame for the artworks installed.

#### 6.4 Thinking *and feeling* the exhibition

The previous section examined how curators mobilize individual artworks within the meaning-laden frame of the exhibition, and in so doing, mediate their understanding of the frame itself. The physical installation is the final step in which their planning work is actually accomplished in a concrete way, via the artworks themselves, not physical or discursive proxies for them. I'd like to unpack this one step further here, by looking at how this is accomplished through situated action in the course of an installation. To do this, I will present a final example from an exhibition installation, drawn from a combination of video footage and a follow-up video-elicitation interview.

To set the scene before this final example, I will first lay out the distinction that curators often drew between the notions of ‘feeling’ and ‘thinking’ about an exhibition or an artist’s work. In particular, many curators turned to a ‘feeling’ discourse to explain the impetus or motivations behind their situated work in the installation, as well as their sense that something ‘works’. Two curators reflect upon this distinction in follow-up interviews:

I was kind of taking the mood of this nostalgia as the impetus for the selection, rather than starting with an academic argument. So, it has quite a theatrical immersive feel to it...The thinking definitely came afterwards. I was interested in starting from that quite an intuitive point and then seeing where that got to.

What it looks like is almost irrelevant – it’s more what it feels like, which sounds pretentious and arty, but it has this kind of physical presence. [...] It feels very crowded. It feels...[long pause]...I think actually, to tell you the truth what I think about it, is it feels a bit, sort of...helpless. [laughs] Because it’s kind of doing this theatre thing...this kind of display...but it’s kind of abject, really. That’s what I feel about it, really. But, I think it’s great, you know. [laughs nervously] The only way I can say what I think about [the artist’s] work is to refer to something else. Can I do that? [SKA: Yes] Do you know the poet called Paul Valerie? Do you know he wrote about the three body problem? Well, basically, it’s very simple. He was an existentialist, and he wrote about the first body as that surface body that you see and other people see. [...] The second body is this mechanical model that medicine uses, that you can take to bits and understand. But the third body is ‘my body’, which is the substance of my presence in the world, its fore-representation. [...] There’s a kind of conflict between that first visual surface body and that actually being me. And it’s quite a traditional way of describing [the artist’s] work, but I think that’s a very relevant to the way that [the artist] approaches...

A curator’s ‘feeling’ about an exhibition conveys a good deal of information about the nature of the artist’s work (in a monographic exhibition) and the larger message or theme (in a group exhibition). But this can also be translated into a ‘thinking’ argument by the curator in explaining why the exhibition or artwork should ‘feel’ a certain way. Therefore, a curator’s ‘feelings’ about an exhibition are an embodied repository of tacit knowledge: what he or she ‘knows’ more discursively about an artist’s work, exhibition theme, and logics of display. But, more interestingly, in the exercise of this somatic knowledge — as curators work to make the exhibition ‘look’ and ‘feel’ like they ‘think’ it should — there may be slippages wherein new associations present themselves.

The curators decided to organize the exhibition described in the following example in order to introduce the public to an internationally-regarded artist. As noted in the curatorial overview to the exhibition catalogue, the selection of artworks for the exhibition were chosen to give the audience a broad impression of the artist’s work in different media and the different themes at play in the artist’s work. As I will show in the example below — which describes the process of installing one gallery— the decision to display certain themes in a particular gallery actually emerged less from the conscious effort of the

curators to introduce them, and more from the way ‘feeling’ and ‘thinking’ combined in the presence of artworks and exhibition space.

[2-Page Data Example Removed, Which Combined Fieldnotes, Video Transcript, and Interview Transcript. This example began with an examination of how the curator went to give the gallery an “eye” from its entry point, and reported that the room did not ‘feel right’. After adding a new artwork to the space, the curator observed that the gallery suddenly took on a new, unexpected theme. The video-elicitation reflection that followed discussed how the artworks and gallery space have a mutually constituting relationship.]

Just like a police officer who can ‘sense’ when something is amiss in a routine traffic stop (cf. Sacks, 1972), the curator recognizes cues about the ‘complete’ or ‘good’ gallery in a deeply embodied way and ‘feels’ when s/he has successfully accomplished this task.

As Becker (1982) notes, systems of ‘aesthetics’ in a particular art world govern how something is recognized as ‘working’ or ‘looking good’, and when curators run afoul of these conventions, they may experience that disjuncture in a ‘vague manner’. Similarly, the curator’s internalized, embodied sense of the aesthetics of conceptual art and the artist’s work in particular informed, on a somatic level, the curator’s feeling that the space ‘worked’ only when filled with a certain number of artworks. In this way, the museum gallery is an accomplice to the action, by informing ‘vague’ understanding of when a space ‘feels’ right. And yet, what emerged from this process was more than the ‘good gallery’, but also the unique football theme, which had been unplanned and was not conveyed as such in the exhibition documentation for the initial installation. While the exhibition is more than the sum of its parts, in conveying a larger frame for the interpretation of the artworks within, the artworks themselves matter quite a bit in how they reflectively shape and refract this theme in the temporal, spatial context of the installation.

### **6.5 Discussion: The exhibition as a learning process**

An important part of curatorial interpretation is the physical juxtaposition of different artworks vis-à-vis the audience (Harding, 1997), but placement and meaning can diverge in practice. As DeNora (2007) observes in the case of music therapy, one can point out the effect of something, in craft terms, but one cannot *predetermine* it outside of and in advance of any specific set of local circumstances. In many cases, including those presented in Law and Mol (2002), how events unfold in a spatial and temporal process can have an impact on their outcome.

In drawing on museum conventions in the process of installing an exhibition, curators often find their own practice continuously developed through unanticipated experiences and sensorial responses in relation to aesthetic objects. 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 details of responding to currents and handling a canoe. 'While plans *can be* elaborated indefinitely, they elaborate actions just to the level that elaboration is useful; they are vague with respect to the details of action precisely at the level at which it makes sense to forego abstract representation, and rely on the availability of a particular, embodied response' (Suchman, 1987: 188, her emphasis). While it is the curator's embodied, tacit knowledge of what makes a gallery 'look good' that directs their situated actions, the result of these actions also presents new opportunities for meaning making in how artworks are ultimately juxtaposed. The aesthetic properties of the artworks are not indeterminate, and thus curators and publics may orient to them in unique and unanticipated ways. To return to the canoe analogy, it is as if the canoeist learns a new skill or paddle technique in the process of encountering an unexpected form of rapid after a particularly heavy rain.

Chapter Seven extends this focus on situated actions to examine how curators and other participants in the exhibition installation collaborate in the process of 'descending the rapids'. But before moving on to this discussion, I will quickly gather what has been learned so far about curatorial expertise and the achieved nature of conventional action. As professional experts in artistic mediation, curators are not blank slates, but arrive to the installation equipped with plans, bodies of theoretical knowledge, and a trained attention to particular physical details. As in scientific work, the subconscious orientation to one's surroundings is an important element of expert curatorial knowledge (c.f. Knorr Cetina, 1981, 1999; Lynch, 1985). This is 'conventional' knowledge (Becker, 1982), or finely-tuned perceptual skills (Ross, et al., 2006), which curators may experience at a very deep 'feeling' level. For the curators in this chapter, their visual expertise informs how they move artworks around to create a satisfactory whole, and their tacit knowledge of the artist and his or her work allows them to identify successful instances of meaning making in the production of this whole. Schön (1987) refers to this kind of tacit knowledge, described in depth by Polanyi (1967), as 'knowing-in-action', the know-how revealed by the spontaneous skilful execution of a performance; 'Intuition is not a magical process, but the

unconscious workings of a prepared mind' (Rolfe, 1997: 94). Tacit knowledge is expert knowledge that uses situated actions to achieve one's plans (or make it look as if one has done so).

Yet, the examples given in this chapter demonstrate that situated action can also result in unexpected outcomes in the course of the installation that require amendments to what curators tacitly know about an artist's work and their own conceptual thoughts about the exhibition. In educational studies, Schön (1983; 1987) notes that the exercise of tacit knowledge can also be seen as a learning process, in the sense of changing potential behaviours through interpreting, acquiring, or distributing information. One way that tacit knowledge can be altered and adapted through interactions with the physical environment is through 'reflection-on-action', or processing experience after the fact (Schön, 1983). In this case, curators step back from their work of installation and pronounce something 'new' that they learned from the outcome of the activity. But this does not explain the genuine 'surprise' moments of meaning making that emerge in the exhibition installation. As Schön (1983; 1987: 28) continues, when routine responses produce unexpected outcomes that do not fit existing categories of tacit knowledge, individuals engage in a form of on-the-spot experimentation, problem-solving, and tinkering that he terms 'reflection-in-action'. This tinkering with materials and environments can be opportunities for questioning tacit knowledge and restructuring or reframing situated action (cf. Conein & Jacopin, 1993; O'Toole, 2001). While public, academic knowledge or theories may be taken into consideration, these inform practice after the fact rather than direct it (Rolfe, 1997). Seen in this way, the installation may also be a learning environment, where curators teach themselves to appreciate objects in new ways through tinkering with them. But, there may be a slippage or disjuncture between these experiences and their verbalizations of them which bring them back into established curatorial repertoires (c.f. Atkinson & Claxton, 2000). This sets the stage firmly for the next chapter where I will explore how this curatorial tinkering is treated and communicated among other participants in the installation.

## **6.6 Conclusion: Situated work and extra-conventional action**

The success of ‘planned’ action in the installation is achieved through a curator’s orientation to the gallery space and the hanging of consecutive artworks. Each object becomes a resource for the hanging of further objects, as well as a resource for getting a feel of what goes with what, what else is needed, and the emergent ‘feel’ of the gallery space. Yet, in the process of carrying out ‘planned’ action, curators encounter unanticipated situations wherein they may ‘reflect-in-action’ using objects, spaces, and emerging feelings generated from the combination of both. While much of this situated action can be explained with reference to existing conventions or knowledge, it can also prompt unanticipated opportunities of meaning making.

In exploring the complementary role of plans and situated actions, this chapter has broached the importance of embodied knowledge, somatic work, and object aesthetics in meaning making. But, I have also treated the exhibition here as an ideal type of sorts, isolating the curator’s relationship to the installation from other human actors in the exhibition space. In reality, the publics of the curator are twofold: the ‘imagined public’ (broader audiences ‘seduced’ here by the curator), as well as the immediate public (other individuals involved in the installation, such as artists, technicians, and assistant curators). In the next two chapters, I will explore how the meaning ‘built’ by the curators in the process of exhibition installation is discovered and communicated in concert with these other art world participants.

## 7. INSTALLATION II: GIVING IT ‘THE EYE’

Serge: You don’t really get the resonance just at the moment.

Yvan: Well, a bit. . .

Serge: No, you don’t. You have to come back in the middle of the day. That resonance you get from something monochromatic, it doesn’t really happen under artificial light.

(Reza, 1994: 13)

In Chapter Six, I showed how much in the exhibition installation appears to ‘go unsaid’. In most exhibitions, curators strictly limit the amount of people in the space with them. There are various reasons for this convention, including access, security, privacy, ease of moving around, and ego. In this chapter, I again follow curators through the installation, not as they operate independently, but as they work at the head of a team of people with whom they must negotiate in the act of achieving a satisfying installation. This team includes artists, gallery managers, gallery technicians, assistant curators, artists’ assistants, and museum directors, as well as the *actants* already mobilized in the previous chapter, namely the artworks and exhibition space.

The more actors involved in the exhibition design and installation, the less goes unsaid, because museum bureaucracies demand that all decisions be subject to hierarchical scrutiny and approval, and therefore, be thoroughly discussed. The question for this chapter is how curatorial ‘feeling’, knowing-, and reflection-in-action is captured, conveyed, and made an object of discussion and interpretation among disparate actors with unique perspectives and tasks to accomplish during the installation. How is the ineffable put into words or made into a persuasive device? In answering this question, I will examine three genres of curatorial consensus-making (although these reflect only a small percentage of relevant cooperative work practices in the installation): working with the artist to choose the general positioning of artworks, working with gallery technicians to understand the positionings and possibilities of installing artworks, and working with curators, technicians, and others to achieve the final, physical installation. First, however, I will elaborate briefly on the organization of cooperative work in the installation.

## 7.1 The working consensus

As in the process of planning an exhibition, the installation of each artwork means different things to the different actors involved. The curator is interested in what makes most sense in terms of the exhibition and what might hold most appeal for the audience. The artist is interested in the best presentation of his or her work in light of his or her original intention. The museum director may care about what works best for the museum. Gallery managers are aware of the institutional and safety codes of the space, such as leaving room for wheelchairs and ensuring fire exit signs are clearly visible. Various technicians are concerned with the physical logistics of hanging artworks. And, assistant curators may be thinking more pragmatically about protecting the artwork or members of the public. Consequently, an exhibition installation plan is not what Latour (1987) would refer to as an ‘immutable mobile’, an object whose meaning is relatively fixed via its inscription in the social setting. Rather, it is the fluidity of the installation plan, left intentionally vague in the planning process, which enables its success. As with the Bush Pump (de Laet & Mol, 2000) or a clinic’s medical records (Garfinkel, 1967), these different actors can elaborate the plan according to their own needs during the installation. The important thing to discover, then, is how these different visions of the same object hold together in practice, and the coordinating work and strategies involved successfully bring together multiple perspectives and versions of reality (cf. Mol, 2002).

Rather than seeing the action of all of these different agents as organized through their common adherence to tacit conventions, I will put forth a different model of cooperative behaviour in this chapter, that of the ‘working consensus’. As Streeck and Mehus (2005: 386) point out, any event involving multiple parties is marked by the question, ‘What is going on?’, as well as quietly answered by them. In ongoing interaction, members of social groups, such as art installations, interact and signal to each other to maintain a common definition of the situation. In the process, one establishes a ‘working consensus’ oriented around the indexical particulars of a particular time, place, and goal. In her study of an art commission, for example, Octobre (1996a: 278) demonstrates how curators literally translate their opinion about a work of art from a personal logic to an institutional logic, from ‘the artist believes’ and ‘thinks’, to ‘the artist says’ and ‘questions’.

They shape the communication of their feelings and personal cognition to align with local expectations and create consensus in a verbal manner.

In his ethnographic look at the operatic rehearsal process, Atkinson (2006: 70-72, 118-122) similarly observes the interaction between producers and actors as a task of communicating the provisional, the imprecise, and the ineffable. The task in the rehearsal is for both parties to locate interpretive frames of reference through which actions and characters become comprehensible, and the musical score may play an important role as this mutual referencing device. In her ethnographic study of an art installation, Yaneva (2003a) also demonstrates that aesthetic objects (including artworks, floors, and other materials in the gallery space) often provide this mutually referential ground for action.

Achieving a consensus in the exhibition installation is a complicated matter involving discourse *and* the mobilization of objects, as well as shifts and changes in what is considered to 'look good' as produced through unexpected orientations to particular objects. In what follows, I explore this process by referring regularly to the work of Goodwin (2000) and Streeck (1996), who demonstrate the physical means through which humans facilitate the vicarious inner experience, such as signalling through posture, gesture, object manipulation, and behavioural orientation. The installation is a perceptual field (Goodwin, 1994) wherein various individuals act to guide the perception of others through a variety of verbal and nonverbal means (e.g., rhetorical work, as well as pointing and holding objects up to walls). Because this guiding takes the shape of step-by-step actions dealing with embodied realities and scenic descriptions, it is not simply 'shop talk' (Lynch, 1985), but is best seen as a 'visual script' (Knorr Cetina, 1999: 101). The sense of this work and conversation cannot be isolated from the indexical particularities participants develop through their action in the perceptual field.

What is important to note in this exercise is that there is a hierarchy of actors. Complex creative processes depend on the exercise of 'clout' among their participants and their authority in the project (Caves, 2006: 145-146; Zucker, 1977). While the curator is certainly the 'professional decider' of his or her own exhibition (Jouvenet, 2001: 327), distributions of power also depend upon the local specifics of a particular institution and installation. For instance, different artists may leave more or less room for the curatorial interpretation of their work, museum directors may play a more or less active role in the installation, and representative galleries may have a more or less vested interest in the particularities of the display.

Some artists need more steering than others. Some artists want curators to tell them where stuff goes, but others will suggest things. People need that [for curators to take a steering role], because there's be times that we'd say 'Oh, what do you think?', and the artists would be like, 'You're the curator...you tell us!' You have to say, otherwise if you don't have final say, then one of the artists will persuade you to move it in a final way and then it'll be more their show. It's one of these funny power things that we try to steer clear of, but inevitably, it's always there. We can't deny the fact that we had brought all of these people into this space...we have 'chosen them', although we don't like that idea, that's ultimately what happens. And we've chosen these works and we have to have a sense of why they're there and what they have to be next to and what those conversations are.

As Knorr Cetina (1981: 73) observes in scientific communities, these differences in symbolic capital act like an 'invisible hand' guiding action and decision making (see also Knorr Cetina, 1999: chap. 8; Knorr Cetina, 1981: chap. 4). The consequences of this invisible hand are visible, however, in how individuals actually carry out decision making. According to Freund (1998), the organization of biopsychosocial and physical space is used by individuals to sustain performance or establish boundaries and regulate the flow of information. In looking at *how* curators, artists, and other installation participants signal to each other the emerging meaning of the exhibition, this 'small group' study also broaches larger questions in sociology about the 'articulations' (cf. Hall, 1986) individuals make between their own worldviews and the available materials for composition.

## **7.2 Working with the artist**

According to Becker (1982: 64), 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. As Irvin (2006) points out, most communication between artists and curators concerns the work of the artist to specify which observable features of the objects are essential to the artwork; the curator then edits the artist's intentions to strike a balance between the artist's wishes for his or her own artwork, the promotion of a satisfying viewer experience, and an obligation to respect the artwork's integrity. As contemporary artists often install their own artworks, particularly in monographic exhibitions, the museum installation is a unique situation in which to examine the collaboration between curator and artist in action. 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. This packaging can concern the conceptual layout of the exhibition as well as aesthetic and viewing practicalities (e.g., ensuring that a viewing bench is within headset reach of a video-based artwork).

At the outset of planning an exhibition, physically walking through the gallery is an important way that curators may try to aid or guide artists who are vague or uncertain about what they want to do in a particular space. This, I was told, ‘motivates the artist to do new things’, as well as ‘forces them to think practically’. In the installation process, artists (like curators) may change their minds significantly. There are many reasons for this, including unfamiliarity with the space, the novel situation of seeing many of their pieces together, and the difficulty of reconciling their pre-conceived notions of the exhibition with situational reality. The curator has the complicated task of ‘guiding’ the artist in the right direction, while also respecting their wishes for the artwork.

As a curator, you’ve taken the second step. You’re behind what the artist wants to do, but quite often they don’t really know what they want so you have to sort of...because I’m used to working with the space, I’ll wait until the initial interest in that area has died down, and then get in there and have a go at it and then see if there is any difficulty with it, later on. I suppose, as a building-based curator, you’re part of the fixtures and you get to know the best ways for doing things in the space.

As seen above (and described in Section 5.1.2), the relationship between curator and artist is delicate and not always explicitly hierarchical. Octobre (1999b: 93) sees this relationship as the exchange of symbolic capital: the curator allows the artist access to museum notoriety and the artist allows the curator to ‘discover’ him, and together they produce an exhibition discourse. But as one curator confided, ‘You have to lay down rules without actually laying them down...it’s a very delicate form of diplomacy’. This means that their collaborative work in the installation is a careful visual game of display and communication.

### *7.2.1 Developing a shared understanding*

[2-Page Data Example Removed, Combining Fieldnotes, Video Transcript, and Interview Transcript. This example examined how curators and artists worked together to complete the installation of a single gallery. The curators and artists were initially in a collegial disagreement about how to install the artworks here, but the curator was concerned that the artists’ preferences would not work well visually in the space because certain colors would be lost against the white gallery background. Their conversation took place at the entrypoint to the gallery while ‘giving it the eye’. The curator first employed gestures to refer to the

area of concern in the gallery while describing his/her preferences for changing the installation. When this did not resolve the discussion, the curator had a gallery technician adjust the installation, and then reiterated his/her preference. When this did not resolve the discussion, the curator again looked with the artist at the adjusted installation, but this time observed that the installation echoed visually a main theme in the artist's work, to which the artist agreed.]

As seen here (and in countless other examples throughout my research), talk and gesture mutually elaborate each other. The nonverbal plays a very important role in the installation by drawing out the ineffable or vague statements in the curator's speech and directing them gesturally to a point where they can be made the object of contemplation and interrogation. In this example, in particular, the curator was in a situation of persuasion relative to the artist and continued to make subtle, gradual efforts to bring the 'indecisive' artist around to the curator's way of seeing. To return to Atkinson's (2006: 120-122) study of opera rehearsals, Atkinson observes that the producer's ideas become embodied in concrete action and are keyed to precise timings in music and interaction. Similarly, curators' ideas for an installation are often linked to artworks and visual relationships between artworks and are communicated in a similarly embodied manner. Gesture, as well as working within the aesthetic constraints of the curatorial space, becomes the communicational instrument of choice to convey these ideas. In this example, however, the curator had to align these gestures with verbal descriptions to persuasively demonstrate that the current arrangement of artworks worked correctly to conceptually frame the artist's work.

The process of installation is composed of curators and artists teaching each other definitions of objects in a situated manner, as well as teaching each other practices of framing and appreciation. In the example above, the curator used indexical nonverbal gestures (which communicate and ground words) to teach the artist how to look and see the conventions of the museum, for example, that 'bleached out' and 'white on white' is not part of museum conventions. The teaching of these practices is based on a framework of action that includes at least three components: a description, a perceptual field, and a hand moving within that field (Goodwin, 1994). As demonstrated above, these components are mutually elaborated: gestures delimit the perceptual field by indexing particular items of interest, and descriptions can play an important role in creating the interpretational framework for perception. This example also evidences the observation of Goodwin (1980; c.f. Lynch, 1985: 161-167) that silence, particularly the silence of stepping back and looking, is not an empty space but is occupied by its own activity, composed of posturing, orientations, and other behaviours. In the example above, though in near-silence, the

curator ‘taught’ the artist how to look at the installation in progress with a curatorial ‘eye’ by reorienting his gaze and drawing him to the gallery entrance.

### *7.2.2 Developing a novel, and shared understanding*

A second example looks at the roles of surprise and micro-adjustment amidst a similar process of persuasion.

[5-Page Data Example Removed, Combining Fieldnotes, Video Transcripts, and Interview Transcripts. This example demonstrated how the experience of viewing a newly commissioned artwork for the first time changed the installation plans the curators had made about its placement in the exhibition. In this case, the curators reacted to the artwork in more emotive, uncodified ways not already articulated prior in writings about the artwork. In the process of moving the artwork around the gallery space, the curators decided upon a new installation for the work that aligned with their new and evolving reaction to the artwork. And the curators and museum administrators employed physical gestures, enactments of the path of potential visitors, and their own embodied orientations to this new, unplanned installation to demonstrate the importance of this new installation to the artists.]

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 or an instance of proto-meaning making in an attempt to create a new meaningful convention. Objects, and artworks are no exception, afford particular readings and uses based on their formal and aesthetic properties. 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 orientations to a particular aspect of this artwork, both through expressions (‘it’s magnificent’) and actions (flopping down on chairs), served to index this aspect as meaningful and important within the exhibition. Through repeated object-oriented action, a new meaning may be assigned to the use and reading of the artwork in a particular way, which indexes it within the local situation.

This new action also becomes a basis for establishing a working consensus, albeit on an indefinite level. 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 & Fields, 2008: 135). Here, for inexplicable reasons, this particular aspect of the artwork provided the latticework for this mutual orientation.

As noted by Yaneva (2003a), curators have a very sensuous relationship with aesthetic objects; they touch them to understand their properties and affordances, and in so

doing, introduce them as active participants in the installation. The curator's touching of the artwork performed a communicative function as well by helping to convey an experience with the artwork that was not yet able to be articulated in a verbal manner. The curator's use of his/her own body in the above example to represent the topic under discussion again shows the importance of the body as a site for displays implicated in the constitution of situated actions (cf. Goodwin, 2000).

This is yet another example of how the ways in which artworks are installed or unconsciously framed make assumptions about what is offered and indicate to the audience its deportment (DiMaggio, 1982b; O'Doherty, 1999 [1976]: 24). Ultimately, the new installation of the artwork was designed to re-create the embodied experience of the curators for future museum visitors. The main point is that it was *a particular aspect* of the artwork 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, they may also afford less rational forms of adaptive and creative action through their appeal to the body, senses, and memory (DeNora, 2003: 129).

Of course, the unconventional decision making in this particular installation process was not unproblematic for the conventions of the exhibition. In particular, the new installation posed problems for the artists' representative galleries, future exhibitions of the artworks, the visitor guide, and the already finalized description of artworks in the catalogue and accompanying documentation. These problems were solved through the creation of a new discursive frame for the artwork. At the last moment, in the most recent press release, a new term was used to describe the works and their installation. (The catalogue, however, had already gone to press without this change.)

As in several of the examples in Chapter Six, new discursive codes for making meaning in artworks emerged here from a complicated process of give and take in the installation. The singularity of an object is the outcome of discursive practices that render it coherent and stable; it has to be made meaningful within a local meaning system. But there is a difference between conscious experience that is not primarily experienced through language ('alinguistic'), and the words people use to reflect on that experience, give it meaning, and communicate it to others. How such experiences are 'translated' into language, via sets of pre-existing words and meanings, has a permanent impact on beliefs about the artwork, serving to erase the small negotiations and situated actions that led to

this point. The artist (or his or her assistants) may have input here as well — in explaining why their artwork does or does not do something — to help curators construct an emergent narrative. For Heinich (1997b), this discursive mediation is a fundamental way in which experts convince others of the value of the artwork and legitimate their own expertise as a function of accumulated knowledge about the field. Though action is shaped by conventions in art worlds, conventions may also be applied in a reactive way, to make sense of this situated action.

### 7.2.3 *In the absence of the visual*

I will present one final example which emphasizes the important role played by gesture, posture, and object-oriented interaction in the accomplishment of situated action and consensus building, but which does so by way of contrast. Unlike the previous examples, this interaction between curator and artist is not satisfactorily resolved. This is largely due, as I will argue, to the *absence* of embodied action in persuasive work.

[2-Page Data Example Removed, Combining Fieldnotes and Images. This example explored how artists and curators reconciled different preferences for installing a series of artworks with the preferences and conventions of the museum space. While the artists wanted to make the artworks available to the reviewer in a ‘confrontational’ way, the curators and museum staff evoked the ‘conventions’ of the museum as an explanation for why this plan had to be adapted to the museum space in order to successfully display the artworks as artworks. The different preferences were not resolved in the conversation, and ultimately a museum administrator chose the placement of the works.<sup>54</sup>]

There is one important lesson to take from this unresolved debate. This lesson is to look at the space in which the discussion actually took place. Although the curators and artist were physically in the gallery space, they were not having a ‘visual’ discussion, meaning a discussion that included the mobilization of various artworks as seen in the two examples given above. Instead, the discussion took place in a seated position, looking only at the list of the artworks on a sheet of paper.

While various gestures certainly played a role in conveying thoughts and ideas, there were no attempts made by the artist or curators to visually *show* the other(s) exactly what he or she was talking about. (Admittedly there were various reasons for this, such as

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<sup>54</sup> The professional is unique in his or her capacity to solve some problems of authority by formal, institutional means, which minimizes the role of persuasive evidence in interaction with his or her clientele (Freidson, 1968: 27). The museum administrator exercises a unique kind of authority in the exhibition, based not necessarily on persuasion or demonstrated skill of ‘interpretation’, but rather on his or her social and institutional status.

the late hour of discussion and the fact that the gallery walls were not quite dry after their most recent coat of white paint).

Although the curators and museum staff spent significant time *talking* about the artworks, what the curators did not do was convincingly and visually *show* the artist how to best work with the artwork in the conventions and space at hand. What this demonstrates is that persuasive arguments featuring institutional codes, attempts to translate logistical solutions into artist's rhetoric, and efforts to slip into 'the artist's own shoes' are well-used strategies, but do not amount to the *visual* persuasion seen in other examples.

As Goodwin (2000) demonstrates, the production of action is linked reflexively to its interpretation, and speakers cannot assume that others will automatically recognize and understand the visibility of what they are doing. Rather, speakers must facilitate their understanding by taking into account what their addressees can and do know. While curators exercise a particular amount of clout in an installation, they can not ensure the automatic orientation of the artist to their point of view or understanding of museum conventions. Instead, they bring the artist around to the working consensus through a tri-fold process of meaning making that involves postural orientation, gesture, and talk. Displays of postural orientation, such as moving to the entrance of the gallery to 'give it an eye', frame and make possible the constitution of situated action. Both talk and gesture can build participation in this situated action by indexing various entities in the environment or treating them as irrelevant. Situated action is ultimately based on securing the consensual orientation of others through interaction and public display; it is not done, as Goodwin (2000: 1499) notes, to 'produce talk or build action into the air'.

Heath and vom Lehn (2004) have demonstrated that a similar process occurs among visitors to the exhibition; members of the public point and gesture to particular parts of an artwork in the process of meaning making and sharing their personal sensory experiences with friends. Here, curators engage in the same activities, which are themselves shaped by the particular artwork at hand. In the first two examples above, curators gestured to particular parts of the gallery and artwork to teach the artist how to see the exhibition from their point of view, one concerned with the logistics and conventions of display as well as a particular interpretation of the artwork. Talk that references 'museum codes' then makes permanent this embodied work. But, as seen in the third example directly above, when talk fails to concretize the consensus, the process begins again.

In the process of completing the installation of a particular artwork, curators evoke a variety of orientations to different objects, including the film, the pavilion, and the gallery space. This shows, quite literally, how the codes and conventions employed to bring the collective work of the many individuals (including objects) in any art world into a working consensus results in a locally achieved and fabricated ‘contextual configuration’ (Goodwin, 1981). Moreover, the final working consensus is not necessarily achieved by bringing everyone into a fixed ‘conventional agreement’, but rather, by enabling different participants to view the same ‘contextual configuration’ in alternative and satisfactory ways (Goodwin, 1995).

### 7.3 Technical translations

The same visual process of negotiation and consensus building observed above between curators and artists takes place between curators and technicians. While Becker (1982) dislikes the low importance placed to people by the term ‘personnel’ and observes that some consider their own work as highly artistic and aesthetic, he also notes that support personnel are commonly perceived as a pool of labour in art worlds.<sup>55</sup> Although often treated as silent or ‘invisible hands’, technicians conduct work that is crucial to interpretational outcomes, provide eyes and validity for meaning making, and are highly skilled perceptual labour (Shapin, 1989). Technicians play an important role in the micro-process of exhibition installation, shaped by their own particular expertise and training in how to handle and install art. Yet, there is little interaction between gallery technicians and curators until the final installation, as any mediation between these parties in the planning process is conducted by the gallery manager(s).<sup>56</sup>

Technicians have an expertise in the installation that is distinctly different to that of the curators. This includes knowing how to physically install artworks (something

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<sup>55</sup> Becker does not resolve the tension between the fact that support personnel are perceived as passive labour, and the fact that many intervene directly in the editing of works in what they may argue are creative ways. Instead, Becker makes the hypothetical suggestion that perhaps such ‘interference’ or ‘intervention’ with the artwork is just what it ‘needed’ at that particular stage, therefore reducing this creative work to the exercise of conventional knowledge.

<sup>56</sup> During preparations for an installation at one field site, I took a brief tour through the galleries with another curatorial intern. A technician present led us on a brief tour through the galleries, during which he described the technique and materials they were using to build the ceiling (to control the diffusion of light) and walls (to be sturdy, but flexible). When we explained that we were curatorial interns, he seemed surprised that we would be interested in scenography, as if there would be no other reason to come down.

complicated by the multimedia nature of contemporary art) and how to guarantee their security. They also possess the knowledge of how to physically present an artwork to ‘optimize’ its viewing experience. In a video artwork, for example, this would entail spending what can be a good deal of time on mathematical operations to ensure that the image projected from a projector is hitting the screen at a perfect ninety degree angle.

In watching installations, technicians do not engage in the restricted code of ‘giving it the eye’ described above among curators and taught to artists. Instead, they suggest elaborated, technical solutions when asked about the placement of particular artworks. There is, therefore, a process of mutual ‘figuring out’ necessary for technicians to understand the broad ‘hand sweeps’ and other vague instructions provided by curators, and for curators to understand the logistical demands of objects and tools faced by technicians. The feedback loops that result are achieved through the mobilization of local objects, proxies for artworks, and more postural and gestural work. In the installation, gallery technicians are responsible for several material tasks: preparing gallery spaces, moving artworks into their appropriate positions in the gallery (or roughly thereabouts), and knowing how to properly install them. Here, I will examine how the second and third of these tasks are accomplished in a situated manner.

### *7.3.1 Show and tell*

As described in Section 5.2, much communication between curators and gallery managers takes place visually or with reference to impromptu visual representations or proxies of artistic works like images and sketches. In the installation itself, there are a variety of visual and verbal resources used to expedite communication across different bodies of knowledge. For instance, technicians generally do not know the official titles of all of the artworks in the exhibition. Instead, curators and technicians use a combination of ‘nicknames’ and images of the artworks to locate particular artworks, that echo a discursive theme in the artwork, part of the artwork’s title, or even the name of an object or image appearing in the artwork.

Sometimes this verbal restricted code is revealed as insufficient for communicative purposes. This was the case below, when an exhibition at one field site included two similar artworks that were referred to in the same way.

[11-Line Fieldnotes Excerpt Removed. This example showed the repertoire of actions and resources required for the curator and gallery staff to locate a particular artwork for installation.]

In this example, local references and ready-made ‘dictionaries’ (e.g., the binder of images) played an important role in translating various levels of local knowledge (what artworks looked like) with codified knowledge (their proper titles). Here, the curator’s physical imitation of the artwork and the image ‘proxy’ of the artwork served to elaborate the otherwise overly restricted code.

Communicating about the placement of artworks in the gallery can also entail the fabrication and use of locally made ‘container words’. For instance, in one installation, a curator clarified the placement of a projector by telling the technician that it would go ‘in the space where that [other artist’s] show was’. When no such local references are available, curators often resort to pointing to spaces in the gallery where artworks are to be installed, or at least placed temporarily. In one installation, the curator walked around the room with the technician, physically touching the places on different walls where he wanted particular artworks to be laid. In all of these situations, a variety of locally-constituted communicational architecture was created and employed in order to communicate visual instructions.

A final example here indicates the physical and situational ways that communication takes place in installations. When planning the installation of technically challenging artworks, artists may work directly with technicians to instruct them on particular aspects of the installation.

[1-Page Data Example Removed, Which Combined Photos and Narration. This example demonstrated how artists, curators, and technicians used hand gestures to translate between the artist’s intentions for a work and the technician’s knowledge of installation mechanisms.]

### 7.3.2 *Let me show you*

This translational work does not go one-way, but rather, technicians play a particularly important role in conveying ‘how things work’ to curators and artists as well. This is also accomplished in a highly visual way. In one example, a gallery technician was trying to verbally explain how one artwork was physically mounted on the wall using small ‘clips’. Others in the space did not understand these instructions, until s/he located the

‘clips’ in the artwork’s packing crate and showed them to those present, one of whom responded, ‘Ah, those clips, I *see* what you mean’ .

To take a second example, the placement of a large, wall-mounted artwork at one research site was ‘demoed’ using a digital projector (Figure 11, image 1) to give the curators an accurate idea of its scale and visual impact. As other museum staff looked on (Figure 11, image 2), the technician pointed to the nearest outlet on the wall to indicate how he would have to run the cord to power the artwork (Figure 11, image 3).



As seen in Figure 11, the technician employed a visual proxy for the artwork, as well as gestural indicators to index his own logistical work and responsibilities, in order to give the curators the best possible idea of how the installed art would look.

As a final example, the fieldnotes excerpt below demonstrates how this work of ‘showing’ can go both ways. Here, the curator used posture and gesture to convey to the technician what s/he thought the artist was saying.

There is this interesting problem of where to put the projector in the last room. The technician is trying to convince everyone to install the projector on a platform halfway down a column in the middle of the room, in order to optimize the viewing angle. He sketches a quick drawing of the room with these angles indicated. After quickly consulting with the gallery managers, the curator voices a concern that visitors will run into the projector in the dim lighting. The technician replies that it will be hung too high for people to bump into it, and he will strap it in very tightly just in case. The curator still seems unsure as to the risks of the projector being bumped, and moves physically to the space where they are discussing installing the projector and crouches down with a hand above his/her head to demonstrate where s/he thinks the technician means to place the platform for the projector. The technician moves next to the curator, and raises his hand higher, indicating that the curator’s perception is wrong and that the projector will be mounted too high for passing visitors to knock.

Again, a situation of disagreement and confusion is solved by the curator and technician both finding a common way to communicate about the physical activity of hanging the projector. Where the curator’s concerned words and the technician’s sketch failed, the embodied role-playing succeeded.

As surfaced in the negotiations between curators and technicians presented above, local interactions with objects in the exhibition space — whether by verbal nicknames, visual acts of looking and pointing, or physical acts of touching — bring about temporary communicative associations between actors in the installation. Yaneva (2003a: 176) refers to these momentary acts as ‘small ceremonies of verification and proof’. While these brief ‘contextual configurations’ physically and visually establish a working consensus on difficult-to-communicate aesthetic matters, in doing so, they also serve to identify and index particular properties of artworks or installations important to the meaning of the exhibition. These small ceremonies are the practical field from which the ‘tacit knowing’ of museum conventions and codes emerges.

#### **7.4 How many curators does it take to hang a TV?<sup>57</sup>**

As described in the previous chapter, curatorial decision making is predicated upon using the entirety of an empty space to make an ensemble of objects and the exhibition as a whole ‘look good’. This process requires a constant focus of attention back and forth between the microelements of exhibition installation (the placement of individual artworks) and the macroelements of exhibition installation (the whole picture). There are two steps in installing an exhibition: choosing where the artworks are to be mounted, and *choosing exactly where* the artworks are to be mounted. A common curatorial strategy is to tackle the first task initially, by moving artworks around the space and laying them on the floor, usually on a layer of plastic wrap, to await the precise decisions as to their final resting place. The second task is to give them ‘the eye’ and decide precisely where and how the artworks are to be mounted. This is usually accomplished by holding an artwork up to the wall, stepping back eight to ten feet from the artwork or to the gallery entrance, evaluating the relationship between that and nearby artworks, moving the artwork slightly, and repeating this process until satisfied. While both tasks can be time consuming, the second ‘certainly does take time’ (according to one curator), is particularly ‘tedious’ (noted another), and concerns ‘pernickety logistical things’ (echoed a third).

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<sup>57</sup> This turn of phrase emerged from an exhibition installation, in which several curators, the gallery manager, and one technician spent almost thirty minutes trying to physically mount a TV monitor on the gallery wall at a specific height using a mounting back plate.

It's amazing what you can do if you know you've only got five hours. But if you've got three days, you spend so much time drinking tea and moving things around...you know, 'let's try moving that again over here'. Things like the positioning of the plinths, you could spend days on, and it was quite nice that we only had that day. That way you don't get too precious about it. You know, it just...it looks good. Otherwise, you could always go on, 'left a bit, right a bit'.

As with the wording of exhibition texts, curators are aware that small differences between positionings of objects matter and they discuss them extensively (Yaneva, 2003b). This process of 'discussion' involves a highly physical element as curators, technicians, artists, and others, including the present sociologist, exchange roles while others 'give it the eye'.

Curators generally report that hanging artworks is a 'visual thing' and they 'know it when they see it'. They say things like 'that's much better' when something is moved only slightly. As I will demonstrate through a variety of examples, the final consensus over what 'looks good' in the installation is achieved both through the work of some participants to bring others in line with their beliefs, as well as a process of outsourcing the decision itself. Confirmations of 'the eye' are sought and achieved through references to other objects and relationships in the space.

The importance of such relational decision-making mechanisms is integral to work in the extended mind tradition of cognitive science. As Hutchins (1995: 157) describes, 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 (or conventions) into coordination with each other. As I demonstrate above, a working consensus may be established not by convincing everyone of the same point of view, but rather, by bringing everyone's different points of view to bear on the same 'contextual configuration'. Here, the mobilization of available objects, instruments, and materials in the installation are a way to 'outsource' this work, by literally giving everyone a material object to focus on to coordinate their unique interpretations of what 'looks good'. For Hutchins, this is 'cognition in the wild', or using local resources as cognitive tools for this consensus building. Similarly, finalizing the installation of contemporary art is also an instance of 'cognition in the wild'.

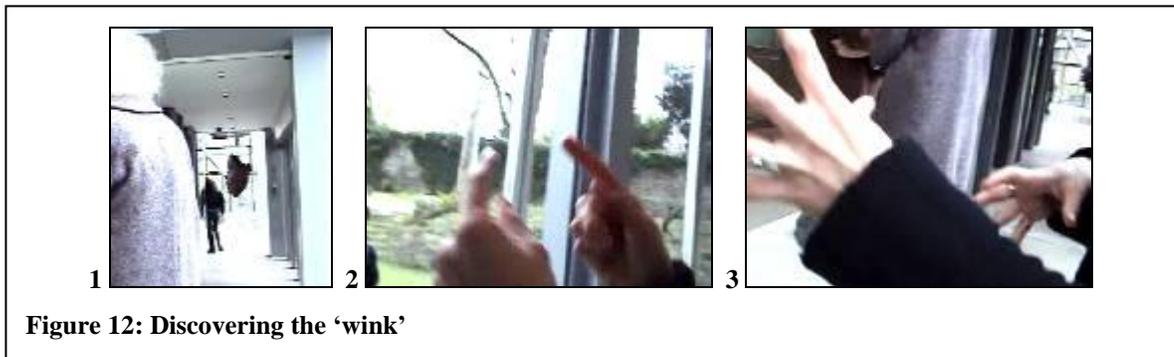
#### *7.4.1 Sculptural work and 'little tricks'*

Just as the initial placement of artworks requires a curatorial interplay between the overall sense of the exhibition as 'feeling right' and the particular relationships between

neighbouring artworks, so does their precise final placement. Unexpected physical associations between artworks provide materials for curators to ‘latch onto’ (DeNora, 2000) to build a conception of an installation as satisfactory and whole. These emergent cognitive resources are described similarly by different curators as a series of ‘moments of clarity’, ‘little tricks’, or ‘happy accidents’.

In a first example, narrated by an assistant curator at an interview site, 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 [one figure] is looking at the [sculpture]. [Figure 12, image 1, the figure on the left has head turned so as to catch the eye of the mask in the far gallery space.] It’s a little bit of a wink of an eye. [Figure 12, image 2, the curator demonstrates with fingers how this ‘wink’ functions.] We didn’t plan it, but we liked the little rapport it created between the two works. [SKA: Wow, I didn’t even notice.] No, but 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. [Figure 12, image 3, the curator demonstrates with hands how they turned the sculpture 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.



In this example, the curators latched onto the ‘wink’ that they accidentally observed between two figurative sculptures as a cognitive resource for tacitly linking the two exhibition spaces, and in doing so, performing the ‘good exhibition’. As the assistant curator described above, the curators outsourced their decision about the sculpture’s final placement by seeing it as ‘determined’ by this ‘wink’.

In two separate exhibitions, the reflective surface of a sculpture, upon installation, was seen to perform the role of visual ‘anchor’ for the gallery spaces. The excerpts below are taken from curatorial interviews.

A lot of the installation is an interaction between ourself and the artist. For example, in this piece, the artist put the silver piece here, in the center. Normally, it’s the [red piece] in the center, the one here [on the left], with the light. But he put it there and said, ‘Actually, I kind of like this’, and [we] both said, ‘Actually, we really prefer this one there’, because you get a reflection and it almost erases the other one a little in that sense. So then we all agreed, ‘Yeah, let’s keep it’.

When the technician was hanging it with the ladder, I really liked the way [one reflective artwork] took on the reflection of all of the other works in the show, and became this kind of central... (pause)... not 'emblem', but this miniature version of the exhibition itself. It sucked everything into it, and I think it's really interesting in terms of [this artist's] position to the other artists, who have all in one way or another looked at his work. That's maybe overplaying its significance, but that was my private thought.

In the first excerpt above, the reflective surface of the middle 'silver piece' acted as a discrete tool to finalize the placement of the artwork by orienting the curators' and artist's points of view to a specific aesthetic property of the installation (though curator and artist may have seen this particular reflection as accomplishing different things in the exhibition space). In the second excerpt above, the reflective surface of another artwork not only helped the curator decide upon its final height (by where it reflected the other artworks in the exhibition neatly), but this spontaneous observation also formed the basis for private curatorial meaning making in the space.

In each of these three examples, curators used small perceptual details evoked by the material presence of specific artworks in particular environments as a resource for stabilizing their definition of the space as complete and looking good. Furthermore, in the process of dwelling on these particular details, new observations and interpretations of meaning in the exhibition emerged. Container words, such as 'little tricks' or 'happy accidents', are used by curators to explain these spontaneous associations and bring them in line with museum codes. Disguising their private thoughts in this way allows curators to move between their situated actions and their plan-oriented work of achieving the 'good gallery'.

#### *7.4.2 Wall-mounted artwork and the tape measure*

As one museum-based curator explained to me, the conventional height of wall-mounted artworks in the museum is 150 centimetres (measured to the middle of the piece or 'eye height'). In my experience, curators of contemporary often, but not consistently, measured the vertical height of artworks using this convention. At other times, curators generally preferred to give the painting 'the eye'. There was no similar convention for the horizontal positioning of artworks, and curators generally decided this based on an artwork's 'importance' or spatial or geometric relationship to other objects in the gallery. Yet, there is a large communicative gap between a curator's visual relationship to the final placement of an artwork ('it works', 'it's crowded', and 'a little to the left') and the

instructions needed to physically attach it to the wall by skilled technicians (measured objectively in inches and centimetres and planned with pencil markings on the gallery walls).

At times, this diversity of orientation to the exhibition may give rise to communication ‘breakdowns’ between curators and technicians. This can result in artworks being hung in the wrong manner or even upside down. The tape measure is generally the tool of translation (between gestural instructions and codified wall placement). It works by directing an abstract conversation to a precise point on the wall. As with a navigational compass (cf. Hutchins, 1995) or a colour code for archaeological soil samples (cf. Goodwin, 1994), the tape measure is a historically constituted architecture for perception. Indeed, tape measures are commonly attached to the rear trouser pocket of all technicians and gallery managers. (I have also seen cardboard packing tools, shoes, visitor guides, and even a wrapped deli sandwich mobilized ‘in a pinch’ as perceptual devices in this manner.) A final detailed example from one field site installation will emphasize the important interplay between different types of perceptual architecture mobilized in the gallery space to achieve the final installation: the ‘eye’, the tape measure, and other gestures that enable articulations between them.

[5-Page Data Example Removed, Which Combined Fieldnotes, Video Transcript, and Interview Transcript. This example walked the reader through the technical installation of a group of wall-mounted artworks from their unpacking to their final mounting. The curators used a combination of pre-set hanging conventions (e.g., 150cm vertical height) and existing measurements in the gallery space (e.g., between windows, other artworks, etc.) to define the final mounting location. Although the hanging measurements are determined by the technician’s ruler, they are always checked by the curator ‘giving it the eye’. Indeed, ‘the eye’ regularly caught minor deviations in the mounting process.]

Ultimately, the curator used his/her own vocabulary to give words to the otherwise tacit and tactile practice of working with the dimensions of the gallery to achieve a visual balance. This is yet another example of the embodied nature of tacit knowledge and how such ‘felt’ knowledge can be reproduced in very different spaces by mobilizing local resources.

To conclude this example, I demonstrated in Chapter Six that each artwork conditions the next, something true in the final installation as well. The gallery space became an accomplice to the curator’s actions via the intermediaries of the tape measure and ‘the eye’. The curator visually ‘wrestled with’ the gallery, latching onto distinct dimensions of the space and the objects within it to achieve correct spatial distancing between artworks. Although ‘only the eye knows’ when the mounting is correct, as demonstrated here, the eye takes its own confirmation from a variety of materials and

objects at hand, such as the measurements of a windowsill. In Section 5.2.5, I explored how curators first used a tape measure to translate the technical specifications of a piece of signage to the visual reality of the space itself. Here, the reverse happens, the tape measure is used to translate from the curator's 'eye' to the technical space occupied by the technicians.

As seen in the examples above, the final installation of a work of art is achieved through a variety of 'boundary objects' (Star, 1989), material objects that facilitate the coordination of work because they can be interpreted simultaneously restricted and elaborated ways by actors with different orientations, interests, and bodies of knowledge. In the last example, the tape measure is seen by the curator as a confirmation of the eye and by the technician as the necessary tool to precisely hang the artwork. In the sculptural examples which preceded this, small perceptions of particular aesthetic properties of artworks created distributed cognitive resources for curators to finalize placement decisions and decide that the exhibitions as a whole felt 'complete' (in the sense of joining artworks as interlocking parts).

### **7.5 Discussion: Consensus and surprise**

Everyday action involves interplay between physical, cognitive, and perceptual work, and the installation of contemporary art is no different. According to Becker (1982: 155), even people who disagree on stylistic preferences can say whether something 'swings' or 'works' or not; this agreement is not based on a mouthing of agreed-upon judgements but 'the systematic application of similar standards by trained and experienced members of the art world'. Yet, I have painted a picture of collective work that is orchestrated not through common adherence to these codes or conventions, but rather, through the work of various individuals to orient to particular contextual configurations and focus each other's points of view and interests to establish a working consensus.

Intimate studies of 'communicative action' (cf. Henderson, 1999; Innes, 1998) reveal that objective standards (such as codes and conventions) are only one of the many information types involved in communication. Instead, information becomes influential when embedded in local understandings, practices, and institutions. Local scenic resources

such as artistic materials, tape measures, or gallery exit signs play an important role in the installation as curators work to elaborate their ideas, sensory information, and the relevance of both to the situation at hand. Mobilized in this way, objects in the material world afford cognitive actions (Streeck, 1996).

Significantly, the process of giving something ‘the eye’ may also lead to unconventional hangings, as in the case of Steven Claydon’s ‘head’ above (*Untitled*, 2005, Steven Claydon). As two additional brief examples show further, from an interview and from observations of an installation, unexpected orientations to artworks during the installation may alter curators’ plans for their presentation. When a working consensus is established about these orientations, they may lead to permanent changes in how curators make meaning with particular artworks. In evidencing these points below, the first quote comes from a curatorial interview in the gallery space post-installation, and the second from my fieldnotes during an installation.

This was the toughest work to install and it was super-heavy...so we set it there while we thought about ways to lift it to hang it on the wall. And then we thought that we kind of liked it there. I mean, everything else is so installed and it seemed nice to just kind of leave something like that. So, we did. And I actually really like it.

Everyone is just there with their arms crossed staring at the video. Will [the gallery manager] watches them and gives advice/possibilities about mounting, looping, etc. B+B want to know the options for the DVD, such as widescreen? When the widescreen does come on...there are lots of ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’ from the curators and curatorial assistants. The curators ask for everyone’s consensus and opinion on the widescreen, particularly the assistant curators and technicians. Everyone decides they like it displayed on that setting. One assistant curator says it even looks better on the big screen because it brings out the grainy quality of the film. One responded, ‘It’s cool...I like that the technology of exhibition changes the artworks’.

Given the ethnomethodological approach throughout this chapter, I can now say that these acts of spontaneous consensus, these ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’ seen above, are not what they would first appear. Being able to say these ‘container words’ in installations (e.g., ‘that’s better’, ‘that works’) is perhaps like being able to say ‘that’s interesting’ in conversation. They are forms of phatic communication that demonstrate actors’ appropriate orientation to the social structure of the installation (Laver, 1975). They do not necessarily represent an actor’s implicit comprehension of conventional knowledge.

One way to test this hypothesis is to look for a negative case, of which there were several. For instance, in the example below, a supposedly conventional agreement that a gallery ‘worked’ was followed by the artist breaking this consensus to make a further adjustment.

[5-line Fieldnotes Excerpt Removed]

In this example, the curator pretends to ignore, rather than correct, the artist's final 'edit' of the exhibition. This is similar to the detailed example from the installation above, where everyone in the installation agreed that a particular installation of an artwork 'worked', until someone (usually with clout) said that it did not. Ultimately, the creation, breaking, and recreation of new working consensuses result in a trail of 'false betters' until the final hanging is achieved. Participants in the installation are not necessarily speaking in 'restricted code' (that conveys meaning through mutual orientation and recognition of tacit conventions), but rather, are verbalizing their consent and participation in the meaning-making process although they may still be personally working out what it means. Language may have more to do with the legitimacy of participation (performing participation and community values) than with knowledge transmission (Lave & Wenger, 1991: 105).

In Section 6.5, I spoke about the importance of embodied tinkering and 'reflection-in-action' in accomplishing situated action. In the installation, the employment of vague terms like 'feeling' are shown to be more than mere 'container words' reflecting existing knowledge. Rather, they are concrete ways in which curators and others, acting as 'reflexive practitioners', attempt to tinker with and make sense of the exhibition space. In the process, they draw upon gestures, postures, and local resources to elaborate these acts of tinkering for others. The 'container word', in these cases, is perhaps better seen as a *placeholder* or 'grey box' (Saferstein, 2007) for the complex cognitive process involved in installing art.

The fact that much communication takes place through the mobilization of bodies and gestures, rather than language, is clarified by Freund's (1998: 279) discussion of body consciousness. Here, Freund notes that emotional communication often takes place through the body, which responds to situations in ways that the mind cannot; cognitive 'findings' may often emerge only out of subsequent interactions with the environment. Of interest here, in the extended mind tradition, is how these seemingly 'restricted codes' are actually *elaborated* through curators' physical orientation to and mobilization of local objects. The exhibition is a situated learning and teaching process, accomplished through a sophisticated show and tell (cf. Goodwin, 1994; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

## **7.6 Conclusion: The distributed work of meaning making**

Building on Chapters Five and Six, the importance of non-verbal activities (such as pointing) for conveying meaning and orienting collective action to particular aesthetic affordances in the exhibition installation provides evidence that meaning is indexical and embedded in a locally relevant activity. Moreover, the resources for meaning making may be built in interaction, as participants respond to particular affordances in the artworks and environment and ‘show these’ to each other. All of these intricate webs of communication pathways result in a form of ‘distributed cognition’ (Knorr Cetina, 1999: 173), which the curator then channels individually into the artwork or exhibition.

At this point, the reader may be wondering why this dynamic process of exhibition installation has not resulted in radical rethinking of the museum concept entirely. The answer to this question will be found in the next and final data chapter. There I explore how what curators offer to their publics may be very different than what they find useful or meaningful for themselves in their own ‘tinkering’. In the final stages of installing the exhibition, much of this interactional work is painted over, quite literally, with white.

## 8. THE PUBLIC PRESENTATION

Art cannot confront society except in acts of originality, which official culture succeeds in absorbing but by which men are nevertheless changed in unpredictable ways.

(Rosenberg, 1972: 211)

The installation of contemporary art is an uncertain situation wherein curators and others work to establish consensus and completion. They do this through a reflexive engagement with artworks and concepts in situated action and on the spot experimentation. Yet, as Schön (1987) explains, the knowledge generated from such tinkering is valid and compelling only for those who share one's commitments. To be effective, this reflection-in-action must be converted into communicate practice and 'knowledge' for one's publics (cf. Streeck & Mehus, 2005). As pointed out by others (cf. Erickson & Shultz, 1982; Suchman, 1987), the user does not know the plan of the expert, and so he or she is able to cooperate only to the extent that being responsive to the expert's actions, locally, constitutes the plan.

As explained in Section 4.4, curators of contemporary art in public institutions work at the crux of a variety of conflicting responsibilities to artists, art worlds, and public audiences. Throughout the exhibition planning and installation process, the viewer has been an imaginary, hypothetical, projected presence, his or her needs envisioned as well as prepared for. At the conclusion of the installation, curators establish the final material and symbolic means for visitors to access or fail to access the exhibition. Much of this final framing process is completed by individuals other than the curator, such as assistant curators, technicians, electricians, invigilators, and educational personnel. These individuals work on behalf of the institution or museum, not simply the head curator, to 'prepare the physical exhibition for the public' (as stated by an assistant curator). This includes documentation to help familiarize visitors with the artist's work, talks by the artist and other professionals who 'know how to communicate the work well' (as described by one curator), and scenic refinements to enhance the viewing experience. These final touches make up what Dobbs (1990) terms 'silent pedagogy', nonverbal resources provided to help visitors experience works of art and the curator's scholarly efforts (cf. Davallon, 2002). In examining how curators oversee the polishing of these final components below, I will examine the consequences of the curatorial act for its publics.

### 8.1 The exhibition as performative act: What is seen and what is read

Throughout this thesis, I have invoked sociological studies of scientific and technical practice to understand how expressions of research and development are indexical, fabricated, and negotiated by particular agents at a particular time and place (cf. Henderson, 1999; Knorr Cetina, 1981: Chapter 5; Latour & Woolgar, 1979; Lynch, 1985; Suchman, 1987: 58-59). And yet, the process of ‘stabilizing’ these accounts effaces how the discovery took place. As Latour (1987) describes, the final step in knowledge production is self-negation; knowledge is only ‘created’ when all traces of work are erased. In scientific and technical practice, this means that the final textual communication of research and experimentation in article form is highly codified. To move forward here, I will draw an important distinction between the outcome of scientific practice and this current study of artistic mediation.

In scientific production, the article is written after the conclusion of experimentation, and indeed, may even be revised prior to publication if editors request further experiments or details. In contrast, in exhibition making, the documentation of an exhibition is generally written and completed long before the installation. To draw an analogy, it would be as if scientists wrote articles prior to conducting their experiments. Although press releases and educational visits are adaptable to late-stage changes in the installation, most other documentary materials describe only the curator’s plans and cannot account for their situated actions. In one field site, for example, the exhibition visitor guide was edited at the last moment, and printed the night before the exhibition opened, to account for changes in the installation (such as the positions of artworks and their formal titles, not the staff’s informal nicknames for them).

My observations about the disjuncture between what is described in exhibition texts and what the viewer may encounter are confirmed by Yaneva (2003a). As she describes, the surprise associations granted by objects in the installation process mean that the final art installation always differs from the ‘purpose’ as stated in the catalogue; ‘Passing through different intensities of transformation, the art installation is stabilized as a nexus of relations shaped in the vicinity of objects mediating social agency through new associations *with* the museum world’ (Yaneva, 2003a: 176, her emphasis). In other words, the installation does not merely reflect the planned action of its making, but actually creates new opportunities

for meaning making that are ultimately ‘stabilized’ in its final instantiation. The final stages of how this stabilization takes place will be examined in this final data chapter.

In Chapters Six and Seven, I examined the small speech acts through which curators, artists, and others worked to achieve consensual action. For this final data chapter, I invite the reader to examine the exhibition itself as a large performative act to its publics, upheld through the same ethnomethodological mechanisms of these smaller speech acts. As Garfinkel (1967) points out, what people assume about the world and about what other people know structures knowledge and makes the social structure visible in everyday activities. Goodwin (1981) further points out that these assumptions play a crucial role in how people construct action as oriented to audience understandings. Moreover, Streeck (1996) demonstrates that objects in the environment become an accomplice to this process of communicating through the interpretive use that actors make of it in their situated activities to build and articulate meanings. In looking at the final process of ‘codifying’ an exhibition, particularly the signage, human mediators, and physical preparation of space, I will examine what assumptions and thoughts about their visitors curators take into account in preparing this final scene.

## **8.2 Signage**

Clear signage on how to navigate the exhibition, from directional arrows to textual instructions on how to ‘interpret’ artworks, is particularly important in public museums and spaces. Indeed, as documented by Bourdieu (1993 [1968]: 298, endnote 25), working-class visitors to museums often interpret the lack of signage as deliberate intentions to exclude the uninitiated; he comments of a trip to Versailles lacking such aids: ‘This chateau was not made for the people, and it has not changed’. As Dobbs (1990: 226) states, viewers need to know what artworks were displayed together and why, something that does not require a ‘Rosetta stone’; this must be made explicit and not rely solely on ‘visual cues’. One curator I spoke with hired a marketing analyst to increase visitation, who suggested placing clear signage around the gallery in order to make the space less ambiguous for visitors. The idea is that if everything is clearly marked and described, uninitiated viewers will feel more welcome because it will be more obvious where to go and what to do. Seen in this way,

signage elaborates the ‘restricted code’ of the museum space by making its conventions explicit.

There are several types of wall-mounted signage in any exhibition: informative text describing and framing the exhibition, notes to accompany the viewing of particular artworks, labels on individual artworks, and additional instructions needed for visitors on how to interact with particular artworks (such as translations of text-based artwork or warnings of harmful or fragile artworks). The physical installation of this graphical and textual documentation is generally left to the end of the installation (although the general placement of larger wall texts is decided upon in the early stages of planning the installation). In Section 5.3, I examined how these texts were composed. Here, I will examine different genres of text with reference to how they are installed.

### *8.2.1 The exhibition overview text*

The main exhibition overview text is a crucial part of the exhibition. It is the first source of information for most visitors, as well as the visual introduction to the exhibition itself (indoctrinating visitors into the graphic design of the exhibition and its visual frame). Unsurprisingly, in his empirical study of exhibition signage, Dobbs (1990) discovered that temporary exhibitions were far more likely than permanent collections to have a detailed overview text. This is no doubt due to the extra importance placed on the curatorial act in the temporary exhibition. The overview text is generally placed at the entrance to the gallery, and most curators imagine that visitors will want to see it as soon as they walk in.

There are various levels for people to engage. Some people just walk in and read the title, some people are more interested and read the wall text. The next level is the people who buy the catalogues and look at the photos, and the last one is the people who buy the catalogue and actually read it.

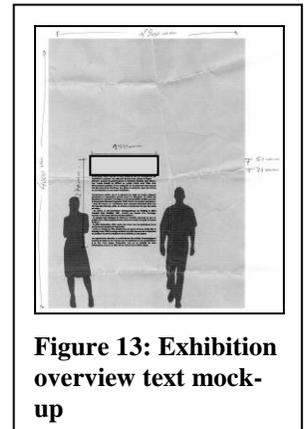
As observed by the curator above, this overarching text, carefully prepared, is there for the most casual of visitors. It is an important part of framing and explaining the inclusion and layout of artworks in the exhibition. While the curator may attempt to draw in or ‘seduce’ visitors to experience artworks in particular ways during the installation, this process of envisioning the viewer is far more explicit in the installation of the exhibition overview text. As I will describe with reference to the installation of two overview texts, the viewer’s physical presence is explicitly imagined by curators in a variety of ways.

The first two parts of this example deal with the installation of an overview text at one field site. Prior to creating the text, the curator chose the physical space in the exhibition where the text would be mounted and approximated its vertical location by sight and touch.

[The curator] says that s/he wants the information on the exhibition to be very big, and emphasizes this by reaching his/her hands up overhead on the wall to indicate the height of the text. The assistant curator responsible for signage confirms her understanding of this by crouching on the floor to demonstrate roughly where the bottom level of this text would now fall. [The curator] steps back, looks at where the assistant curator has put her hand, and tells her to move the entire text up about a foot (which the curator indicates by placing a hand above the assistant curator's hand).

In this fieldnotes excerpt, the curator used his/her own physical orientation to the gallery wall to physically describe both the size of the overview text, as well as its placement in relation to imagined visitors. By stepping momentarily into the visitor's shoes, the curator gave the assistant curator a satisfactory idea of the size and height of the text that was preferred.

The next step in creating the exhibition overview text was to translate the curator's bodily instructions into vinyl lettering. Figure 13 displays a scanned copy of the exhibition overview text that was sent by the assistant curator to the printing company. As seen here, this document imagined the size of the lettering needed based on the assumed size and distance of readers as demonstrated by the curator earlier in the gallery. In literally weaving imagined visitors into design of the text, the text was explicitly planned to facilitate a particular act of visitor consumption.



**Figure 13: Exhibition overview text mock-up**

Once designed and created, the mounting of signage in the exhibition is not unlike the hanging of artworks. It requires a close and concerted effort between curators, technicians, objects, spaces, and imagined viewers. While smaller signs and labels are hung 'by eye' (meaning the curator's eye), the placement of larger blocks of text is carefully measured, commonly using a level. The following fieldnotes excerpt from the second field site demonstrates the final process of hanging the sign whose planned location was described in Section 5.2.5.

Two of the gallery technicians get ready to put the large weekly table text up on the far wall. [The assistant curator] says that s/he wants this text centered between the edge of the wall and the beginning of the shelf on the wall. [The assistant curator] pretends to be a visitor and takes five steps away from the gallery, turns around, re-enters the gallery and says, 'Okay, you come in and...' The assistant curator stops talking here and instead steps up to the text — about five feet away — and then steps back across the gallery space and

pauses for several seconds. [The assistant curator] then steps closer to the text again and tells the technicians to line up the last line in the text with the top of the shelf.

In this example, the curator physically played the role of the visitor, including reconstructing the visitor's entrance and perceptual path into the exhibition. The curator paid particular attention to ensuring that the text would be positioned so to be immediately visible to the visitor upon entry. The curator was also careful to line the text up with neighbouring objects, in order to preserve the sense of a well-balanced, visually appealing exhibition. As seen in the examples above, much care and detail goes into enabling and facilitating the visitors' primary interaction with the exhibition overview text. This reinforces that it is the discursive point of entry for the exhibition as a conceptual frame.

### *8.2.2 Viewing notes and visitor guides*

Conventionally speaking, viewing notes and other guides for the visitor are generally placed in a size-appropriate Plexiglas box at the entrance to the gallery, usually near the overview wall text. As discussed in Section 5.3, most curators see these texts as superfluous and necessary only for visitors with little understanding of the artists or their work. As such, they are generally written by assistant curators or those in education departments. The interview excerpt below demonstrates the overwhelming feeling about such texts among my informants.

Whether you read the text or not depends on each person: whether they already know a fair amount about the artist's work, whether they like to read things first or not. So, we put texts there at their disposition, and visitors can read them if they want to or use them how they like.

Implicit in the interview quote above is that viewing guides are to be used 'as the visitor likes', not necessarily as an accompaniment in the framing of an artwork in the particular exhibition. As Dobbs (1990) observes, there is no such thing as the 'pure gaze' because everyone needs textual support to look at artworks; the only difference is that curators have already 'internalized' this knowledge through education while publics need to read the texts in the exhibition. Yet, both in their physical placement as well as their composition (being written by someone other than the head curator), descriptions of artworks are divorced from the overall meaning making at the level of the exhibition as a whole. Viewing notes support the viewer's regard on individual artworks, rather than the relationships between them. It is therefore unsurprising that none of the curators with whom I spoke were personally interested or involved in physically deciding on the placement of these texts.

Instructions presuppose competencies for their enactment that the instructions themselves do not fully specify; they also purport the knowledge of how to use them (Suchman, 1987). Similarly, curatorial staff members assume that visitors will know to look for a Plexiglas box or similar receptacle near the entrance of an exhibition and have a general awareness of how to use the materials within. In my informal observations of exhibition visitors, however, this was not always the case. After the third day of the exhibition opening at one field site, for example, the assistant curators realized that the Plexiglas boxes themselves needed to be labelled to inform visitors of their use. Some visitors were taking the viewing guides home with them to read later instead of using them in the exhibition. In fact, one of my final tasks before ending my fieldwork period here was to place a sign on the Plexiglas box saying, ‘Please return these documents after consultation’. Unlike the exhibition overview text where the visitor’s trajectory is carefully imagined and planned for at several stages, the display location of detailed visitor guides to the exhibition were left to a variety of other institutional actors.

### *8.2.3 Labels on artworks*

The precise naming and labelling of artworks is highly important and standardized in fine art (Devenish, 1997). The label represents the accumulation of information known about an artwork and must be proofread and copyedited closely by the curatorial assistant, artist, and often an individual from the artist’s representative gallery. At one field site, for example, I was told that every single wall label must uniformly include the following information:

1. Title
2. Date (year only)
3. Medium
4. Dimensions
5. Courtesy line (The owner of the artwork has the final say on how they want to represent their ownership, e.g.: ‘Courtesy of Sophia Acord and the Krzys Gallery.’)

This convention is important to ensure correct attribution of artworks and to thank lenders and galleries. In the information that it supplies, particularly line five, it inserts the artwork into the social networks of its production.

The curators in my sample also uniformly believed that the label plays an important role in how visitors look at objects in the exhibition. This is because, conventionally, each artwork is associated with one label, which means that the label itself plays a performative role in constituting an artwork. An exaggerated example of this is how a visitor unfamiliar with contemporary art may look for a wall label prior to sitting down on a bench in a gallery, at the risk of confusing it for an artwork. Dilemmas of unplanned installations described earlier, for instance, also pose the problem of how to label artworks whose appearance might have been differently anticipated. Seen in this way, the labelling of artworks in the institution also performs their meaning and value.

In contrast to the exhibition overview text or viewing notes, which are almost always placed at the entrance to a gallery, the placement of labels can be highly variable depending on museum, exhibition, and curatorial preference. In my interview sample, wall labels generally took a variation of one of two forms: placed at a slight distance from the artwork, or listed cumulatively with reference to a small floor plan of the gallery in the visitor guide or at the entrance to the gallery. Both of these labelling techniques function to physically and visually separate the viewer's encounter with an object from his or her encounter with the label. As one curator explained of her choice to consolidate the wall labels at the entrance to the gallery, 'You don't want a label next to the artworks in the space because you want the public to be completely wrapped up in the artworks'. The following quote expounds upon this statement in more detail.

We didn't want to put the labels everywhere, right next to each artwork. Personally, I have a 'blockage' to the use of labels because I have an active rapport with the artworks. And when you have a label there, you put the artwork at a distance from the viewer. In other words, the label becomes an entry port of some kind to access the artwork, and it creates a distance between it and the viewer. And, really, what does the label mean to the visitor? They treat it like a validation of sorts. But suppose the label says 'Untitled', well that doesn't mean anything to the visitor...or suppose it says the artwork was done in 2005, so what? Voilà. So, given the type of banal information the labels provide, it doesn't seem very interesting, or even necessary, to put them next to the artworks...But, on the other hand, we try to welcome the public, and there are visitors who really know nothing at all, absolutely nothing. So, we can't ignore the labels either, but in the logic of the exhibition, it doesn't make sense to contaminate the artworks by having the labels there, or rather, pollute the gallery itself with labels all over the place. And when the walls are green, it's even worse to see these little white labels everywhere. It neutralizes the artworks, whereas now, the artworks breathe more and propagate more. They have a much more active presence, in terms of installation. Also, in my own experience, it doesn't make sense to take one context and mix it with another: why put a pedagogical context in a plastic, spatial context?

As the curator above describes, he did not want to confuse the visitor's visual experience of the exhibition with the discursive details required by the institution. By removing labels from the frame of vision, curators exercise small agency in isolating spaces for reflection

untainted by institutional convention. As another curator stated, ‘The label has to be not so close that it interferes with the artwork, but not so far that you can’t find it or don’t know what it’s referring to’. Wall labels perform a function, but not one primary to that of experiencing the artworks themselves.

In sum, wall labels are seen as necessary evils by many curators. They are required for institutional reasons to validate and certify works of art, but they are seen as distracting at best, and antagonistic at worst, to the experience of the exhibition. Like the exhibition overview text, curators are often involved in choosing how and where to display labels for individual artworks. Unlike the exhibition overview text, however, curators are concerned not about bringing the labels to visitors’ attention, but rather, about how they might be best kept *out* of the visitor’s trajectory.

#### 8.2.4 *Security and other texts*

The final steps of ‘end curating’ in the exhibition are done not by the curator, but by gallery managers, curatorial assistants, and even the sociologist intern. These tasks are so conventional in their nature that the charismatic interpretation of the guest curator is not needed. The placement of smaller, supplementary texts and any additional safety or security information is generally left until the last moment. Again, this is due to the fact that curators do not know what details and documentation are required until the final selection and position of artworks is established. It is also due to the fact that such text-based information is often ignored or seen as superfluous to the interaction with artworks by most curators. Instead, gallery assistants or assistant curators are responsible for scrambling to fulfil this final act of framing in keeping with institutional guidelines and ordinances.

These last-minute forms of signage are generally mounted for either safety reasons, to protect the artworks and members of the public from physical contact or misuse, or for access reasons, such as to translate artworks featuring text in a foreign language. Safety signage, in particular, is directed at visitors who are very unfamiliar with contemporary art and museum codes, such as young children. These signs often include visual images as well words (for instance, a photograph of a camera with an ‘x’ through it).

You never know what to expect and what might be needed in terms of signage until the public actually enters. That’s why it’s good to start with a private opening with invited people, because they’ll know the mechanisms of the art world and have an idea of what they

can and can't do...which is a much safer way to begin then to open the doors directly to the public.

Indeed, as the assistant curator described above, one reason that exhibitions generally open with private views is to 'test-drive' the exhibition with an 'art world' public in order to ensure adequate signage. While curators generally argue that any extra texts should be kept to a minimum and not be placed too close to the artworks, there is seldom a choice in the matter when it concerns issues of public safety. Here, what the fire marshal requires goes, and these texts are designed and placed to be obtrusive on purpose.

Various forms of signage and documentation play different roles in the museum space. The exhibition overview text plays an important role in framing the exhibition as a whole, and curators spend significant amounts of time imagining how the visitors will use and access this text upon their arrival to the gallery. In contrast, notes and labels on individual artworks are meant to interfere as little as possible with the viewing experience, and as such, are composed and managed by other curatorial staff. This isolation of artworks from other textual commentary serves to isolate objects for the concentrated gaze of the aesthetically adept and downgrade information-seeking behaviours of exhibition visitors (cf. Bernier, 2002; Duncan, 1995; Rosenberg, 1972; Smith & Wolf, 1996). The conventional interpretation of this discrepancy is given by McManus (1989), who describes the devaluation of these texts as a curatorial 'slight of hand'; the knowledge a curator has of an artwork is 'obvious' to him or her and makes the text seem unnecessary. Although the information conveyed in the viewing notes or labels does not fully represent the knowledge a curator has of an artwork, it is a conventional starting place for uninitiated visitors who are more accustomed to art historical hangings.

These various texts are not the only situational mediators available to the viewer in the exhibition space. Human mediators, such as museum invigilators and educational staff, also play passive and active roles as information providers in the viewing experience. By comparing curators' treatments of exhibition texts above with their interactions with educational staff below, I propose that textual mediation is less 'downgraded', as McManus (1989) assumes, and perhaps simply seen as more irrelevant.

### 8.3 Human mediators

#### 8.3.1 *The education department: Tours and talks*

Earlier complaints about the poor state of museum education (cf. Eisner & Dobbs, 1986) led to a revived emphasis on the activity in many institutions. As described by Montoya (2008: 26-27), the role of educational ‘mediators’ is becoming increasingly professionalized; their mission is to address the ‘gap’ or ‘bipolar space’ between art and its audiences by ‘giving the keys’ to uninitiated viewers or ‘opening the doors’ to them. Most museums of a certain size have separate education departments which arrange exhibition tours, invited lectures, and other pedagogical events for the public. Again, the larger the institution the less contact the curator has with these pedagogical aspects of the job. For curators at larger institutions, their job is simply ‘to mount the exhibition’ (as stated by one curator), rather than engaging in any kind of educational work around that. As one curator confessed, ‘I try not to spend much time in the galleries when the exhibition is open, because when people overhear that I work here, they always ask me for explanations of the works’. Indeed, when I gave a personal exhibition tour to one of the new curatorial interns at the ICA, a crowd of people gathered around us to listen and ask questions about the artworks.

Curators, or rather assistant curators in larger museums, lead informational meetings or visits to the exhibition for educational mediators so that they can then transmit this information to visitors during guided tours and other activities. Although the stated goal of these meetings is to explain the narrative and concept behind an exhibition, what is more interesting is the other work that takes place. The most remarkable thing about these meetings is how animated the curators are, in contrast to the more stressful and focused mood during the exhibition planning process. Although curators bring the finalized exhibition texts with them to these meetings, they rarely use them. In the example below, I use fieldnotes to reconstruct one such meeting, held over lunch in the corner of a local restaurant.

As I was told before the meeting, the curators’ main goal was to explain the exhibition’s opening form to the educational staff. To begin, the assistant curators leading this discussion had a somewhat difficult time explaining the concept behind the exhibition

as a whole, perhaps, as one indicated later, because they were not involved in the conceptual planning of the exhibition. This is illustrated in the excerpts below:

[12-Line Fieldnotes Excerpt Removed. This excerpt examined how the assistant curators used extensive, fluid hand gestures while speaking and before settling on specific words with which to describe the artist's work.]

At the end of [the assistant curator's] presentation, someone from education picks up the finalized curatorial preface that we brought with us and asked a question about something in it. [Another assistant curator] admits that we wrote things that we 'weren't totally sure about' in the texts...and said that it must be so if 'it's what we wrote'.

As with writing the exhibition texts and planning the installation, this final discourse on the exhibition took place on a wide variety of verbal and nonverbal levels. It seems here that the assistant curators had trouble adopting and explaining the conceptual ideas 'codified' by the museum as their own. They resorted several times to hand gestures as placeholders (akin to treading water), as well as their own personal understandings and vocabularies to make sense of the larger concepts in the exhibition.

In contrast to the discussion of the exhibition as a whole, the conversation became much more precise when turning to the description of individual artworks with which the assistant curators were familiar, as demonstrated in the following fieldnotes excerpt that followed later in the same meeting:

Someone asks [the assistant curator] what [a particular artwork] is all about, and s/he is very amused and tells us all about it with a genuine, eager smile (the first I've seen for several days). [The assistant curator] starts off by telling the whole story behind the project, and finally ends with [a discussion of the artist's method]. [...] (The assistant curator makes very good eye contact when telling everyone about it and there are few of the frantic hand motions used earlier.)

In this later conversation, the assistant curator began to immerse him/herself in the stories behind each artwork and seemed almost carried away in explaining them one by one in a personal, embodied way. For the assistant curators, this was the first time that they were asked and able to communicate their own thoughts and feelings about the artworks, rather than limiting their communication to pre-approved and agreed-upon phrases. For the first time in weeks, they smiled and seem relaxed. As one of the members of the education service stated at the end of this meeting, 'It must be good for you guys to talk about the exhibition like this; it allows you to distance yourselves from it for just a bit'.

Noticing the assistant curators' smiles in the exchange above prompts the realization that the artworks and the stories behind them do not often surface in the bureaucratic nature of the planning process, which is focused on 'what they mean' and finding appropriate ways to convey this in conventional art world discourse. To support this point, I offer a second example below from another field site. In the two accounts that

follow, I compare the curator's explanation of a single artwork to an educational staffer (as captured in fieldnotes), versus the description of this artwork printed in the visitor guide:

[2, 4-Line Excerpts Removed: 1 From Fieldnotes, and a Second From the Visitor Guide.]

In comparing these accounts, the first is certainly more spontaneous, 'fun', and relatable, while the other is more thorough and moves from the process of making the artwork to a grander comment on its meaning. Additionally, in the first-person encounter with the artwork, the curator *showed* how the artist physically created the artwork, while in the narrative description, it is ambiguous, and the process of the work's fabrication might be understood in multiple ways. In this way, the printed account of the artwork actually risks miscommunicating the actual process by which it was made.

### 8.3.2 *Invigilators*

Although their main function is to ensure the security of the artworks, invigilators play an important role in the public's encounter with art. They are the first port of call for curious visitors with questions. Traditionally, the curators of an exhibition will give the invigilators a brief introduction or tour to the exhibition directly before or after its opening. The tours I observed at both field sites, however, were dominated not by the curator but by upper-level administrators of the museums, adding another layer of distillation between curatorial expertise and the passing on of knowledge to the visitor. At one site, the director spoke about the artist's fascination with particular themes, rather than describing the particular stories behind individual artworks. While the administrators of both sites occasionally gave basic details about the media of different artworks or the process of their composition, there was little in the way of the personal stories described above. When I enquired about this distinction in ethnographic interviews, curators simply shrugged and informed me that the museum directors have a 'different relationship' to the artist, which is clearly less intimate than that between curator and artist.

In cases when the invigilator was actively responsible for demonstrating the functioning of an artwork or the trajectory of an exhibition, curators at both sites instructed them, generally through gestures, how to shepherd visitors in a certain direction. Some instructions, however, were lost 'in translation'. In one case, a curator instructed the invigilators to allow visitors to touch a specific part of one sculpture, but upon my later

visit to the exhibition, the invigilator on guard was actually telling the public *not* to touch any of the artwork, perhaps, as he indicated, simplifying his job of keeping it from harm.

At one field site, a curatorial intern told me that she really enjoyed visiting exhibitions with a guided, educational tour, because after working on the exhibition this gave her a chance to see things that she had not noticed before. She also confessed that, personally, she did not like one of the artworks at all until she took a tour, and when she found out more about the artwork and how it was made, she really started to think it was ‘cool’. By reviewing the previous pages, I have shown exactly why this would be the case. Curators speak about artworks in more ‘informal’ ways in these discussions, versus the codified, bureaucratic nature of the catalogues and exhibition texts. Taking an educational tour also allows the visitor to participate in a process of situated, micro-interactional meaning making in the museum space, as educational guides point, posture, and help visitors to experience artworks in particular physical ways. Significantly, this was not the case with museum invigilators, given that their job was to ‘protect’ the artworks versus create opportunities for personal meaning making. Curators customize their ‘talk’ and ‘gesture’ to particular audiences, personalizing their knowledge for consumption in particular ways.

## 8.4 The white cube

The physical conditions within which contemporary artworks are displayed are a final and important component of meaning making in the exhibition of contemporary art. Two main conventions for the institutional display of contemporary art are neutral lighting and neutral, or white, gallery walls. O'Doherty (1999 [1976]: 14) has described the 'white cube' of the gallery as an elitist space, artificially constructing the 'pure gaze' required for the elite audiences of visual art: 'the ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is "art"'. The physical space of the exhibition represents a closed system of values which encourages certain conventions in the production and consumption of contemporary visual art. As a final comment on the public presentation of contemporary art, I will look briefly at how curators conceive of the environmental conditions of its display.

### 8.4.1 Lighting

Most museums have some degree of control over the lighting in their galleries. Commonly, bright fluorescent overhead lights are used to illuminate the gallery space for the installation, but following its conclusion, curators or gallery managers use secondary track lighting systems to achieve a more tailored effect. Generally, as I was told, 'If you do not notice the lighting, it has been done well'. Curators explicitly consider lighting a space so as not interfere with the artworks. This includes reducing reflections, maintaining an even light throughout the gallery space, ensuring that the hue of the light flatters the artworks (e.g., grey light is used to illuminate white artworks rather than risking the use of a different colour of white light), and ensuring the right level of light for video-based artworks.

While the stated goal of one curator was to 'not blind the public', lighting also plays a crucial role in establishing the feel, definition, and *aura* of the exhibition. While some curators act as if it is an afterthought, lighting is one of the crucial final steps in exhibition making. It is here that an installation *is transformed* into an exhibition.

A great moment as well on Monday was when the lights went off. It was a great moment. We always knew it was going to be quite dark in there. They normally use these white, flat lights which are kind of *deadening*, and during the installation these prints looked really

weird with it. But when the lights went off and the spots came on, it really took on its own life.

I wanted to keep the lighting in there quite bright, so that everything was more diagrammatic and theatrical. That's what I was interested in, an outline of things, not an experience, so much. Although, there was this physical relationship to the pieces...

As the quotes above indicate, it is often through the careful manipulation of lighting that the physical frame of the exhibition (and inseparably, its conceptual frame) came into its own. In the first quote above, spotlights were used to create an atmosphere of reverence for particular artworks, while in the second quote above, bright, even light emphasized stylized the spatial layout of the artworks in a particular 'diagrammatic pattern'. The reader may also recall an incident from the previous chapter (Section 7.2.1), when the curator illuminated the exhibition track lighting to demonstrate to the artist what a 'conceptual exhibition' should look like.

Designing and installing the lighting is often left to a gallery manager or a specialist lighting designer (Cannon-Brookes, 1994). I was repeatedly told that most curators do not study lighting as part of their profession, but instead teach themselves in the course of their professional careers. Lighting is an institutional expertise, and the degree to which curators are well-versed in the technical dimensions of lighting varies by curator and institution.

As with the placement of artworks, curators are seldom explicit about precisely how they want the lights to look, but they can have strong feelings about the mood they want the lighting to convey. Again, they 'know it when they see it'. Lighting is described as 'feeling' 'warm' or 'cold', 'soft' or 'bright', 'subtle' or 'theatrical'. Therefore, the process of lighting the exhibition is another example of the sometimes difficult translation work required between a curator's concept (as well as understood assumptions about how artwork is to be valued in the gallery space) and specific guidelines for technical work.

[1-Page Data Example Removed, Which Combined Fieldnotes and Narration. This example explored how a curator and electrician used personal and professional examples to come to a mutual understanding about the quality of light desired in the gallery space.]

In this passage, both the curator and electrician took on each other's orientations to the gallery space in order to accomplish consensual action. The curator spoke about 'two rows of lights hanging from the ceiling', and the electrician asked about the 'concept' and compared the lighting to sitting at the 'dentist's office'. They spoke different languages and had different orientations to the matter at hand, but worked in tandem as 'local experts' across languages. In the process, they created new discursive loops, such as referring to a particular space [not stated here].

Lighting is an important way that curators highlight particular dimensions of the installed artworks and suggest modes of consumption to their visitors. Due to the institutional limitations of translating these ideas into physical practice, however, there may be some slippage between their curatorial concepts and the resulting effect. While lighting systems certainly transform the installation into an exhibition, in doing so they bring the installation into line with institutional codes for the deliberate display of artworks in the gallery space.

#### *8.4.2 Painting the walls*

As demonstrated in the previous chapters, curators often make spontaneous decisions about the placement of artworks, and technicians respond with a variety of ad hoc technical solutions. The final step in the transformation of installation to exhibition concerns the careful concealment of all of the work that has gone before, the performance of the idealized white cube. This includes cleaning the exhibition space of extraneous materials, filling holes or correcting other deviations in the gallery walls, cleaning or polishing the floors, masking any cables, and, most significantly, carefully using white paint to touch up any spots or markings on the walls or plinths. The pristine white cube is really better conceived of as a block of Swiss cheese, whose holes are filled and concealed painstakingly by diligent technicians.

Symbolically speaking, the final stage of painting the walls literally erases all of the postural, gestural, semiotic, and other activities that curators relied upon in the installation to create and co-organize meaning. In that process, the gallery space was powerful not in its neutrality but in its flexibility, as it was drilled forward and backward in varied attempts at hanging artworks. In the white cube, it is the very absence of the work by which meaning is produced that itself becomes a resource for visitor meaning making.

Although Becker (1982) acknowledges that conventions are not rigid and unchanging (and always require some local negotiation), he also observes that the more conventions are adhered to, the more viewers will get the meaning. Non-knowledgeable audiences, in particular, need these conventions to understand that what they see is 'real art'. As one curator told me, contemporary art is perceived as not being 'real art', and so

curators work extra hard to make it ‘look good’, visually speaking, to justify its presentation in the museum.

You don’t want the visitor to notice the little things like labels, temporary walls, etc. That’s important. You don’t want them to notice anything except the artworks.

If you look at institutions in this country, compared to Europe, [...] everything has to look good. Whereas, actually, what we are dealing with is ideas...it’s supposed to be about supporting experimental ideas. So, [...] it doesn’t matter if the building is shoddy in places. They are into experimental objects; that’s the signifier. Whereas here, the bigger the institution is, the more anal and tied up it’s got to be. [...] Joe Smith wants art, not discourse, in the ‘come to admire some special objects’ sort of way.

As the curator explains in the second quote above, some purpose-built institutions of contemporary art, like the Palais de Tokyo in Paris or the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern in London, create artistic signification by their absence of strict white cubes. In the majority of museum and gallery spaces where contemporary art is displayed, however, white walls play an important role in orienting the visitor not to the meaning of particular artworks but to the fact that the objects installed in the gallery space are actually art. In doing so, the museum encourages visitors to walk through and appreciate galleries of contemporary art in keeping with the conventions around classical and modern artistic forms.

In Section 6.2, I spoke about the importance of the convention that the gallery ‘look good’. Here, the curator’s vision of the white cube is not simply a framing device communicating this convention, but rather is itself a resource in the process of meaning making during the final stages of the installation.<sup>58</sup> Ironically, the very tools by which the exhibition is supposedly made textually accessible — signage, visitor guides, etc. — must be disguised or placed ‘out of the way’ in order to make the exhibition visually accessible as fine art. Hancock (2005: 30) refers to this process as the aesthetic coding of materiality, which enables physical space to create an aestheticization of meaning that reaches beyond and beneath intellectual cognition. In doing so, the institutional codes and conventions mandating purity in the museum create the modern museum space (Prior, 2002). Perhaps, then, one could speak of the exhibition of contemporary art, at least in a publicly-funded space, as hyper-institutionalized.

‘Conventionally’ speaking, through the final public presentation of an exhibition, the museum visitor is seen as the product of the institution rather than as an independent

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<sup>58</sup> As Suchman (1993) demonstrates in a study of air traffic controllers, the technologies that individuals use to track the activities of objects in their work are also structuring devices for the very people using them. In the same way, I suggest that the white cube of the museum gallery plays an important role throughout the installation process by providing subliminal cues as to ‘what works’ for the curators.

being. As O'Doherty (1999 [1976]: 82) observes, 'Most of the people who look at art now are not looking at art; they are looking at the idea of 'art' they carry in their minds'; curators curate for the 'eye', not the flesh-and-blood 'spectator'.<sup>59</sup> Ironically, the physical framing of the artworks (e.g., through the placement of benches, carpets, lighting, and white walls) suggests what Huyghe (2005) terms an 'experience of experience', or placing viewers in a situation of 'experience' rather than letting them actually experience works of art in a direct manner. Moreover, as Bernier (2002) notes, the comprehensive packaging of the exhibition into a museological discourse means that visitors are having a 'museum experience' rather than a traditional 'aesthetic experience'. The visitor ends up consuming the museum, rather than the individual artworks or exhibitions he or she encounters. As a result, the exhibition mediates not between the artist or curator and visitor, but rather between the visitor and the universe to which the exposed objects belong (Davallon, 2002: 56). The consequences of this museum framing process has been demonstrated extensively to result in a social divide, because certain populations are more habituated to the 'museum experience' and the 'pure gaze' it implies (cf. Alexander, 2003; Bourdieu, 1979; DiMaggio, 1982a; Gans, 1974; Heinich, 1998b; Jenkins, 1979a; Lamont & Fournier, 1992; Levine, 1990; Lynes, 1949; Willis, 1990; Zolberg, 1992). In the final discussion below, I will reflect upon what curators present to their audience and how they conceive of visitor sense-making in order to address the query posed at the outset of this chapter, namely, the consequences of the curatorial act for its publics.

### **8.5 Discussion: A distributed sense-making environment**

As Fine and Fields (2008) and Streeck and Mehus (2005) explain in their surveys of microsociology and microethnography, respectively, micro studies of social action open a window onto the maintenance of situations of power, as maintained through gesture, the manipulation of material resources, and the organization of bodies in space. Certain meanings and understandings are reified through the social placement of certain objects by experts or other actors, as well as the language in which they are constituted (Garfinkel,

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<sup>59</sup> In a discussion of the contrived purity of installation photographs, O'Doherty (1999 [1976]: 42) describes the separation of 'Spectator' and his or her 'Eye'; the Eye maintains the illusion of a seamless gallery space, while the Spectator is a physical presence in the space, which is broken up and impure. While the public presentation of museum curation appeals to the 'Eye', the Spectator is called to move in and around the artworks.

1967: 56). Yet, the study of the temporary exhibition of contemporary art, as a microcosm of mediating practices in institutional art worlds, is not a study of a co-produced situation of power (as the visitor is imagined, but not present), but rather of how a situation of power is set up. What is made available to the public in the final presentation of the exhibition may provide subliminal or taken-for-granted cues about meaning and how it is to be conveyed (DeNora, 1986). Here, it is not the curator's embodied work which establishes the situation of power, but rather the conventional framing of this work by the institution and the curator's appeals to these museum codes.

Like a laboratory (Knorr Cetina, 1999) or professional coding scheme (Goodwin, 1994), the museum subjects 'natural processes' to the conditions of local social order. In Section 4.3, I laid out the institutional limitations and restrictions of working in the museum space. Throughout Chapter Five, I looked at how curators negotiated institutional requirements for plans and texts with their own uncertainty about how to frame works of art. In Chapters Six and Seven, I looked at how curators can exercise a unique amount of agency in physical installation through their orientation to objects and ideas that are 'unsaid', 'felt', and identified and communicated through local and situated action. In every stage of the curator's work, then, rather than the artwork becoming more and more fixed in discourse, aesthetic possibilities opened up room for *more interpretation* in the mediation process. The unexpected encounters that curators have with particular works of art can be important episodes of developing or extending the meaning of the physical exhibition. In these micro-interactions, co-organized meaning making is based on the ability of other participants to systematically see how a co-participant's body is doing specific things by virtue of its positioning within a changing array of diverse semiotic fields (Goodwin, 2000). Yet, as demonstrated by Taylor (2002: 835) in his study of organizational aesthetics, this aesthetic dimension of work has a negative impact on an organization's efficiency by increasing possibilities for complexity and distraction; in consequence, aesthetic discussions take up organizational resources, facilitated by orientation to institutional norms. By the time the public enters the exhibition, all of these physical touches and presences are erased.

Zucker (1977: 730) demonstrates that institutionalized contexts are so strong that attempts at transmitting meaning through personal influence (such as by the star curator) will not be successful, and moreover, may result in a redefinition of the actor rather than the act. As Swidler (2003 [2001]: 177) observes, although individuals develop a variety of

implicit and explicit action strategies to deal with the restrictions imposed by working in an institution, in the process, these actions are given meanings based on the institutional situation and ‘patterns of constitutive rules’ the institution evokes.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, I would argue that the final moments of ‘painting over’ the situated actions of the installation give a final, conventional form to the exhibition. A museum invigilator cannot be concerned with helping viewers to understand and appreciate spontaneous associations between artworks when his or her main job is to ensure their security.

According to Smith (1990), the key significance of a text is its capacity to crystallize and preserve a definite form of words detached from the lived processes of its transitory construction. Similarly, in the final stages of preparing an exhibition for its public opening, the exhibition and the artworks on display are removed from their production history as generated in the course of planning and installing the exhibition. This work involves the activity of a variety of institutional staff, including gallery managers, assistant curators, museum directors, and other professional mediators. The exhibition is polished and presented as if all of the ‘instruments of appropriation’ (Bourdieu, 1993 [1968]) await the visitor in the form of exhibition overview texts, visitor guides, and physical invigilators waiting to be of service.

As I have demonstrated, however, there may be an amount of slippage between what is given to the visitor to make sense of the exhibition, and the physical artworks and exhibition he or she encounters. For example, while visitors are directed to read the exhibition overview text, which explains the logics of choosing and grouping particular artworks, they experience no clues as to how curators planned associations or ‘moved things around’ in the installation. As curators install artworks based on semiotic as well as aesthetic factors, visitors could potentially end up trying to associate artworks in a meaningful way that were brought together for purely aesthetic reasons. The question begs,

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<sup>60</sup> Although she does not cite Zucker (1977), Swidler (2003 [2001]) outlines two ways that institutions create cultural coherence: first, individuals orient to their demands through drawing on institutionally-anchored narratives or practices, and second, people develop distinct symbolic capacities to deal with institutions. She explains the latter by saying, ‘It may be, indeed, that a good deal of what we normally mean by culture is not an internalized set of beliefs or values, easily transportable from one institutional setting to another. Precisely the opposite: most culture sustains the symbolic capacities people develop to deal with institutions’ (Swidler, 2003 [2001], 177). Seen in this way, a curator’s actions are not caused by the museum itself (in an internalized, conventional way), but rather, curators (particularly ‘star’ curators who may experience a misfit between their expectations and the public institution) develop a variety of implicit and explicit action strategies to deal with the restrictions imposed by the museum and these actions are given meaning based on local museum codes and conventions.

then, as to how curators expect visitors to make sense of what they encounter when they arrive to the exhibition.

For Bourdieu (1979: 91), ‘What is learnt through immersion in a world in which legitimate culture is as natural as the air one breathes is a sense of the legitimate choice so sure of itself that it convinces by the sheer manner of the performance, like a successful bluff’. Yet, what if so much of curatorial decision making is exactly that: a ‘successful bluff’? As one curator noted, ‘At some point, the curator has to step aside, and ultimately the work has to speak for itself...and make the case for how good a curator you are or aren’t’. As this curator notes, at some point, the visitor must simply engage directly with the artworks and decide whether or not they like what the curator has done. While this might mean that the spatial arrangements of exhibitions are obvious only (if at all) to the initiated viewer, it may also mean that the process of meaning making from the viewer’s point of view is more open than it is made to seem. The curators cited in this chapter note that many of the tools and texts given to viewers for sense-making should be displayed far away from individual artworks in order to not distract from the aesthetic experience. After all, as Diamond (2004) points out, the museum’s traditional focus on the conceptual or hermeneutic aspects of art contradicts the emphasis on direct experience common to many contemporary artworks. Perhaps curators also do not want to pin down meanings or distract their audiences from the dynamic meaning-making process that takes place in confrontation with artistic forms. Part of this plan to increase curatorial transparency and spontaneity may be seen in the enthusiasm with which the curators led guided tours of exhibitions to the museum’s educational staff members.

As several curators observed, their goal is to create exhibition environments where individuals can simply engage with the art, in whatever form that takes.

The way to make meaning in art is social. There’s no particular meaning – like the old modernist idea that the object was invested with special meaning by the artist. Instead, contemporary art is about what you bring to it. I think there’s really something quite radical about understanding that associative, as opposed to rationalist, way of making meaning, which hasn’t been properly studied as of yet. The trick is you have to allow yourself to notice what you are getting out of it. It’s a bit like wine tasting or something like that, ‘Ooh, I’m getting...’ If that’s what they get, that’s what they get. You’re facilitating the opportunity to get as much out of the work as possible.

Everyone has the right to the gaze...there is meaning there, you just have to look for it.

I’m not interested in notions of the public. We aren’t a curator who does exhibition workshops; we assume our audience is made up of bright people that want to engage in work without being led by the nose.

For these curators, who are representative of the majority of my diverse sample, members of the audience will take different things away from the exhibition. While curators want to provide particular context for their personal reading of the artworks, as seen in the detailed attention paid to mounting the exhibition overview text, they appreciate that visitors (like themselves in the installation) may find and take away new ideas and meanings in their visit. My hypothesis that ‘star’ curators downplay visitor guides on purpose to enlarge the scope of visitor interaction with artworks is supported by a variety of literature on public interactions with elite art forms.

In his ‘sociological theory of art perception’, Bourdieu (1993 [1968]) distinguishes between two levels of deciphering a work of art: the meaning one understands from his or her practical experience (colours, evoked feelings, emotional sensations), and the ‘sphere of meaning of the signified’ (meaning grasped through a familiarity with themes or concepts transmitted by literary sources, i.e., ‘the code’). The former does not have the same value when it constitutes the whole of one’s experience, versus just part of that experience; as Bourdieu continues, the ‘mere enjoyment of the work is not as good as the scholarly delight one can take in adequately deciphering it’ (Bourdieu, 1993 [1968]: 220). In contrast, Witkin (1997) demonstrates that artistic appreciation need not be simply one or the other. Instead, Witkin (1997: 116) describes how many of the so-called scholarly ‘references’ in an artwork are better seen as ‘cultural allusions’, and while these allusions may be exemplified in the work of particular artists (and ‘de-coded’ with an art theoretical knowledge of symbols and iconography), they can also be read in the context of local culture. Although Witkin is referring explicitly to modernist art (as distinct from postmodern or contemporary art), other scholars have demonstrated empirically that museum visitors may read and use exhibitions in creative, spontaneous ways, based on their own personal resources and the companions that they bring to the space (cf. Gielen, 2008; Heath & vom Lehn, 2004; Vom Lehn, et al., 2001b). Similarly, work in experimental aesthetics demonstrates that access to and the use of different language systems to explore the same situation does not necessarily mean that the experiences themselves differ (O’Hare, 1978). Ultimately, as art historian and theorist Edgar Wind (1969: 63-66) proposed four decades ago in response to the increasing ‘domestication’ of art, while the eye focuses differently when it is intellectually guided (and creates a space free of prejudice for its appreciation), ultimately the only test for an interpretation’s relevance is that it heightens one’s perception of the object and increases aesthetic delight. Indeed, I came across a comment by one member of the contemporary art-

going public who asked for curatorial comments on artworks to be removed so that visitors could be free to have their own experiences.<sup>61</sup>

This ‘sociological’ conclusion echoes past critical work in cultural theory which argues that the museum, in its very institutional nature, literally ‘kills art’ (cf. Crimp, 1993; Valéry, 1931). Similarly, well-known contemporary artist Martha Rosler (1984) notes that the art world and its structures maintain a ‘passivity of relationship’ between artist and public, enforced through institutionalization, grant funding, and other bureaucratic necessities. On the other hand, art historian Danto (1997) notes that it is merely the fact that people can create meanings with artworks that justify putting them back in the museum. But in this case, the institution prioritizes its own meaning making over that of its visitors. The crisis of contemporary art outlined in the introduction, then, is also perhaps a crisis of museums.

As Tobelem (2005: 200-201) outlines in his text on the ‘new age of museums’, the primary function of contemporary exhibitions is increasingly to ‘pique the curiosity’ of visitors. Rather than assuming or offering detailed knowledge of the exhibition in the form of extensive viewing notes and labels next to every artwork, curators try simply to establish relationships with elements of the exhibition that visitors will understand and expect that they will seek more information outside of the exhibition if they like. In other words, for Tobelem, the viewer in contemporary art plays a more active role in ‘elaborating’ the exhibition experience by drawing on resources beyond the texts provided. This conclusion fits very well with the findings of this current thesis.

Of course, as other empirical research has shown (cf. Van Moer, 2007), when visitors arrive to the art museum with ‘preconceptions’ about what art is supposed to be, these more ‘open’ forms of making meaning inevitably fail. This is why textual documentation and visitor guides are still needed in the exhibition, to familiarize visitors who will look for these conventional cues. In her ‘letter to a curator’, Heinich (2003: 11) describes the need to be ‘led by the hand’ during a recent visit to an exhibition of contemporary art. She notes, ironically, that the more open and fluid exhibitions are and the more contemporary art seeks to broaden its frontiers, the more meaning making and

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<sup>61</sup> Una, R. P., 2009. I dream of a museum without curatorial comments. [Blog] *Mindfulness & Making*. Message posted on 14 July 2009. Available at: <http://una-love.com/2009/07/i-dream-of-museum-without-curatorial.html> [Accessed 10 September 2009].

participation is restricted to those with intimate knowledge of the artworks or the changing nature of contemporary art.

As I was told by one young curator, the ‘new spirit in curating’ is to rethink the white cube format of the exhibition and create exhibitions ‘that can be accessed by lots of different people on different levels’. Several different audiences are imagined in the process of exhibition making (often by different individuals): the artist, the curator’s peer group, the museum’s initiated public, and the larger uninitiated public writ large. Currently, museums provide a variety of sense-making resources for these publics, which serve different purposes in relation to the exhibition. While catalogues present extensive detail and reflection on the exhibition topic, visitor guides and notes on artworks may speak more about particular artworks than the exhibition, leaving visitors to fill in the gaps between the two. Guided tours with educational staff members may give more of an insight into a curator’s thought-process, but may also be obfuscated by the layers of translation in between curatorial act and educational mediator. In sum, the visitor to the contemporary art museum exhibition enters a highly institutional world which cannot (and should not) be ‘read’ according to institutional conventions.<sup>62</sup>

## 8.6 Conclusion: The production of consumption

In this chapter, I examined the complex and contradictory nature of what is ultimately presented to the public as tools for accessing the meaning made in the curatorial act. If the transformation of the instruments of art production come before those of art perception, as Bourdieu (1993 [1968]: 225) claims, the museum also lags behind. Although the museum is usually seen as a producer of culture, it also plays an important role in the consumption of culture, in that it serves to produce the instruments of art *perception* by which explicit culture is consumed. In the case of contemporary art, it is lagging behind. As one curator pointed out, ‘As it stands, this whole looking for new audience relations is really just a curatorial fairy tale...’. Subsequently, a museum can contradict itself, as Bennett (1995) observes, by making a symbolic pretence towards inclusion while

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<sup>62</sup> In her recent master’s thesis, Meyer (2008) cited the need for new communicational technologies to encourage visitor-centered experiences in contemporary art exhibitions. These could include mobile technologies or other interactive information guides, as well as the greater availability of staff on-site to answer questions.

materially fostering practices of exclusion. In this case, however, material practices of exclusion (e.g., the removal of documentary texts from the viewing space, and the disjuncture between such texts and the physical exhibition) are as much an accident of the institutional framing process of contemporary art as they are the result of intentional motivations by curatorial staff.

In the next and concluding chapter, I will reflect on the varied resources by which curatorial meaning making has been shown to take place over the lifecycle of planning an exhibition. How exactly does an object-oriented study of mediation inform the sociological understanding of the production of contemporary art? More importantly, what new questions does this research raise for the sociological study of culture?

## 9. CONCLUSION

To know the cultural world, our relationship in it, and ultimately to know ourselves, it is necessary not merely to be in it, but to change – however minutely – that cultural world. This is a making specific – in relation to the social group or individual and its conditions of life – of the ways in which the received natural and social world is made human *to them* and made, to however small a degree (even if finally symbolic), controllable by them.

(Willis, 1990: 22)

Sociology has always assumed that the locus of creativity and meaning lies with the artist. Consequently, cultural production in the sociology of the arts has been seen as the study of organizations, power and distinction, collective action, and values, but not as a study of meaning. While I have also demonstrated that valorisation in the fine arts concerns promoting particular artworks or artists within a certain organizational structure, I have equally shown that this process is contingent upon practical operations of framing and mediation which can unfold in unexpected ways. As DeNora (2003), Hennion (1993), and others have argued with respect to amateur practices, artistic reception is in fact a creative form of production. Similarly, I have explored how artistic production itself involves acts of consumption, which can reproduce existing codes and conventions as well as make room for possible transformations. These real-time feedback loops between consumption and production not only involve mediators' interactions with conventional knowledge, but also involve the particular artworks they have to consume and the available tools and materials they have with which to consume them. In doing so, this research provides evidence for the need to examine art world actors and mediators from the position of performance and meaning making, especially when this practice involves new or changing art forms.

Curators exercise agency within institutional restrictions during the exhibition-planning process. Working in an organizational focus, Alexander (1996b) demonstrates that this curatorial editing takes place when planning exhibitions, as informed by curators' values and scholarly background. Using actor-network theory, Yaneva (2001; 2003a; 2003b) reveals that editing takes place during art installations, as informed by objects and their situational needs. I have demonstrated that editing *throughout* the exhibition-making process is informed by a careful, practical negotiation between both curatorial values and object-interactions. Creativity in any domain is related to one's knowledge of that domain, time in that domain, personality, purposeful behaviour, abilities of persuasion, and escaping the bounds of conventional thinking (Sternberg, 1999). Creativity is located not in the

adherence to convention, but in the micro-level action and negotiation (between a person's individual thoughts and social context) to bring about this adherence (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Sawyer, 2006). By merging the production of culture and art worlds approach with work in microethnography, communication studies, the sociologies of science and technology, and education, I propose that curators are themselves creative individuals who contribute to cultural change as much as cultural stability.

### **9.1 Theorizing the entry of objects into art worlds**

Art worlds are about codes and conventions but they are also about art. Artistic knowledge is unique from any other kind of knowledge because it is 'sensorially embodied' (Carney, 1998: 378) and evokes a distinctive, emotional, aesthetic response (Eyerman, 2006). In order to work within a meaningful production of culture approach, sociology needs to understand how the emergent meaning of any artwork emerges in and through the artist's, curator's, and other technician's appropriations (which are not necessarily conscious) of objects and space. The curator as mediator is not simply a passive or rule-governed intermediary between the artist and audience, or even between his or her personal values and the artwork. Indeed, the biggest question raised by this study is one faced by other 'in action' consumption studies in the sociology of the arts, namely, how can I know that *art matters* (Acord & DeNora, 2008).

In response, this research adopted techniques from visual sociology and the sociology of education to collect types of data which are not commonly generated in the sociology of visual art. In particular, the use of these aesthetic methodologies demonstrates the extent to which the meaning of visual knowledge and emotional experiences is transformed when translated into verbal arguments. The curator spans both worlds in creating the exhibition; they 'feel it' during the installation, and they 'read it' when they (re)present it to the audience by situating it in an overarching perspective. Sociologists tend to conflate the two by asking, 'What is it about?'. In exploring how curators encounter and understand artworks and the devices through which they frame them, the use of audiovisual technologies helps to further sociology's understanding of the dynamic construction of meaning centered on the particularity of the artistic work, rather than focusing merely on the structural workings of the art world.

This thesis has explored the complexity of curating the temporary exhibition of contemporary art in practical detail. Curators and other artistic mediators are aware that their decisions about exhibition installations, texts, and other framing mechanisms may change when in the presence of the artworks. Yet, their work requires that they go forward with the planning process, drawing on a variety of physical and textual proxies to build the exhibition frame. When confronted with the works of art in the exhibition space, however, interesting and ‘unconventional’ things take place as curators have unexpected reactions and orientations to artworks they had previously only experienced in reduced forms. In the sense of drawing grounded theory (Strauss, 1987), the singular concept that explains the great variety in the data presented here is the importance of objects, particularly artworks, to art worlds. Objects provide affordances for the situated action of curatorial mediation as curators work. In doing so, they literally ‘hold together’ the work of mediators (Hennion, 2007).

As Heinich (1998a) notes in her text ‘what art does to sociology’, art is a particularly heuristic device for showing sociology its presuppositions and permitting its practitioners to rethink, and now and then to abandon or to reverse, mental habits that are entrenched within the sociological tradition. But rather than focus only on the artwork as suspended in contexts of mediation, as Heinich advocates, I have argued for a complimentary approach that focuses on mediation as suspended in physical encounters with artworks and environments. In this way, artworks do not ‘read the scripts’ mediators provide for them (cf. Latour, 1992), but rather are themselves dynamic mediators in social life. As Harris (2006: 207) describes, ‘Art does things that only art can do, and in a metaphysical universe, art participates in transformational or transcendent processes. Art works’. A willingness to look at the workings of the sublime as they emerge from the encounter with artistic works is one way that sociology can focus its analysis on instances of change rather than on the reproduction of social conventions.

As Geertz (1993 [1976]) and Alexander (2003) both observe, art is not only something around which people and actions coalesce, but 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, both of which Knorr Cetina (1999: 242) observes as characterized by object-centered relations more than person-centered relationships. Seen as a knowledge-producing society (Sutherland & 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 cultural sociology to understand how aesthetic objects (as explicit culture) play an important role as arbiters of social relations, meaning, and action. In doing so, the study of curatorial mediation in the production of explicit culture provides a window into the workings of implicit culture.

## 9.2 Curating contemporary art

This thesis set out to understand how unacknowledged criteria play a role in curatorial mediation and meaning making and how these negotiations impact what is offered to the public in the final exhibition. Other work in the sociology of the arts speaks significantly of the institutional relationships, codes, and conventions that *organize* mediation, yet little is said about *how* curators know when something ‘swings’ or ‘works’ at the level of situated action and interaction with aesthetic materials. While Nathalie Heinich and others who look specifically at the volatility of contemporary art acknowledge that personal values may contradict organizational conventions, the artwork’s power to appeal to particular values is overshadowed in favour of focusing on the values themselves. On an implicit cultural level, then, meaning making takes place as a tacit, internalized dialogue that emphasizes the cognitive work of mediators, not their interaction with aesthetic objects.

In an effort to inject practical action into the production of culture, I turned to a variety of object-oriented research that deals with more embodied notions of cultural information-processing and sees meaning as made, rather than assigned. In particular, sociological studies of science and technology development begin with the work of mediators to actively craft knowledge in a dislocated manner, using local materials, situated interactions, and discursive communities. Using this work as a platform, I began an interrogation into the various cultural and other resources curators mobilize in their work of exhibition making and meaning making.

Curators of contemporary art represent a break with traditional curatorship in their affinity with contemporary artistic practice, their experimentation with the exhibition as presentational medium, and their knowledge of cultural theory instead of a (purely) art historical background. As a dispersed ‘community of practice’, contemporary curatorial work includes an important informal and experiential learning component. Through periods

of educational training, apprenticeship, and growing experience with the global art world, curators gradually grow into their professional role and come to understand their particular intervention in the museum. Yet, the museum as institution is a highly-codified and conventional environment where this informal meaning making is subject to many constraints. Independent curators cannot rely solely on charisma, but must be accountable for their actions to museum directors above them and other museum agents (such as assistant curators and gallery managers) working below them. Both the conceptual, institutional (in the sense of conventional), and practical resources curators have in their 'tool kits' create the conditions for curatorial action.

Planning a temporary exhibition of contemporary art in the traditional museum environment is complicated by the presence of the artist and the general absence of the artworks to be exhibited. In planning the installation and composing exhibition documentation, curators fill these holes or 'grey boxes' (Saferstein, 2007) with what they do know about artworks, which may be low-resolution images, technical descriptions, embodied knowledge of their size or likely presence, nicknames connoting particular 'themes', bodies of text from published work, interviews with the artist, or other sources. In other words, curators make do with what they have when arranging and accounting for the exhibition. In this planning, 'the buck stops' at various individuals who have the final say, and curators' uncoded knowledge of artworks may not always make it through the planning process. Museum conventions, therefore, are drawn on by curators and others to make meaning in the absence of other aesthetic resources.

Once confronted with the artworks in the exhibition space, these plans quickly become situated actions. As Menger (2006: 47-48) notes, inevitability and unpredictability co-exist in the creation of an artwork; I argue 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 and may respond to them in surprising ways. The process of making the installation 'meaningful' for the user (in the sense of making 'it work' conceptually and aesthetically) entails a large amount of local tinkering with the inclusion and placement of artworks. In the process of moving things around, curators have a reflective conversation with the materials of their craft and practice (Jarvis, 2007: 206).

Through this ‘reflection in action’, unanticipated possibilities for meaning making may occur.

This encounter sets the basis for an understanding of expert knowledge in contemporary art as a grounded aesthetic. In his formulation of the grounded aesthetic, Willis (1990) emphasizes that meaning is not intrinsic to a text or practice, but rather is always inscribed in the ‘sensuous/emotive/cognitive’ act by which the good is ‘used’ (Storey, 1993: 161). For Willis (1990), grounded aesthetics represent the creative ways in which symbols and practices are selected and highlighted so as to resonate further appropriate and specific meanings; these dynamics are emotional as well as cognitive. While meaning creation can make use of texts and artefacts, it also makes use of everyday social relations. The idea of high cultural goods being consumed with austerity has already been broken by Benzecry (2007) and Hennion (2007), and the installation of contemporary art demonstrates that curators themselves make meaning from artworks on a variety of levels with reference to a variety of resources within and outside of their ‘professional’ training and expertise.

In order to complete the installation, curators must communicate about their tinkering to a variety of other individuals in the space. Here, gesture, local architectural elements, and other features of the situation are drawn into contextual configurations to elaborate restricted (or ‘ineffable’) communicational codes. In describing the ‘meta-indexical role of visual representation’, Henderson (1999: 199-200) notes that visual demonstrations of knowledge (such as ‘showing’ things in the installation), serve as a holding ground where codified and uncoded knowledge can meet. In this way, curators index their tacit work of meaning making in the physical situation at hand.

The picture I have painted about meaning making as dynamic and emergent in the exhibition-planning process contrasts with other work that sees the museum as a re-producer of existing cultural meaning. Why is it, then, that this lengthy critique of ‘encoded behaviour’ reveals new forms of curatorial agency, but does not turn the notion of the museum on its head? To answer this question I returned, with renewed vigour, to the value of organizational and museum studies which demonstrate how the museum itself is an important mediator in art worlds. The key lies in the importance of micro-interactions in making meaning and building contextual configurations, and the absence of these cues for the museum visitor.

As public institutions, art museums simply try to provide an elite experience for everyone (and fail), producing exclusivity (Zolberg, 1992). In the rhetoric of Grint and Woolgar (1997), this is unsurprising: exhibitions contain a model of two users. First, the initiated visitor will enter, read the overview text, bypass other documentation, and ‘understand’ what the curator has done with the installation (or at least understand the flexible approach needed to consume it). Second, the uninitiated viewer will read all of the literature at hand and progress through the exhibition artwork by artwork. In comparing the composition of documentation to the installation of the physical exhibition, I revealed the often large disjuncture between what is ‘thought’ and ‘said’ in the text, and what is ‘felt’ in the exhibition. By contrasting the non-cognitive or ‘operational’ features of how curators make sense of objects with the institutional practices that do not allow ordinary actors’ practices to penetrate institutional authority (and thereby exclude forms of knowing or expertise), I have found the ‘smoking gun’ demanded at the outset of this thesis. The institutional demands of the museum make art theory look as if it is logically drawn from what it describes, and art practice look as if it is logically explained by the discourses about it. In fact, it is the opposite: art theory and discourse is indeed a framing device, serving to highlight particular aspects of artworks in exhibitions, but it is by no means drawn from or explanatory of these artworks. Or, put a different way, in the traditional vision of the plastic arts as bound to matter, wherein mediators fix a certain aesthetic impulse to be constantly reproduced to viewers, there is no opportunity for the ‘play factor’ to enter (unlike music which is performed in order to become aesthetically active) (Huizinga, 1944). When reception is seen as *production*, it removes this barrier, and allows visual arts to become aesthetically active.

Sociologists (cf. Pequignot, 2008; Zolberg, 1992) have observed that it is dangerous for museums to separate curatorial and educational functions in exhibition planning. I have tried to demonstrate empirically why this is. It is not because curators do not think educationally about their publics or wish to create elite exhibitions (although this may be the case for some), but rather, because the work of meaning making may simply not get ‘translated’ or passed down to those charged with communicating the exhibition on an interpretive level. As Hennion notes below, artistic consumption requires a detailed experiential interaction with aesthetic objects:

...yes, the works matter, they respond, they do something – if we make them do it; as many amateurs would put it, beautiful things only offer themselves to those who offer themselves to beautiful things. Instead of interpreting this phrase as the disclosure of an arbitrary code

to select the right people at the door of a private club, it is much more fruitful to take it absolutely seriously: one does not appreciate music, one makes oneself appreciate it; music is not beautiful, it makes itself beautiful for those who are courting it. (Hennion, 2008: 5)

In the installation process, curators ‘give themselves over’, as it were, to artworks in the exhibition, but they are unable to deliver the publics who follow. This gap of communication results from the multitude of different actors involved in exhibition making, their various conflicting responsibilities, and the fact that the outcome of the installation may be at odds with its earlier textual framing.

It should come as little surprise, then, that curators and artists interested in reaching new publics are increasingly rethinking or exiting the institution (Anderson & Karczmar, 1990; Hansen & Iversen, 2007; Noever, 2002) and turning instead to venues like biennales and Documenta (Gevers, 1992; Gielen, 2009; Harding, 1997; Heinich, 1995; Hughes, 2005).<sup>63</sup> Others have called for an ‘independent check on curatorial practice’ (Farquharson, 2005) by reviving the role of the art critic to provide now largely-absent forms of discursive mediation and keep a check on the seldom-regulated self-promotion of curators.<sup>64</sup> Any of these options could help the museum (as an institutional form of artistic production) catch up with the contemporary curator (as a charismatic figure and artistic-affiliate already pushing artistic production forward).

This thesis draws methods and epistemological approaches from science studies to enrich the material understanding of artistic production as a situated practice, subject to factors and constraints outside of the heads of its producers. Based in this approach, I understand culture as derivative from action through the efforts of curators to bring cultural codes and conventions to bear as needed in the meaning-making process. Studying the distinctly visual and aesthetic situation of work in contemporary curation also raises new questions and possibilities for how instances of reception and the sublime might lead to unconventional behaviour. Just as an understanding of the temporal dimension of music is necessary to see how it participates in processes of boundary transformation and social change (cf. Hanrahan, 2000), here I show that examining the visual dimension of art does

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<sup>63</sup> On the theme of biennales, see the second issue of *Manifesta Journal: Journal of Contemporary Curatorship* and Vanderlinden and Filipovic (2006). See also Swedish Travelling Exhibitions’ recent publication entitled *Future Exhibitions* (2009) that asks, ‘Will there be any museums in 50 years time, and if so, what will be their role?’ Available at: [http://www.riksutstallningar.se/templates/ExhibitionEpo\\_34684.aspx](http://www.riksutstallningar.se/templates/ExhibitionEpo_34684.aspx) [Accessed 10 September 2008].

<sup>64</sup> As Holt (1979) describes with reference to the eighteenth and nineteenth century rise of public exhibitions, the role of the art critic grew in parallel to introduce and interpret artworks for the grand public. As art was no longer the sole domain of the cultural patron, the critic became a persuasive and powerful arbiter of taste and value in the visual arts for its newer and larger audience.

the same. Although curators may ‘know it when they see it’, how they come to see something depends on the indexical particularities of artworks and environments that cannot be predicated and accounted for in advance. This allows new outcomes to emerge that have not been codified based on existing repertoires.

### **9.3 Beyond the tacit cultural code?**

At the outset of this thesis I asked the question: if something goes without saying because it came without saying, where can it be said? Over the course of this thesis, I have demonstrated that ‘it’ can be said in the micro elements of practical life. This represents a departure from the traditional sociological reliance on the explanatory power of codes and conventions in the study of art worlds and a movement towards looking closely at detailed practices of artistic production as consumption.

The appeal of codes and conventions for sociological theorizing is clear. As Lave and Wenger (1991) note, the world lends itself to generalness, which is why storytelling is so powerful and compelling. Additionally, Becker (1982: 30) states that the notion of conventions provides a point of contact between humanists and sociologists, in that it is interchangeable with sociological ideas like rules, norms, shared understandings, and customs. As a heuristic device, an examination of ‘conventions’ focuses the sociological gaze on the rules of social action rather than the negotiations. While absolutely useful to the study of collective action and institutional stability, these heuristic generalizations perform the role of conceptualizing ‘context’ (cf. Garfinkel, 1967), acting like an invisible hand in the sociologist’s understanding of the mutual intelligibility of action. ‘Conventions’ are in some ways a ‘grey box’ for sociology. As Latour (2005) repeatedly observes in his formulation of actor-network theory, ‘social context’ or ‘the social’ plays the same role as ‘ether’ in turn-of-the-century physics; it leads sociologists to deduce why actors act in certain ways by assuming their orientation to the assumed ‘social’, rather than looking closely at the details of action to understand what makes them act. In the absence of these useful tools, the question for sociology is how to understand concerted and collective action, as well as the reproduction of particular beliefs and ways of working. How does culture enter into action on a micro-level?

Swidler's (2001) work on culture looks less at culture as mediating scripts, and places more emphasis on understanding how culture is put to use by individuals in particular situations. Her 'tool kit' approach to culture sees individuals drawing on particular cultural models when composing strategies of action, but she acknowledges that further work needs to examine how this 'drawing upon' the tool kit happens and what structures these cultural framing processes. In this thesis, I have demonstrated that the ability of curators to make meaning by framing artworks in the exhibition-making process depends on the situated resources they have available to them at any given moment. These resources include artworks (and their physical and discursive proxies), various language systems and background understandings (seen as codes and conventions), organizational status (which is visible as 'clout'), and 'tinkering' or information-seeking activities. 'Making sense has a lot to do with making' (Streeck, 1996: 383), and similarly, putting culture to use in action is based on how curators are able to mobilize these various resources in any particular contextual configuration. I will now briefly summarize these resources and their role in shaping how curators bring culture into action or 'draw upon' their cultural toolkits.

First and foremost, micro-level research in art worlds demonstrates that curators build what they build in interaction with objects, environments, and other features of the material world. Based on Hutchins (1995), I demonstrated that many of the cognitive processes deployed in curatorial practice take place in and through situational orientations to the affordances of artworks and gallery environments. Curators identify particular 'codes' in artworks through spontaneous associations they observe in the physical context of exhibition installation. They locate their satisfaction of when the exhibition 'works' in the aesthetic connections achieved between objects. More importantly, they do much of this through pointing, gesturing, looking, moving, and generally invoking these resources in often nonverbal manners, which reveals culture operating as practical consciousness in this work. In this case, curators draw on cultural repertoires to help them develop strategies of situated action to make sense of the sensory environment. When they do so successfully, they 'know it when they see it'.

Second, throughout this thesis I looked at the varying ways curators draw on language codes and conventions in the planning process. As Zerubavel (1997: 59) notes, art promotes 'mental promiscuity' in breaking conventional cognitive boundaries; it is through language systems that curators attempt to resolve this. Language systems, acting through

codes and conventions of art worlds, are the means through which curators must channel their ecstatic experiences to be compliant with institutional demands and to create vocabularies of meaning and interpretation (Goodman, 1968). Curators draw on earlier descriptions of an artist's work or use 'e-flux' words to insert the exhibition into the larger meaning categories of contemporary art. This evokes Knorr Cetina's (1981: 132) discussion of how scientific work is 'converted' into the ongoing enterprises of other social agents through the scientific paper. Conventions, like scientific papers, are performed and sustained when naturally occurring objects are shaped into work-relevant categories of a specific social group. Although the uptake of organizational resources is facilitated through the use of these codes (cf. Fine & Fields, 2008), it is not always the existence or content of the code as a prescriptive device that achieves this end, but rather, the actual *use* of the code as an orienting resource for action (cf. Wieder, 1974). Curators may employ museum codes and conventions as part of interactional, performative work to achieve a working consensus. In this case, culture operates as curator's discursive consciousness of these language systems, which curators draw on in their acts of meaning making.

Third, I regularly discussed the existence of 'clout' as it varied between curators, artists, and, in particular, museum directors. These individuals have a greater sign-making capacity than others, and expert persuasion has been proven cognitively to redefine people's perspectives towards cultural objects (Klucharev, et al., 2008). As Collins (2004) would say, these individuals have a higher 'emotional energy' to mobilize objects and other materials in interaction rituals. Although meaning is built in interaction with objects, environments, and language codes, particular individuals have a greater ability to shape natural objects into social categories. The exercise of clout plays an important role in consensus-building, because when a 'conventionally achieved' consensus is impossible, individuals in a place of power can simply impose their will on others who are forced to play along. In this case, culture operates through organizational structures and hierarchies, and the 'drawing on' the cultural repertoire may be more or less involuntary.

In the examples above, the work of drawing on the cultural toolkit can take different forms, many of which go 'unsaid' (Amin & Roberts, 2008). Curators have an embodied knowledge of what makes a 'good' exhibition and achieve this through latching on to particular dimensions of artworks in the installation process. Curators have a discursive knowledge of the particular cultural codes and conventions in contemporary art, which they may refer to in 'restricted code' (Bernstein, 1971). Assistant curators often go along with

working consensuses when planning an exhibition, even when they do not fully understand what is happening or when they simply do not need to know. But, these variables — embodied cognition, discursive consciousness, and organizational clout — do not exclusively account for action, but only how some action is made comprehensible to the conscious self and others by employing cultural repertoires.

In everyday life, things may also go ‘unsaid’ when curators are testing a hypothesis that has yet to be confirmed or when they are awaiting further information in order to make a decision. More importantly, things may go ‘unsaid’ when curators are having a transcendental experience or working outside of conventional cultural repertoires. In this case, they literally may not be able to say what they are doing because they do not yet know. In reality, there are moments in curatorial work 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. I have referred to this practice in various ways, including ‘tinkering’, ‘reflection-in-action’ (Schön, 1983), experimentation, and situated action. I have also shown how these object-interactions can create opportunities for proto-meaning making, where new meanings and associations can emerge through experiential, subliminal, and often embodied orientations to one’s surroundings, rather than socialized norms and conventions (Jay, 1994 [1993]; Wrong, 1999: 44). This uncoded knowledge may be communicated through the use of off-the-cuff sketches, gestures, and posturing in relation to particular works of art.

Culture is established through the creation and ritual repetition of such ‘shared references’ (Fine & Fields, 2008: 134) or ‘silent practices’ (Swidler, 2001, 91) that organize and routinize interaction. New meanings, seen here as new meanings for artworks or the exhibition, emerge through this material, interactional work. But, as Henderson (1999) and Knorr Cetina (1981) observe, resources that cannot be successfully ‘converted’ into cultural repertoires or artefacts remain ad hoc, neglected, and ignored. Grounded tinkering and reflection-in-action must respect ‘orders of worth’ in the organization (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991), which largely involves drawing on established repertoires of meaning and action (Swidler, 2001). In particular, as described by Mills (1940), vocalizing established symbolic or linguistic motives is a new act that may be separate from the original motor-social and may bring the original act into lines with existing vocabularies of motive.

The use of language codes, conventions, and clout to bring object-interactions into shared meaning necessarily results in a loss of sorts (Sacks & Garfinkel, 1970). As Bourque

and Back (1971) demonstrate empirically, the availability of 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. Similarly, what people say may not be how things are (Frazer & Cameron, 1989; Mills, 1940). This may occur for a variety of reasons, including, as Sewell (2005: 340-344) observes, the fact that there are always ‘slippages’ between non-linguistic semiotic modalities (such as gesture, physical characteristics, emotion, and physical action) and language.

Looking at the aesthetic and non-cognitive elements of action demonstrates that culture sometimes does and sometimes does not directly enter into action; the important thing is that by verbalizing motives or reasoning, individuals make it look as if it does by reflexively structuring their actions into an interpretable code based upon the cues and conventions of the situation they find themselves in. Curators make split-second decisions based on the materials that are available to them (and the agency they have in the institution), but 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 texts or otherwise carry out their work in support). This demonstrates, as does DeNora (2003), that culture (in the forms of norms and orientations) is not merely a medium to realise pre-established structures, but culture can also be an ‘end of action’, in the sense that these practices of accounting for split-second decisions can grow into new cultural repertoires.

To summarize the argument made above, what people have available to build with in any situation affects how they draw on cultural repertoires and construct strategies of action. In highly institutional settings or hierarchical organizations, drawing on particular cultural repertoires is automatic. When limited or familiar information about particular artworks is available, cultural repertoires are drawn on in a practical and discursive manner to guide curatorial meaning making. In these cases, culture for the micro-sociologist is a matter of ‘circumscribed agency’ (Fine & Fields, 2008: 131), because cultural actions are delimited by available choices based on the norms and conventions of the context at hand. When confronted with new experiences, however, curators may draw on situated actions with local props and environments to ‘tinker’ with their cultural toolkits.

### 9.3.1 *A relational aesthetic for the sociology of the arts*

I began this thesis by citing calls from other sociologists of contemporary art (cf. Halle, forthcoming; Zolberg, 2005) for new theories to understand production in contemporary art. When consuming contemporary art, viewers are actively engaged with artworks and meaning making in personal ways that involve both form and content. This produces a relational aesthetic (Bourriaud, 1998). In art, it is the quality of these relationships in relational aesthetics with which curators are concerned: what they produce and for whom (Bishop, 2004). What value would this ‘relational aesthetic’ have as applied to the sociology of cultural production?

Both Bourdieu (1993 [1983]) and Becker (1982) define their approach as *relational* by explaining the outcome of artistic works with reference to the social mediating activities external to them. In the sociology of emotions, however, Katz’s (1999) description of ‘affective relationality’ is based on seeing emotion not merely as a property of socially-constructed events and an individual’s cognitive state, but also as located in an individual’s affective relationship to others and the situation at hand. Similarly, a relational aesthetic for the sociology of the arts would require basing analysis not only on organizational networks, cultural conventions, and values, but also on the other relationships cultural producers sustain with art forms as aesthetic objects, which can be functional or emotional. A relational aesthetic would be concerned with all of the resources cultural producers have at their disposal for meaning making, as well as the quality and strength of their relationship to these resources. The concept of the ‘grounded aesthetic’ (Willis, 1990) could be one potential way to understand how different affective or resource-relationships enter into curatorial action.

Berger (1991) warns that drawing useful generalities in cultural sociology risks the danger of getting lost in complexity, on the one hand, and over generalizing, on the other. The solution Berger proposes is for newer theories and conceptual approaches to deal with heterogeneity in social life. I am not convinced that a ‘relational aesthetic’ in sociology would not err on the side of complexity. But, as Robin Wagner-Pacifici (forthcoming) notes, the answer is perhaps for sociology to sustain ‘alternating visions’ of cultural objects, including visions at the level of social structure and those at the level of being in time; the challenge for sociologists is to transform discussions of local revelation into analyses of social and political meaning. In this way, a relational approach to meaning making in

contemporary art could strengthen and complement more organizational work in the production of culture.

#### 9.4 Future work

Even in its errant complexity, this study had left out much of interest to a possible relational program. Considering that the goal of this research was to create a more meaningful production of culture, I have dealt relatively little with what meaning actually *is* and what it includes in art worlds. I have also largely skipped over the work of many contemporary artists to push new art forms forward and turn museums into sites of encounters with art and encounters with the ideas encountered through art. Indeed, the current shift in contemporary art is to see artworks and their reception more as a process and less as an object for analysis, something largely ignored in this research. Instead of looking at the making of meaning in a single exhibition, I hope that my larger comparative study provides a helpful basis for future work in this area by demonstrating that meaning emerges in situational, resource-dependent ways that are not always codified in the final instance. A return to the careful study of practice and small group interaction in epistemic cultures, including the arts, is an important venue for further work.

Perhaps this microethnographic perspective of meaning making in contemporary art will open a door to research that examines the situational and material dimensions of artistic engagement and how they play into the aesthetic experience (Dewey, 1934).<sup>65</sup> Just as Becker's (1982) formulation of conventions and Bourdieu's (1993 [1968]) formulation of codes provide a link between individual action and institutional structure, this work is needed to fill in the missing ground between individual experience and individual action. In particular, more work is needed on the perceptual dimensions of aesthetic experience and the precise moments in which these are 'translated' into linguistic tools of communication (with a further examination of exactly *what* slipped out in the translation) (Luhmann, 2000; Marí & Schaeffer, 1998; O'Sullivan, 2001). A further visual emphasis in the sociology of

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<sup>65</sup> The *eMotion* Mapping Museum Experience project (June 5-July 19, 2009) managed by the Institute for Design and Artistic Research at the Applied University of Design and Art Basel, Switzerland, is doing exactly this. This project blends sociological, curatorial, psychological, and institutional perspectives to collect information in great detail on how visitors to the museum encounter and process their interactions with artworks as well as the museum itself. Available at: <http://www.mapping-museum-experience.com/en> [Accessed 10 September 2009].

the arts can provide important perspectives on how the aesthetics and dimensions of objects, space, and environment, as well as the body (Belting, 2004 [2001]) and emotion (Altieri, 1998; Cupchik, 1995), actually structure action as it takes place, versus semiotic readings of these correlations after the fact. As Chaplin (1994) describes, the relationship of visual to verbal is more complicated than sociology makes it seem. This focus on the pragmatic elements of cultural engagement would allow sociology to extend the explanatory power of explicit cultural studies by illuminating the tacit resources (cognitive and environmental, strategies, orientations, etc.) that contribute to the upkeep of values, codes, and conventions (Shalin, 2007).

In addition, the research conducted for this thesis unearthed a surprising feature of life in art worlds. Curators regularly spoke of feeling an affiliation between their work and sociology, because, as one curator explained, ‘We both like to observe’ [JH]. Moulin (1967: 127) notes that artists are ‘experts in practical sociology’, because they master organizational networks and reward systems and use them to their own benefit. Curators are experts in practical sociology in a different way. They have high emotional intelligence and are conscious, as Witkin (2005) would say, of ‘sensing their own sensing’. Curators are experts in knowledge production, not only seen in the codification of knowledge in museum and art world texts, but also in understanding how to establish situations for knowledge production to take place, what I have earlier termed an environment for ‘knowing’ (Sutherland & Acord, 2007). While past scholarship has explored intersections between contemporary art and science (cf. Galison & Thompson, 1999) and contemporary art and anthropology (cf. Schneider & Wright, 2005), there has been little research on the intersections of contemporary art and sociology as vehicles of knowledge production.

In 1974, artists Hervé Fischer, Fred Forest, and Jean-Paul Thénot wrote a Manifesto on ‘sociological art,’ which was defined as exercising the ‘dialectic power of critical questioning’ (Fischer, et al., 1974). Sociological art makes its object by visualizing social relations, and in the process, revealing theoretical sociological analysis and practice (Heinich, 1998c: 89-90). In doing so, this art aims to make individuals conscious of the social categories, logics, and values governing their daily lives and actions, such that they can exercise critical judgement. Much of this so-called sociological art has taken the form of institutional critique (cf. Bourdieu & Haacke, 1994), but recently it has sought to exit the institution and address larger social issues, such as feminism, globalization, and colonization. The concept of ‘knowledge production’ inherent to this activity has gained

unprecedented prominence over the course of the last decade, witnessed in the marked increase in discursive activities (symposia, lectures, discussions, artists' talks, etc.) in locations once dedicated almost exclusively to the display of visual art (Sheikh, 2006). Future investigation is needed into the intersecting texts and resources between sociology and contemporary art (including the contemporary curatorial models built to 'cope with' this artistic practice). This research could potentially follow developments in other fields, such as new media, by creating new genres of scholarly products like the 'sociological exhibition'.<sup>66</sup> It could also potentially begin to build new bridges between the museum and the university (cf. Bernier, 2002).

Finally, this thesis may demonstrate the importance of microsociological research to the emerging field of 'culture and cognition' in the sociology of the arts. Recent work in this field surveys the literature in cognitive science for useful tips and tools for sociology (cf. Lizardo, 2004; Vaisey, 2009). In particular, the 'dual process' model of culture proposed by Vaisey (2009) provides support for Bourdieu's embodied dispositions by seeing culture as twofold: practical consciousness (acting through embodied dispositions to provide the underlying motives for action) and consciousness (occasional directional interventions). While this model provides insight into the relationship between various dimensions of experience (cf. Archer, 2003; Pitt, 2008), it does not explain how practical consciousness is mobilized in everyday life.

Much work on tacit knowledge in expert performance treats tacit knowledge as passive knowledge, encoded and reproduced in environmental situations over time in an unarticulated and non-explicit manner (Cianciolo, et al., 2006). Both practical consciousness and discursive consciousness, conventionally conceived, reproduce social relations and structure (Giddens, 1979). While this is straightforward in some cases, such as Vaughan's (2002) study of air traffic controllers and the existing rules and procedures they must learn to routinely apply, in most cases, familiar rules, theories, and techniques are put to work in concrete instances where this implicit application is dependent upon context and an individual's intuitive capacity to perceive, apprehend, and act. 'We ride on steel tracks laid down by others, but at critical moments we may become switchmen' (Fine & Fields, 2008: 143). Other cultural sociologists interested in cognition (cf. Cerulo, 2002; DiMaggio,

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<sup>66</sup> The curatorial work of sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour has been particularly experimental in this regard. Latour has curated two large exhibitions: *Iconoclash* (May-July 2002, ZKM Karlsruhe, co-curated by Peter Galison, Dario Gamboni, Joseph Koerner, Adam Lowe, and Hans Ulrich Obrist) and *Making Things Public* (March-August 2005, ZKM Karlsruhe, co-curated by Peter Weibel).

1997) have called for more work examining the relationship between background or institutionalized scripts of action (practical consciousness) and the situational contexts that act as primers for this ‘code switching’. This requires further work into the non-cognitive dimensions of experience as revealed through interactions with objects and environments. Can the human body do more than reproduce social relations?

To conclude, this thesis has looked at what curators are able to accomplish in the exhibition-making process with different levels of instruction, restriction, and access to artworks. While museum conventions and limitations are important enablers of curatorial work, the situated experience of consuming artwork ‘in the flesh’ plays a significant role in enabling new forms of agency. Rather than seeing action as prescribed through orientation to particular codes, conventions, or organizational orders, I see it as built through the available resources and interactions at hand in any given situation. In doing so, I am providing empirical support for a strong programme for cultural sociology (Alexander & Smith, 2001) that shifts its understanding of culture from cognitive values and norms to an anthropological notion of culture as material practice and to an understanding of the actor as an embodied practitioner. I am also providing a way to make the strong program even stronger. The strong program sees culture as a text that actively shapes its world, for instance through the codes in play in cultural objects themselves. I have shown here that cultural objects are far more salient than recognized in more human-centered sociology. Actors’ grounded and relational interactions with cultural materials play a crucial role in how they are read and mobilized in meaning making. Seen in this way, members of social worlds may use objects to tinker with culture and objects may use culture to tinker with actors.

## APPENDIX A: INFORMATION LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

Dear Sir or Madam,

I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Sociology of the Arts at the University of Exeter, and my research investigates the changing nature of contemporary art and its public presentation. Of chief significance is the way in which artistic decision making is carried out. I am particularly interested in the process of assembly during the exhibition installation itself, as well as the public presentation of the exhibition through talks and mediating texts. In looking closely at this interactive process, I would like to discuss the more tacit personal and institutional factors that lie behind the public rationale given for the choices of specific artworks, such as curatorial taste and institutional prerogative. My aim is not to 'debunk' the exhibition, but rather explore the multi-layered and complex process of meaning formation concerning a particular artwork or exhibition.

In contrast to past work in the sociology of the arts, I intend to return the artistic object and its specific artistic and semiotic properties to the center of sociological inquiry. I believe that sociology should converse much more with art history and public policy perspectives on the arts, and that it is crucial to have open dialogue between social scientists and members of art worlds.

My Ph.D. research, for which I have full ethical approval, will consist of a cross-cultural study of curators of contemporary art in [two European cities, focusing on one particular museum in each city from August-December 2005]. In each space, I will be interning in the exhibitions department, working closely with the curatorial team and observing the process of curating an exhibition from start to finish. I will also be videotaping the final installation of these exhibitions.

To complement this research, I will be conducting informal interviews with curators from various other sectors of the art world. During these conversations, I hope to use audio/video recording devices in the exhibition space itself, the details of which are specified in the form of written consent. The use of video is merely a means to record the non-audible components of the interview. Each participant will have final input into transcripts and drafts upon request. In gratitude for your participation, I offer my services in any way to your own work, including presenting research findings to all participants.

The ultimate aim of this research is to inform legislative and educational perspectives on the arts, such that measures may be found to increase public support and visitation for the fine arts and incorporate contemporary art into a new definition of a whole and dynamic society. Thank you in advance for your attention, and I look forward to speaking with you.

Sophia Krzys Acord

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## **APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE\***

### I. Background

How did you become a curator?

How did you arrive at your current position?

What do you see as the role of the curator in your practice?

What and who are your influences (e.g., authors, curators, artists, spaces, etc.)?

What past exhibitions are important to you?

### II. The Exhibition (photo/video-elicitation or walking through exhibition)

How did you choose the subject of your show and the artworks included?

What relationship do you have with the artists in the show and any other curators or staff in the gallery/institution?

How did you go about planning the installation (e.g., gallery plan, pre-show visit)?

Can you take me back to the installation, speaking in the present tense, and tell me what is happening (regarding a particular artwork or gallery)?

Did you encounter any unexpected changes during the installation?

How did you set about to light the exhibition?

What do you think about the show?

What do you feel about the show?

Who is your audience?

### III. Additional Questions

Could you describe your dream exhibition?

How would you represent your place in the art world (by drawing a map)?

What do you think is the role of contemporary art?

What do you not like or define as art?

What is your opinion on artistic hierarchies and public taste?

Can you walk me through a recent studio visit you undertook?

Where does your information about artists and exhibitions come from?

Do you subscribe to any art magazines or journals?

How do you decide which events to attend?

Where do ideas for new exhibitions come from (or where have ideas for past exhibitions originated)?

What do you plan to do next (after this current position)?

Has working in your current position changed how you think about art/curating?

\* N.B. These questions indicate the general themes covered in the interview; they were not asked verbatim of the informants.

Appendix C: Consent Form

You are being invited to take part in a research project conducted by Sophia Krzys Acord. I am a Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology and Philosophy at the University of Exeter.

Your part in this study will involve a 40-60 minute interview which may be recorded on a digital voice recorder or video camera with your prior consent. (You have the ability to switch the recorder off and on.) If the interview takes place in the exhibition, I may ask you to wear a lapel microphone attached to the recorder, for purposes of mobility.

If you choose to take part in this research, you are undertaking this on a voluntary basis and have the right to withdraw your consent at any time. You also have the right to refuse to answer any questions I may ask without giving me reasons. I am willing to share all video/audio footage, transcripts, and research drafts with you upon request. You have the right to review all transcripts, add information, and identify statements to be omitted from publication or presentation, upon request.

We will discuss and agree upon a standard of anonymity, including the use of pseudonyms, withdrawal of the name of institution or exhibition, or other options.

If you still wish to be kept completely anonymous, please tick here:

Research findings may be used in academic conference presentations and published in academic articles, books, and my Ph.D. thesis. Additionally, I may wish to use video footage/stills in the following ways, each respectful of the agreed standard of anonymity. Please tick to the left of each to indicate your permission:

- 1. Video stills in an academic publication or conference presentation
- 2. Video footage as reference during an academic conference presentation
- 3. Video footage on a hidden page within my institution’s website, to supplement discussion in an academic paper

All data and information collected during this study will be kept confidential by myself. Only my supervisor, Professor Tia DeNora, may be shown excerpts from transcripts and footage. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a participant or dissatisfaction regarding my research, you may report them in confidence to:

Professor Tia DeNora, University of Exeter  
Amory Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter. EX4 4RJ  
T.DeNora@ex.ac.uk, +44 01392 263280

I confirm that I am over the age of eighteen and therefore legally afforded the right to participation. I understand and am well-informed about the above information, and I voluntarily consent to participate in the research project: ‘Beyond the Code’.

-----  
signature of participant

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date

-----  
signature of interviewer

-----  
date

I, the researcher, will leave a signed copy of this consent form with you, the participant, at the beginning of the study.

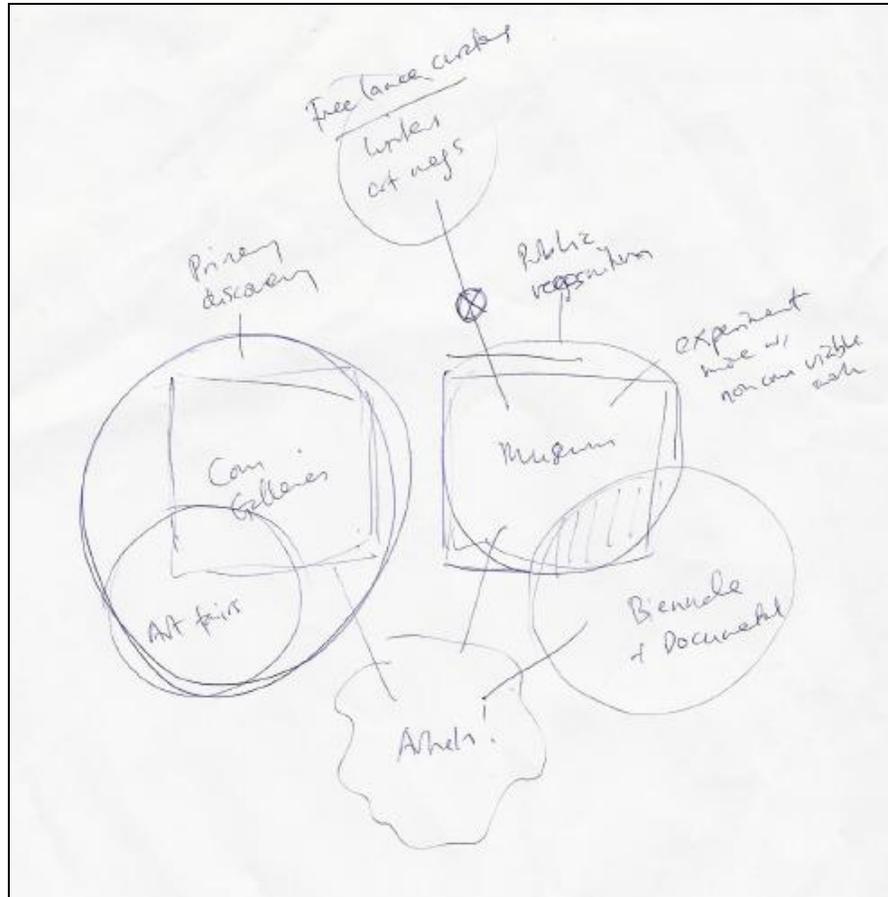
Map 1: *Contemporary Art in Britain, 2001*, Adam Dant<sup>67</sup>



This cultural ‘tree’ of the contemporary art scene in British culture demonstrates the position of the independent curator in relation to other entities in the contemporary art world. In particular, I invite the reader to examine the representation of ‘star’ curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist in the upper left quadrant of the image. Here, he is represented with a bird which carries him in and around the other entities in the art world. This representation is in keeping with the emerging role of the curator of contemporary art who is less fixed to a particular institution or ‘tree branch’, but has a holistic knowledge of the entire scene.

<sup>67</sup> This image is reproduced from Millard (2001) with the permission of the artist, Adam Dant, obtained by personal email on July 13, 2009.

**Map 2: The Contemporary Art World [elicitation map drawn during interview]**



Curator: The major things would be museums and commercial galleries, where they [the galleries] are putting on more primary discovery of artists, and this [the museum] is more a public recognition thing. Of course, museums might experiment more in the art world with non-commercially viable stuff. [...] I suppose these are the two main structures that house people. And there's some overlap, like this [draws art fairs overlapping with galleries].

SKA: I never realized that art fairs and biennales were linked to different paths.

Curator: Well, what I'm saying here is that there are a few museum curators who might curate a large-scale biennale. Commercial galleries — actually, that should be more like that [draws circle around galleries and art fairs to group them together] — generally show mostly at art fairs, if they can afford it. But then, there is a blurry area here [in between museum and biennale] of museum curators looking at commercial galleries and art fairs in order to find artists. This would be the biennale and Documenta. Then there are freelance curators and writers for art magazines. I'm somewhere here [draws 'X' and circles], because I've always written for art magazines and done freelance curating, as well as my position here [at the Tate]. Quite a lot of people working at museums do that. [...] Umm... what else is there? Oh, Artists! [laughter] They belong to everything [draws artists in cloud at bottom].

As demonstrated by the curator's map and narration above, curators employed by prestigious institutions are subject to a variety of forces in the art world. They are also involved, often simultaneously, in a variety of mediating tasks in the mediation of art, including writing, exhibition making, and discovery. The museum exhibition, then, represents the intersection of these forces and the knowledge gained in these activities.

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