

Witnessing Culture: Museums, Exhibitions and the Artistic Encounter

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INTRODUCTION

As public institutions that serve society by conserving and communicating the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity, museums aim to provide opportunities for social groups to engage with their unique collections and gain 'unforgettable' experiences (López-Sintas et al., 2012). As with many other cultural institutions, museums are highly dependent on national histories, traditions and funding, and vary widely by organizational structure, audiences and exhibits. Conventionally, in academic and professional literature, museums are classified according to the types of the objects they contain (e.g., ethnographic museums, art galleries, science museums, etc.), the purpose they are expected to serve, the type of management, the scale of their operation, or the nature of their audiences (e.g. Ambrose and Paine, 2006: 6–8; Goode, 1896).

Despite these differences in form and mission, museums seem to be exceptional among all sociological topics for several reasons. First, they are not simply neutral stages that bear witness to the struggles to define culture, as seen in the controversies over the display of images from Robert Mapplethorpe's *X Portfolio* in Cincinnati or the 'Elgin marbles' at London's British Museum

(Hamilakis, 1999). Museums also *participate* in the controversies and introduce new stakes in these 'culture wars'. Through the work of exhibition-making, they shape public perception of social and political events, and thus '*solidify* culture, science, history, identity, and world-views' (Dubin, 2006: 479).

Second, museums are able to bring new political, cultural and aesthetic meanings to material objects by putting them into the specific context of exhibitions. As many have observed, museums provide the highest kind of institutional approval available in the art world (Heinich, 1998a; Moulin, 1992; Zolberg, 1992). 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; Moulin, 1992). Museums, galleries and other public exhibition spaces are also important institutions that provide resources for artistic recognition in art markets. As culturally-loaded environments, museums convey their own meanings and mediate social relations in particular ways. They actively contribute to social processes of legitimation and consecration by providing social, political and institutional resources (e.g., Moulin, 1986). For example, in the case of Marcel Duchamp's renowned *Fontaine* (1917), a functional and mass-produced object – a porcelain

urinal – was consecrated as an art object by many actors and institutions, including public museums and commercial art galleries.¹ Museums, as well as other institutions, continue to participate in the maintenance of the legitimate status of this artwork by constructing cultural and material biographies of its replicas. Put another way, museums are cultural institutions that are themselves culture-producing.

Third, being active in culture production processes, museums are made up of people who carry out the routine work of constructing meanings and experiences. As Becker (1982) observes, the personnel of art worlds, including museums, is composed of individuals and groups who do everything from insuring artworks to purchasing the exhibition catalogue. When sociologists examine precisely how these individuals go about doing their work, it reveals much about the relationship of individual agency and affect to the more structural variables of power and expertise as exerted through formal museum organizations. In this way, the cultural study of museums reveals the enormous *work* required for culture to be produced, reproduced and changed. Therefore, museums offer a tangible space to examine the intersection of human action and structural systems in the creation and perpetuation of culture.

Finally, the creation of culture in museums involves interactions between social meanings, individuals and exhibits as material objects. Interpretations of exhibits are social, but interaction with them is always materially and physically grounded: the way visitors move, stand and respond to objects impacts upon what they consider to be meaningful. In scholarly literature museums are often described as heterogeneous spaces (e.g., Hetherington, 1999) where actors are confronted with an uncertainty of physical space and meanings. So while museums are social organizations concerned with representations of culture, they also serve as places to see culture as continuously recreated and enacted in different models of action and experience (learning, entertainment, aesthetic comprehension, political and social engagement, etc.) which involve social and material components.

Museums are sites where cultural sociology can examine the link between our theoretical ideas of how culture operates and the material processes of cultural production and consumption, in the sense of physical artworks as 'explicit' culture (Wuthnow and Witten, 1988). As we will argue in this chapter, the sociological study of museums thus requires sociology to be precise about the robust role played by culture in our social lives.

In this chapter, we will explore three overarching approaches to the sociological study of museums, and discuss the varying contributions of these perspectives for the development of cultural sociology. First, we will look at theoretical approaches within sociology, and critical theory more broadly, that have sought to define the role of museums in structuring the social world. While work in this area has been foundational in describing the role of cultural systems vis-à-vis other sociological processes and institutions, it does not examine the museum as a mediated entity in and of itself. Second, we turn to studies of museum professionals to examine the museum itself as a site of ongoing cultural work. While these studies demonstrate how social systems shape cultural production, they are largely human-centered in their focus, involving the risk of overlooking the very cultural products that make museum settings so unique. Third, we look to contemporary sociological research on museums that examines exhibition encounters as sites of socio-material assemblage. These micro-level ethnographic studies examine closely the work of culture in action, as humans, artworks and mediating texts and spaces combine to showcase the intricate ways in which cultural and social systems are constantly co-mediating and reconstructed in finite moments. We conclude with a discussion of the necessary interrelatedness of these approaches in the future of cultural sociology.

In 2006, Gordon Fyfe wrote that museums were 'rarely mentioned by sociologists' (Fyfe, 2006: 33). By this, he meant that sociology generally considers the museum as a context or site where social interactions and cultural encounters take place, rather than an object of study in its own right. Indeed, sociological studies of museums have been primarily a part of broader sociological disciplines, such as the sociology of art (examining, for example, institutional aspects of museum organizations), the sociology of cultural consumption or education (looking at, for example, museum attendance and reproduction of class inequality), the sociology of occupations (analyzing the work of museum professionals) and so on. The interdisciplinary field of museum studies spans a wide area, ranging from professional manuals to critical theory. Though it is hard to claim that there is a specific sociology of museums, it is reasonable to argue that a variety of sociological approaches have been applied to museums in many different contexts.² We draw liberally across this literature in our discussions below, though this chapter focuses most specifically on the exhibition of visual art.

THEORIZING MUSEUMS: THE PRODUCTION OF CULTURAL CIVILITY

Contemporary museums are the outgrowth of the social transformations and revolutions that took place in Europe and North America in the 18th century.³ In this Enlightenment period, increased levels of education and wealth saw '[an] expansion of the public for art, as reflected in the growth of the art market and the advent of public exhibitions and museums' (McClellan, 2003: 4). As specifically Western inventions, museums gained a particular sociological relevance when they became public social institutions performing specific social functions. Consequently, functionalist and theoretical approaches in historical sociology generally emphasize the specific roles that museums played in creating and maintaining a general sense of order in Western society, by organizing the consecration and performance of material culture, and also by organizing the audiences who perpetuate processes of cultural sanctification and consume museum products.

Theoretical approaches to understanding these roles for museums vary from critical perspectives that view museums as tools to govern and discipline populations (e.g., Duncan, 1995), to more positive perspectives that consider museums as places for sharing and creating collective identity (e.g., Falk and Dierking, 2000). Museum studies scholars (e.g., Crimp, 1993) have been largely inspired by the former position and have viewed museums as social institutions 'in which citizens ... have met, conversed, been instructed, or otherwise engaged in rituals through which their rights and duties as citizens have been enacted' (Bennett, 2006: 263). Another positive view of museums is provided by Romanticism. In the essay 'Museum', Hetherington (2006) draws on Walter Benjamin's work to consider museums as institutions which are able to fabricate *Erfahrung*, a form of pre-modern experience. By constructing shared historical time and bringing meanings to various objects, museums aim 'to provide people with a sense that they are living in a world where our uncertain and complex set of experiences make sense' (Hetherington, 2006: 600). These two negative and positive viewpoints represent the research continuum, and the following discussion of empirical and historical studies shows that there is evidence to support both of the claims.

Before the advent of modern museums, the majority of art collections, curiosities and other valuable objects were unavailable for viewing by the general public. Most individuals could only encounter these objects during sacred rituals such as religious ceremonies. Museums were

storehouses presenting miscellaneous collections of curiosities to learned scholars and collectors. The emergence of the new, modern form of museum reshaped these encounters to a significant extent and established a new social practice: museum-going. This dramatically extended potential audiences for particular collections. Consequently, the social institutions of artistic display, conservation and curation became standardized in the 19th century, going hand in hand with the advent of the modern museum form. As Bourdieu (1993: 260) explains, the 'emergence of the entire set of the 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'. As museums became sites which people visited with the purpose of seeing specifically selected and arranged objects of various kinds, the new mission for museums focused on display practices which 'framed' collections appropriately, to help visitors interpret the meanings of the objects which they beheld (Holt, 1979).

On this front, the museum studies and cultural theory literatures have contributed important perspectives to cultural sociology. 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 forms 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 meaning to artworks in a performative way, as visitors enact the 'ritual' of going through the museum (Duncan, 1995). While this has always been true in ethnographic and historical museums (Clifford, 1988; MacDonald, 1998), contemporary conditions have brought this to the fore in art museums as well, because in contemporary art the museum is the context of the origin of the artwork (Barker, 1999; Buskirk, 2005; Crimp, 1993). 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.

The creation of culture by museums is not simply an exercise of social representations and performance of expert power. It also involves aesthetic manipulation which consists of conceptual and practical work. Artistic objects are, as Raymond Williams (1981: 131) points out, signaled by occasion and place. In particular, the white cube – a gallery space characterized by blank, white walls – 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). 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) note subliminally indicates the 'pure aesthetic'. Museums contribute to what Inglis (2010: 217) describes as 'highly reflexive games as to what counts as "art" and what does not'. Just as the museum establishes its own historical accounts of canonized artworks, the museological space is also a framework through which to control and enact particular types of cultural readings and understandings; it establishes viewing conditions with an invisible regime of control. These modern display conventions limit the nature and media of artworks that can be effectively exhibited; and, as Leahy (2012) argues, the display mechanisms and guided tours at different museums literally created a 'social body' that knows how to stand, where to look and how to comport itself in particular museums. The literature in museum studies reminds the sociologist that spaces carry meaning as much as do accounts, objects and actions.

Once objects are placed within exhibition displays, they are framed as aesthetic objects for demonstration, not function (such as Duchamp's *Fontaine* or indigenous artefacts), through the use of white walls, labels and other technologies of the gallery space. In this way, museums reveal the aesthetic dimensions of displayed objects. Museum exhibits can be understood as objects which Alexander, Bartmansi and Giesen (2012) describe as iconic, i.e., objects that condense meanings through the interplay of aesthetic surface and discursive depth. To a certain extent, museums are unique in the way they organize encounters with iconic objects, and at the same time they provide insights into how iconicity is routinely constructed through professional practices and in visitor experiences. Museums are open laboratories where everyone is able to observe how culture is fabricated.

The museum, of course, is not a neutral body in relation to its culture-producing function, but is itself a social institution involved in the cultural politics of differentiation (Bennett, 1995; Bourdieu, 1984; DiMaggio, 1982a; 1982b). Within the domain of museum studies, scholars often refer to the works of Michel Foucault, who conceptualized museums as heterotopias: spaces of otherness that invert our normal standards of reference (Foucault and Miskowiec, 1986). As Bennett (1995) argues, this process of inversion is fundamental to how museums have framed the

development of power/knowledge relations in society; he argues that museums were organized on the basis of an 'exhibitionary complex'. Through submitting objects to the disciplinary regimes of museum display, museums constitute new spaces where the general public can view objects that were previously available only to restricted social groups. Seen in this way, museums discipline populations through the material settings of exhibitions and the articulation of power/knowledge relations between those who are behind the scenes of museums (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992: 188–90), and those who attend exhibitions and are subject to education and instruction (Bennett, 2006: 263–81).

Over the course of the 20th 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). From the very beginning, modern museum professionals were concerned not only with the ways to represent events and objects and to organize exhibitions, but also with the people who were expected to come to museums. And sociologists have noted an ongoing tension in the social function of museums in relation to the general public. On the one hand, lofty ideals about mass education presumed that museums should attract all social groups in order to provide equal access to their collections and thus to contribute to broader civilizing and educating processes. However, in practice museums have contributed to processes of social differentiation by strengthening the social position of elites through sanctifying their cultural preferences and discriminating against the tastes and habits of lower social classes (Bennett, 1995: 28; DiMaggio, 1982a; Zolberg, 1992).

This tension between elite valorization and democratization in museums has grown alongside broader social changes. In his reconstruction of the history of museum publics, McClellan (2003) describes the transformation that the ideas of a museum have undergone, from the 'innocence' of museum education as a tool of democratization, to museums playing an active role in addressing 'relevant' social issues and shaping current political agendas. These transformations are also reflected in the way museums built relations with their publics. While the belief in the power of a museum to provide education in arts and crafts was typical for 'modern' museums, in so-called post-modern times 'post-modern' museums are expected to contribute to the politics of representation and identity in a much more reflexive way. As a result, their educational aspirations to provide universal knowledge are challenged in a world where the organization of knowledge and culture

has itself become fragmented. The educational function of museums is still at the centre of relations between organizations and audiences, but its meaning has changed, and now museums are expected to address contemporary public issues and to be as flexible as possible by referring to various segments of audiences, including those who are under-represented in the public sphere (McClellan, 2003: 39–40).

Overall, one could say that modern museums became part of a broader worldview of the 18th and 19th centuries, and consequently reflected the social structuring of knowledge of that period. They became a part of the broader *episteme* at that time, and contributed to emerging modernity by differentiating between those who had expertise to curate collections and those who were only allowed to see objects under the surveillance of professionals. Museums became one more instrument of power in the modern world, as part of a burgeoning civilizing process which involved establishing and controlling cultural meanings. Research that theorizes museums from historical and functionalist perspectives demonstrates how this form of cultural production intersects with other significant sociological phenomena such as social class and inequality, power and governance and the establishment of group identity. In their more macro-level focus, however, these studies are not able fully to examine the details by which this mediation of museums and wider social forces takes place.

In the 21st century, museums have seen their authority challenged and their universalistic claims to truth criticized. Museums are now considered to be one of the many routes through which individuals can know about and experience the world. Similarly, for a cultural sociology of museums, it is important to go beyond an understanding of culture as only 'high' or 'legitimate', and to extend the notion of culture into the realm of individual actions. This involves asking what happens inside museums. We turn now to interview-based and ethnographic research that examines the actions and roles of individuals in museum worlds.

INVESTIGATING MUSEUMS: INSTITUTIONS, PROFESSIONALS AND THE WORK OF CULTURE

The bulk of work on museums coming out of the sociology of the arts emerged from the 1960s onwards, and focused less on museums per se than on their staff and audiences, groups who were

engaged in particular processes of cultural production. For example, the pioneering 1969 work of Bourdieu and his colleagues examining European museums and their audiences discusses museums as places where social class profoundly shapes cultural practices (Bourdieu et al., 1969). The development of empirical sociology of art, along with the application of approaches from industrial, organization and occupational sociologies to the realm of culture (e.g. Peterson, 1976), brought a slightly different focus on museums. Following analytical frameworks of institutional analysis, sociologists began looking at museums as organizational structures that shape cultural practices, involving production, consumption, market, recognition and so on.

Historically, there are three distinct institutions that have shaped the visual arts, all with their roots in 18th- and 19th-century Europe: public art museums, the world of visual arts discourse and the art market. The relative prominence of these three institutions has changed over time, as different 'institutional systems' (White and White, 1993) have emerged to give value to art and to project value into artworks. Rather than having become obsolete, recently the work of artistic mediators in attributing value and shaping classification schemes has become particularly integral to processes of consecration and meaning-making in contemporary art, where assertions of value and judgments of taste are increasingly open to challenge by publics, governments, funding bodies and the media (Zolberg, 1990). And the contemporary art world is now composed of an increasing plurality of local and international mediators (Foster and Blau, 1989; Moulin, 1992; Mulkay and Chaplin, 1982; Zolberg, 2005). 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 cultural artefacts (Heinich and Shapiro, 2012) and so-called outsider art (Zolberg, 2001; Zolberg and Cherbo, 1997), as well as in periods of artistic controversy (Dubin, 1994). The influence of the mediator in purchasing or exhibiting an artwork is an important signaling device as to the quality of the artist or the work, which sends ripples through the art world, which in turn acts to confirm these choices in an act of auto-realization.

Empirical work has also examined in depth the individual work practices involved in artistic encounters inside the museum. Particular individuals in museums, such as curators, museum educators and invigilators, play significant roles as intermediaries that shape the nature of cultural reproduction and audience experience in the museum. As mentioned earlier, 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 (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 intentions, which may have been hazy to begin with (Becker et al., 2006). 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 dialogue with each other, the dialogue being understood by an initiated public (Heinich and Pollack, 1989; Octobre, 1996: 231). Once the exhibition is open to the public, mediation processes are guided by invigilators who often assist visitors in dealing with artworks. Their role has become of particular importance for contemporary art, which often aims to challenge visitors' expectations and as a result can puzzle them. Consequently, the institution of contemporary art is no longer the single ground from which the understandings of visual culture are made, but rather is a site involving the display of shifting cultural, artistic, social and power relations (Greenberg et al., 1996; Luke, 2002).

While it is important to understand the role of museums in culture-producing institutional systems (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 wider social orders. To understand the work involved in producing culture, we turn now to consider more focused studies of mediation, so as to examine how culture operates in a highly mediated environment.

For Bourdieu (1984), 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 – 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 meanings. Bourdieu's greatest contribution to the organizational study of mediation described above is his specification of the practical cognitive mechanisms by which an organizational consensus is achieved, namely through inherited cultural codes which render certain artworks perceivable (Bourdieu, 1968).

Developing a less explicitly critical approach, Becker (1982) shows that an artwork takes the form it does at a particular moment because of the choices, both small and large, made by artists, mediators and others up to that point – choices

between multiple possibilities of subject, format, stylistic treatment, material, assembly, techniques and so on. Curatorial and other professionals engage in 'editing' processes that bring works of art into line with the conventions of the museum, gallery or exhibition space. For Becker, there is a tremendous amount of collective coordinated work that goes into the making and operation of a museum exhibition, which is organized through adherence to common, tacit conventions.

These important studies of mediation focus largely on the accomplishment of ongoing action, and see culture operating as 'imaginary feedback loops' and 'internal logics' organized through systems of social reproduction and coordination. Meaning making in art, then, involves a 'mediate deciphering operation' of these codes or conventions (Bourdieu, 1968), as museum actors 'apply' tacit knowledge to shape artworks for their expected publics. As Greenfeld (1989: 105) notes:

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.

There is thus a mutually-constituting circle involving art, artists, museum professionals and publics.

Some studies of mediation, however, reveal the perhaps subversive contradictions going on behind the scenes of museum spaces. Research that resonates with recent historical work hailing the 'new organizational analysis' school of thought reveals tensions between the goals and beliefs of cultural mediators and the institutions or fields in which they act (Alexander, 1996; Powell and 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 cultural industries also examines the negotiations made between creative managers and institutional demands (Banks, 2007; Bilton, 2006; Montebello et al., 2006). These studies, particularly Alexander (1996), demonstrate the personal dilemmas curators face between curating for their peers and curating for broader publics.

The lived nature of these conflicts and contradictions is evidenced by further research that has examined mediation in contemporary art in a detailed, qualitative manner, often through participant observation or interviews. This includes examinations of the evolving nature of curatorial

expertise (Heinich, 1995; Moulin and Queminn, 2001; 1993), the work of building museum collections (Herrero, 2006), curatorial decision-making (Gielen, 2005), and changing notions of museum curatorship which have to accommodate the challenges involved in presenting contemporary art (Jouvenet, 2001; Michaud, 1987; Octobre, 1998; Tobelem, 2005).

In particular, studies of conservation dilemmas in modern and contemporary art (e.g., Henaut, 2008; Irvin, 2006; Marontate, 2006) illuminate the outcomes of these conflicts as they impact upon 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 striking problems for older systems of producing culture in museums. To take an important example, in her various studies of curators and other artistic mediators in action – in an art commission (Heinich, 1997a; 1997b), in planning an exhibition (Heinich and Pollack, 1989), and in museum work (Heinich, 1998b; 2009) – Nathalie 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 their framing work 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 catalogue. As Heinich (1998b: 41) observes, ‘interpretation is a fundamental instrument of artistic integration: interpreting, or giving something a value, involves justifying the interest paid to the object’. This dilemma faced by art and museum professionals is at the heart of Heinich’s work, which connects the ‘sociology of domination’ (a more critical type of sociology associated with Bourdieu) with a broader ‘sociology of values’.

Visual ethnographic studies by Yaneva (2003a; 2003b) and Acord (2010; 2014) of contemporary art installations reveal that mediation processes do not merely conform to existing limitations and museum codes, but actually create 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 processes described by Becker (1982), but are born specifically from the fact that every ecological arrangement of artworks, actors and environments presents a unique possibility for meaning-making (Becker, 2006; Heath and Hindmarsh, 2002). As Benzecry (2007) notes in a study of opera mediators, the work of the interpretive sociologist is to complement analysis

of institutional networks with an appreciation of the self-understandings of the practitioners themselves, rather than reducing agents’ ‘experience’ to participation in a collective form of deception or delusion. Such studies reveal that culture does not simply govern how mediation takes place, but rather that culture is put to work by individuals engaged in processes of cultural production, and is sometimes transformed in the process.

As demonstrated by much literature in the sociology of the visual arts, mediators play an important role not only in the material creation of culture, but also in the production of symbolic worth and the value of art in general. Their role is not simply economic, but also involves the creation and maintenance of social relations. This production of belief in artworks takes the form 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 these circulate, in what Bourdieu (1996) terms the ‘two-step social construction of events’. They produce culture, as well as the systems required for the ongoing production of culture.

Sociological work in this area fleshes out some of the broad theoretical discussions of museums presented above. It demonstrates that individual museum professionals are active cultural actors who shape and mediate cultural processes. A common limitation ascribed to work in this vein, however, is that it risks focusing on the human and social-relational elements of art worlds at the expense of their aesthetic elements. In the process, actual encounters between artworks and audiences become merely ‘black boxes to explain intergroup relationships’ (Alexander, 2003: 241). The irony here, as pointed out by Heinich and Ténédos (2007), is that this position both reduces culture to the mere reflection of a social group or network, while simultaneously endowing artworks as cultural objects with the extraordinary capacity to transmit the essence of a society. To understand how culture really works, it is important to bridge theoretical and empirical perspectives with aesthetic research that can examine in detail the nature of visitor interactions with artworks inside museums.

ENCOUNTERING MUSEUMS – VISITOR INTERACTION AND CULTURAL AGENCY

Museums are spaces where one can witness civilizing processes, human and group relations and social systems involving hierarchy, power and

cultural inequality. But museums are also spaces where one can observe the production and consumption of specifically *aesthetic* goods. In any exhibition, the materiality of space and objects informs professional practices, while space itself is a matter of social design where each object and its place within the overall display are meaningful. Indeed, the previously cited theoretical perspectives offered by DiMaggio (1982a; 1982b) and O'Doherty (1999) demonstrate that museums are not neutral spaces, for framing processes provide certain spatial-aesthetic cues to individuals. Moreover, some of the visual and interpretive studies of museum professionals cited in the previous section reveal that mediators may themselves have unanticipated reactions to the cultural forms and processes they mediate. For Latour (2005: 39), mediators of all varieties, including artworks, 'transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry'. In this final section, we turn to consider studies that use museums as opportunities to examine the uniquely aesthetic, embodied, spatial and temporal character of cultural experience through considering visitor interactions with artworks. These studies understand museums as socio-material assemblages whose use by visitors reveals the extensive work of culture in and through social action.

As mentioned earlier, museum professionals have been concerned with visitor experiences from the time of the beginnings of their profession.⁴ Over time, museums have elaborated various policies aiming to control and regulate visitor behavior in relation to exhibits (McClellan, 2003). Since museums have more recently been recognized as learning environments (Falk and Dierking, 2000), museum professionals and scholars from anthropology, psychology, education and sociology have begun studying interaction at exhibitions in order to discover audience reactions to exhibits. Understanding visitor behavior is a way to enhance the museum experience and to increase the educational significance of exhibitions. It is not surprising therefore that many visitor behavior studies are focused on providing practical recommendations to improve the design of exhibits and environments. Using experimental research design, observational techniques and interviewing, scholars have explored the impact of many factors on museum experience, including time spent with particular exhibits and within exhibitions, the presence of, and interaction with, other visitors, and various other factors (e.g., Cone and Kendall, 1978; Falk, 1991).

While applied museum research has been focused on visitor behavior for some decades, academic sociology has long neglected the

interactional, real-time aspects of museum experience. Rather, following Bourdieu (1984), sociologists have considered museums as vehicles of social distinction and as sites that reveal how art perception is predetermined by the social and economic status of visitors (Bourdieu, 1968; for review of relevant literature, see Katz-Gerro, 2004; Lizardo and Skiles, 2008). Consequently the sociological study of art perception shifts towards the analysis of how tastes (i.e., aesthetic codes) correspond to social positions, and does not leave any room for the analysis of what visitors actually do at exhibitions. Another academic discipline, museum studies, as Kirchberg and Tröndle note, also primarily disregards visitor experiences in favor of focusing on 'cultural, historical, or critical analyses of the museum as an institution' (Kirchberg and Tröndle, 2012: 436). Consequently, one can argue that visitor experience research is predominantly an applied research field that has been influenced by explanatory models from psychology and educational studies.

Yet there are several recent examples of studies that aim to offer an interdisciplinary space for the study of visitor experience using sociological data from surveys and questionnaires. For example, integrating physiological (heart rate and skin conductance) and time-tracking data with sociological and psychological self-reports, a group of German scholars elaborated a complex methodology to test various theories from empirical aesthetics, visitor experience research and the sociology of art (Tröndle et al., 2014a; Tschacher et al., 2012). The results of this study challenge the reductionist perspectives in the sociology of the arts (Tröndle et al., 2014b), by calling sociologists' attention to other factors beyond social class that influence artistic experience. These include age, appreciation of new art forms, the display of artwork, and the nature of the artwork itself, among many other factors that are mostly neglected in types of sociology interested primarily in socio-economic factors and social class determinants. These studies show that museums and their professional mediators are not the only ones involved in the construction of art objects, since museum visitors also actively participate in processes by bringing their own meanings and expectations to the encounter. As with studies of 'audiencing' (Hall, 1980), audiences may decode artworks in many different ways, partly based on their social position and forms of previous cultural knowledge acquisition, but not simply reducible to these. For this perspective, culture and cultural production are therefore not merely cognitive phenomena, for they are inseparable from the situated character of museum experience as this is laid out in multiple ways by particular museum visitors.

The situated character of museum experience can also be addressed from micro-sociological perspectives. Ethnomethodologists, ethnographers and other qualitative analysts have carried out systematic observations in museums, in order to explore how visitors make sense of exhibits in interaction with each other. The collaborative dimension of museum experiences is crucial for this domain of research, since it is in interaction with others that visitors organize their aesthetic activities. Often curators and exhibition designers are not aware of what visitors actually do at exhibitions. Close and detailed observation of such practices, as exemplified in the studies of Christian Heath, Dirk vom Lehn and others (e.g. Heath et al., 2002; vom Lehn et al., 2001), sheds light on what actually happens at an exhibition site. Though it seems to be obvious that museum experience is a collaborative activity, as Heath and vom Lehn put it, 'theories of the perception and experience of art and artefacts largely rely upon an imaginary situation in which an individual views a single artwork alone, independently of the circumstances of viewing' (Heath and vom Lehn, 2004: 46). Neither a Bourdieusian sociology of art perception, nor applied studies of visitor behavior trace the course of art perception as a situated activity. But ethnographic studies can show how visitors create and articulate various contexts for their action, depending on what other visitors do. Individuals are engaged in flows of interaction and conversations with many other actors who are usually ignored by more conventional sociological analysis.

These micro-level studies also show how visitors obtain 'aesthetic' competencies which allow them to interact with exhibits and perform particular emotions (e.g., Scott et al., 2013). Authors writing in this vein argue that the perception of artworks is a situational activity continuously redefined in interaction with artefacts and other people, and this activity is 'hardly reducible to cognitive abilities and dispositions of the participants', as it is in Bourdieu-inspired forms of analysis (Heath and vom Lehn, 2004: 60). One of the examples that Heath and vom Lehn discuss concerns visitors' experience of *The Flagellation of Christ* by Caravaggio in the Musée des Beaux Arts in Rouen. They analyzed the interactions between family members in detail and show how, for example, a son shapes the way his father moves his body in order to discover incisions used typically by Caravaggio in his work. They summarize the interaction as follows: 'The talk and bodily conduct of the son figure how the father examines the picture and responds. The son's actions not only show the incisions, but also establish, through the ways in which they are revealed, the relevant ways

in which the father should respond, with awe and appreciation' (Heath and vom Lehn, 2004: 52). This example, among many others, is a detailed description of what happened when a particular family unit stood in front of a specific artwork.

Actor-network theoretical vocabulary is also useful for studying museum experiences and visitors' interactions with artworks, understood not simply as texts to be decoded but as material objects endowed with certain capacities. Contemporary interactive art installations are a good example of how artworks can organize and shape the activities of visitors. Acord and DeNora (2008) describe these processes in terms of the 'affordances' that artworks provide. Griswold et al. (2013) show that these affordances act in both material and cognitive ways to de-stabilize planned routines in museum spaces. They propose a formula to study the relation of cognitive (including meaning-making processes) and material (including physical movements) experiences: 'position [in a physical space] guides [cognitive] location, and location guides meaning-making' (2013: 360). Observing how people approach artworks, they show how the ways objects are arranged impact on what visitors expect to experience and understand. Farkhatdinov (2014) supports these arguments empirically by revealing how visitors collaborate in various ways in order to make sense of and resolve their sense of puzzlement when visiting contemporary art exhibitions. Actor-network theory describes this process as the 'stabilization' of objects (Law, 2002). In other words, the museum experience is a continuous process of reducing one's uncertainty of action and meaning by stabilizing the relations that exist between the materialities of artworks, the exhibition environment, visitors and other participating actors. Just as Becker et al. (2006) argued that artworks are always in a state of flux, in the different stages of visitor encounter, there is no singular artwork. Artworks are always multiple in the sense that their meaning is never pre-ordained and fixed, and that meanings arise contingently in and through encounters between a variety of actors and objects.

In methodological terms, ethnographic studies emphasize the details of interaction in museums and galleries. Using observational techniques and conversation analysis in order to transcribe visitor behaviors, scholars seek to grasp tiny movements, the direction of gazes, fleeting conversations and passing sounds. Everything, no matter how apparently small or trivial, becomes an important element of the analysis. All these elements constitute the situational order of museum experience. To grasp all these sorts of details, scholars have adapted video-based ethnographic methods

(Heath et al., 2010), and this has equipped sociologists and other scholars with a method that can be used in almost any museum context. As Heath and others note, 'museums provide an opportunity to explore how the "affordances" and experience of objects and artifacts emerge within and are constituted through interaction, interaction that inextricably relies on a social organization which informs the very ways in which things are seen and experienced' (vom Lehn et al., 2001: 209). For cultural sociology the significance of such ethnographic studies is that they can discover how forms of interaction emerge at the micro-level within museum exhibitions. They reveal a multiplication of meanings through a context specific situation.

The micro-case study of museums demonstrates that cultural communication is mediated on many levels through the course of its production and reception. In this way, these studies show the multiple negotiations between cultural and social systems that artistic users and other mediators enter into in the course of experiencing an exhibition. Museum experience has its own specific dynamics, and forms of materiality and sociality. Cultural sociology benefits from analyses of these processes by being able to comprehend how objects come into social being both materially and meaningfully. As research objects, museums enable cultural sociology to follow culture in action. This approach does not stand alone, however, but necessarily must enter into dialogue with the earlier approaches to studying museums which we have already outlined. We must consider how cultural repertoires of power are intertwined with both human mediators and forms of micro-interactions, for all of these shape culture in profound ways.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS CULTURE AS A THEORY OF ACTION

In this chapter, we have discussed how the sociological study of museums reveals much about the specific workings of culture in social life. Theoretical and historical approaches from museum studies have demonstrated that culture is produced by framing mechanisms which produce and are produced by regimes of power and distinction. Empirical research on museum professionals demonstrates that culture shapes the nature of social interactions in museum spaces. And micro-level research on museum audiences shows that culture is also put to work by individuals in the process of meaning-making. Museums may

produce culture, but when one looks more closely, culture is not a passive script that is produced and reproduced but rather it is a resource for action that is drawn on and applied in myriad aesthetic circumstances. Consequently, all of these approaches must work together to understand how regimes of culture can be created, perpetuated and, most importantly, changed. In particular, further work should seek to examine how the micro-level uses of culture evident in visitor interactions affect larger, codified processes of mediation and cultural production.

The material, aesthetic and physical dimensions of social actions and interactions are central to the sociological interest in museums. While for the majority of cultural sociological approaches, bringing materiality into the forefront of research is a conceptual and methodological challenge, for cultural sociological studies of museums it is a crucial part of analysis. Museums are always material. The ways museum professionals and audiences organize their expertise and experiences include the arrangement of, and interactions with, material art objects in meaningful settings. General cultural sociology can benefit significantly from the ways that empirical studies of museums have addressed issues of materiality.

As Heinich (1998a) notes in 'What Art Does to Sociology', art is a particularly rich heuristic device for showing sociology its presuppositions and permitting its practitioners to rethink, and sometimes to abandon or to reverse, mental habits that are entrenched within the sociological tradition. Museums also can 'do things to sociology'. The different sociological approaches to studying museums that have been outlined here are themselves profoundly shaped by the nature of museums and art. Modern museums exhibiting major oil canvases in gilded frames certainly afford a different level of analysis than installation artworks that require touch or other visitor actions to 'activate' them according to the artist's intent (or not). Artworks and museums themselves produce and affect the kind of sociology that we can do with them. And the classification of museums reflects the organization of knowledge in a particular society. In a society where museums try to bring art and science, the everyday and the extraordinary, and culture and nature together, sociology can expect to encounter even more opportunities for cultural theorizing. Thus museums above all show that sociology in general, and cultural sociology in particular, must maintain an open-ended dialogue with changing practices of art and culture, and the museums and curatorial models that evolve to 'cope' with them. Future research in the cultural sociology of museums should focus on the place that museums occupy in the networks

of institutions which shape cultural production and aesthetic experience. As this chapter shows, there are many empirical studies in the sociology of the arts and cultural sociology that address this question, yet these fields still lack a unified theoretical framework which can integrate a number of approaches and provide a solid and robust understanding of culture(s) in action. The pursuit of such a framework constitutes a major task for sociologists to undertake in the near future.

NOTES

- 1 For a pragmatist interpretation of Fontaine (1917)'s artistic consecration, see Heinich (2012).
- 2 Attempts to establish a sociology of museums go back to the 1970s (e.g. Eisenbeis, 1972).
- 3 See the discussion of the etymology and intellectual history of the term 'museum' in Findlen (1989).
- 4 See, for example, Elliott and Loomis (1975) for the annotated bibliography of visitor studies which clearly represents a research field that dates back to the end of the 19th century. Some scholars also refer to Robinson's (1928) work on tracking visitors in museums. Earlier attempts to study and design museum experience are discussed by historians (Bennett, 1995; Duncan, 1995). Nowadays the field of visitor behavior studies is a legitimate field of applied research with its own journal (*Visitor Studies*) and a professional association (the Visitor Studies Association).

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