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**Title :**

Beyond the 'code': New aesthetic methodologies for the sociology of the arts<sup>1</sup>

Au-delà du 'code' artistique: Nouvelles méthodologies esthétiques pour la sociologie de l'art.

Más allá del código: Nuevas metodologías estéticas para la sociología del arte.

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**Abstract :**

Current methodological approaches to the sociological study of art worlds have contributed to the abandonment of the artistic oeuvre from the sociology of the arts. It is time to redress this shortcoming and recover the particularity of the art work as a key, material factor in how social actors construct and experience the social world within an artistic space. Focusing on the study of curators as artistic gatekeepers, this article outlines a new visual methodology for the sociology of the arts which incorporates the use of audiovisual technology and running commentary to develop the interview as a collaborative process between informant and researcher.

Les démarches méthodologiques existantes à la recherche sociologique du monde des beaux-arts ont contribué à abandonner l'oeuvre artistique de la sociologie de l'art. Il faut améliorer ce défaut afin de récupérer la particularité de l'oeuvre comme une base matérielle qui est essentielle à comprendre comment les acteurs sociaux construisent et connaissent le monde social dans un endroit artistique. En étudiant les conservateurs, comme les gardiens des barrières sociales, culturelles, et symboliques, cet article propose une nouvelle méthodologie visuelle pour la sociologie de l'art. Cette méthodologie va intégrer la technologie audiovisuelle et le commentaire suivi afin que l'entretien devienne un processus accompli en collaboration entre l'informateur et l'enquêteur.

Enfoques metodológicas actuales al estudio sociológico del mundo de arte han contribuido al abandono de la obra artística de la sociología de las artes. Es hora de reparar este defecto y recuperar la particularidad de las obras de arte como un factor principal y material con respecto a los agentes sociales que construyen y experimentan el mundo social dentro de un espacio artístico. Al enfocarse en el estudio de los conservadores como guardias artísticas, este artículo resume una nueva metodología visual para la sociología de las artes la que incluye el uso de tecnología audiovisual y comentario continuo para desarrollar la entrevista como un proceso de colaboración entre el informador y el investigador.

As a grounded discipline, a main concern of the sociology of the arts is to understand and address the bases of social distinction and how they are naturalized through the institutional consecration of specific artists and artworks, the maintenance of symbolic boundaries around art worlds and their audiences and the more personal conception of individual ‘taste’. In doing so, the discipline has undergone a broad transition in methodologies, each proposing a specific niche for sociological expertise in the arts. Early approaches focused on the interpretation of art works as social artefacts. Individuals and art institutions later began to interrogate quantitatively the viewing public, art markets and art producers, demonstrating the stratified existence of cultural consumption. More recently, qualitative and ethnographic methodologies were adopted to explore art as a symbolic system, used to mobilize meanings, values and feelings in a social context.

In “Art as a Cultural System”, Geertz notes that art seems hard to talk about: “If you have to ask what jazz is you are never going to get to know”.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, sociology has found art equally challenging to discuss. Large scale surveys of taste treat artistic objects as little more than social markers, while ethnographic research reduces the artistic oeuvre to an ordinary object mobilized in social action. Although the semiotic approach to art amends these shortcomings by taking art’s social meaning into account, it fails to examine how individuals orient to the artwork based on this meaning. Our working repertoire of methodologies is responsible, thus, for excluding the contextual particularity of the artistic oeuvre from the sociology of the arts.

The state of contemporary art demonstrates the urgent need to respond to this methodological quandary. Despite arguments that the 21<sup>st</sup> century ushered in a general ‘cultural declassification’, recognizing that anything can now be art is very different from asserting that *everything* can be. Rather than become obsolete, processes of boundary formation and preservation are particularly integral to artistic consecration and presentation in contemporary art, where assertions of value are increasingly open to challenge by publics, governments, funding bodies, and the media. There is, therefore, a great need for qualitative research in the sociology of the arts which interrogates the strategic role of the gatekeeper and refocuses on the art object, which is the very object of the performance of taste and said gatekeeping.

This essay will briefly examine the role of gatekeepers in contemporary art and the methodological questions that their work poses for sociology. In attempting to respond to these questions, I will outline an aesthetic methodology which utilizes audiovisual tools adapted from visual sociology, anthropology, technology studies and education. (Science and technology studies, in particular, have 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).<sup>3</sup> Through reference to my own research program working with curators in publicly-funded spaces of contemporary art in France and England, I will show that the goal of aesthetic sociology is not to “debunk” the exhibition, but rather to help sociology converse with aesthetic intelligence.

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<sup>2</sup> C. Geertz, "Art as a Cultural System" in *Local Knowledge: Further essays in interpretive anthropology*, dir. London, Fontana Press, 1993 [1983], p. 94-120, p. 94.

<sup>3</sup> H. Garfinkel, M. Lynch and E. Livingstone, "The work of a discovering science construed with materials from the optically discovered pulsar", *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 1981, p. 131-158.

### Gatekeeping as Tacit Knowledge in the Sociology of Art

DiMaggio and Douglas link the valorisation of certain art forms as cultural capital to professionals who define the institutional criteria for classification.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as the (public) arts are increasingly economically marginalized in many Western countries, such mediators play an ever more active role in shaping contemporary art's public image and dissemination.<sup>5</sup> Although galleries are the first step in the artistic gatekeeping process, publicly-funded spaces are subject to additional pressures for accountability and attracting 'middlebrow' visitors, transforming museum gatekeepers into managers focused on marketing a product rather than simply curating.<sup>6</sup> As a result, issues of decision-making in the publicly-funded exhibition implicate a myriad of tacit discourses including personal taste, policy concerns, and public expectations.

Yet, while museum studies has looked rigorously at issues of contradiction and display in museums, sociology has generally overlooked the thinking of gatekeepers, conflicts within institutional practices and the impact of situational dynamics on the logic of the gatekeeping process.<sup>7</sup> Gatekeepers, specifically curators, have been talked about in terms of how they shape artists' careers, national heritage and possibilities for audience participation, but not in how they actually *make* the decisions that drive these outcomes. If the museum is a barrier, as suggested by Zolberg, then the curator maintains that barrier through exhibition-making.<sup>8</sup> Thus, contemporary exhibition design is an 'end-curating' of sorts, when the curator(s) envision their audience and establish the final material and symbolic means for visitors to access or fail to access the exhibition (position of accompanying texts, labels and other perceptual barriers to entry). By discussing collecting practices rather than exhibition design, sociology has amassed little information on why artistic gatekeepers act as they do or what informs their practice.

Consequently, the majority of curatorial practice usually goes unsaid.<sup>9</sup> The work of such connoisseurs has been described as "mythmaking" by Willis,<sup>10</sup> as "symbolic" distinction by Moulin & Quemin,<sup>11</sup> as the "good eye" by Rogoff,<sup>12</sup> and as a self-

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<sup>4</sup> DiMaggio, P. (1982) "Cultural entrepreneurship in nineteenth-century Boston: The creation of an organizational base for high culture in America", *Media, Culture and Society*, 4, 33-50; M. Douglas, *Purity and danger*, New York, Routledge, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> J. Wolff, *The social production of art*, London, MacMillan, 1981.

<sup>6</sup> J. Alexander, P. Smith, "The strong program in cultural sociology" in *The handbook of sociological theory*, dir. J. Turner, New York, Kluwer, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> G. Rose, *Visual methodologies*, London, Sage, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> V. L. Zolberg, "Barrier or leveler? The case of the art museum" in *Cultivating differences: Symbolic boundaries and the making of inequality*, dir. M. Lamont, M. Fournier, Chicago, London, The University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 187-209.

<sup>9</sup> The notable exception is periods of artistic controversy, when the criteria for artistic judgement must be made explicit. S. C. Dubin, *Arresting images: Impolitic art and uncivil actions*, London, Routledge, 1992.

<sup>10</sup> P. Willis, *Common culture: Symbolic work at play in the everyday cultures of the young*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 1990.

<sup>11</sup> R. Moulin, A. Quemin, "La certification de la valeur de l'art : Experts et expertises", *Annales ESC*, 6, 6, 1993, p. 1421-1445.

<sup>12</sup> The "good eye" is a non-explicit way of describing paintings that fails to be methodologically or theoretically explicit. I. Rogoff, "Studying visual culture" in *The visual culture reader*, dir. N. Mirzoeff, London, Routledge, 1998, p. 24-36.

privileging intellectual exercise by Strassaldo.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Bourdieu points out that, “Everything seems to suggest that even among professional values, the criteria which define the stylistic properties of the ‘typical works’ on which all their judgements are based usually remain implicit”.<sup>14</sup> This idea of tacit knowledge 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 a documented and explanatory model of how culture enters into action. If something goes without saying because it comes without saying, then *when*, *how*, and *where* can it be said?

To begin to address these questions, 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. This approach is well adapted by Halle, who uses in-home interviews with respondents to investigate what they see when they look at abstract art.<sup>15</sup> However, his work merely models interaction between individuals and artworks rather than actually understanding what *goes on* between them. This deeper understanding is not easily accessible; as one curator stated, “I don’t know what I do so I don’t know how to teach it”. Yet, instead of abandoning further inquiry, sociology simply needs to develop new tools to take this more visual, *aesthetic* intelligence into account.

Aesthetic knowledge is unique from any other kind of knowledge because it is sensorially embodied, and is ultimately practical not intellectual. Thus, sociology must provoke the aesthetic intelligence of its informants, not their lay discourse. By asking ‘how?’, rather than ‘why?’ or ‘how do you account for this?’, sociologists can 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 which affords specific interactional opportunities that it affords.<sup>16</sup> In the next section I will present my research program, specifically constructed to interrogate sensorial reaction and intent in the microcosm of the exhibition installation.

### **The Curator in the Exhibition: Constructing an Aesthetic Methodology**

Focused, audiovisual research is wholly dependent on establishing a thorough, valid ethnographic understanding of the research context. To this end, I spent three months shadowing the curator(s) in each artistic space. Yet, it is impossible to witness the tenure of planning an exhibition, as ideas and even works are often chosen years before the exhibition’s opening. However, the ‘backstage’ moment of the exhibition’s installation provides a pivotal opportunity for investigating artistic gatekeeping in action, as the curators are then under the ‘occupational pressure’ of real-time decision-making.

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<sup>13</sup> Strassaldo notes that art increasingly requires an educated gaze versed in the intellectual art world, thus privileging its curators. R. Strassaldo, *Bemoaning the emperor's nakedness: The great Parisian debate on contemporary art*, [Conference Proceedings], ESA Arts Network, Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*, trans. R. Nice, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 64.

<sup>15</sup> D. Halle, " The audience for abstract art: Class, culture, and power " in *Cultivating differences: Symbolic boundaries and the making of inequality*, dir. M. Lamont, M. Fournier, Chicago, London, The University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 131-151.

<sup>16</sup> The concept of affordances is a rebuttal to the social construction of cultural artefacts. Artistic objects, in particular, afford certain activities and practices of interpretation based on their physical, musical, and discursive properties. T. DeNora, *Music in everyday life*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Although gatekeeping is usually discussed in terms of the initial selection of objects for exhibition, the original criteria responsible for choosing certain artists and artworks are often clarified and verbalized during the installation. Here, the curator first views their relationship to other artworks in the space and actively attempts to construct a frame for the exhibition as a whole. Additionally, the original plan of the exhibition of contemporary art is seldom realized upon execution; rather, the curator(s) will often change their mind about the inclusion or placement of artworks when physically confronted by them in the exhibition space. For instance, during one installation, the planned artworks simply did not ‘fill the gallery’, and the curator noted, “It looks like nobody’s done anything here”. This curator then returned to the artist’s catalogue to choose an additional work to include, one that had not been targeted for display prior.

Specifically, in concentrating the sociological lens on the visual, I aim to interrogate the role that unacknowledged (or tacit) criteria play in this purposeful meaning-creation. Every curator has a unique “signature” to his or her exhibition-making. While watching the installation to see how the curator frames the exhibition for the public, the researcher is also able to observe the performance of taste and other tacit criteria implicated in the final choice of how and which art works are displayed.

These aesthetic methodologies are three-fold:

### *I. Video and Audio Streaming*

As Collier points out in his seminal text on visual anthropology, a camera’s great value is that it creates a repetitive record, examining social interaction over several intervals without demanding considerable familiarity with a culture.<sup>17</sup> The use of video amplifies this value by capturing not only moments of social presentation and interaction, but the transformations from one moment to the next. According to Erickson & Shultz, the best way to get as much information as possible about what people do is by using video to produce such “behaviour records”.<sup>18</sup> For this reason, studies in education have often use video to reflect on the ways in which teachers or counsellors (as gatekeepers) produce social facts by engaging ‘tacit knowledge’ to inform less ‘objective’ measures of student performance.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, during the exhibition installation, I employ digital video and real-time microphone streaming in order to trace the aesthetic experience as it happens and capture the necessarily changing nature of contemporary plastic arts. As communication is cross-modal, spanning both gestures and language, I pair my video of the installation with a lapel microphone attached to a digital recorder which is worn by the curator during the installation. In this way, I can collect the audio data from the curator with perfect clarity, and have his or her running commentary on the installation process that I observe in the video. This allows for explicit links between the visual and verbal knowledge that informants wish to convey.

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<sup>17</sup> J. Collier, *Visual anthropology: Photography as a research method*, New York, Holt, Reinhardt & Winston, 1967, chap. 5.

<sup>18</sup> F. Erickson, J. Shultz, *The counselor as gatekeeper: Social interaction in interviews*, New York, London, Academic Press, 1982.

<sup>19</sup> A. V. Cicourel, J. I. Kitsuse, *The educational decision-makers*, New York, Bobbs-Merrill, 1963.

The main advantage of video in this context, as described by Pink, is that it simply allows the researcher to incorporate knowledge which is not verbally accessible.<sup>20</sup> One can begin to examine the context and basis of the installation situation by looking at the various *positionings*, or physical orientations of its participants, which signal its meaning.<sup>21</sup> 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. While fieldnotes are necessary to accompany video data, the latter includes a more detailed record of social action largely free from summaries and inferences about meaning and intent in the communication.

Above all, it is important to use the video camera as a tool of inquiry, rather than as a shield to hide behind; it must be mobile. Although I prefer to remain unobtrusive during the installation process, at times it is useful for the curator to demonstrate things for the camera to facilitate my understanding or to instruct me as to parts of the installation they want recorded in detail. As one curator pointed out, the only way to learn about installation practice is to follow other curators around and watch what they do. To take a quick example, while installing a series of photographs along one wall, another curator explained to me his notion of the “golden cut”, a certain fraction of a line segment which creates an aesthetically pleasing distance between two works. As an active agent in the installation, videotaping allows the researcher access to images of the process that are meaningful to its participants.

Although it is tempting to treat video as the epitome of thick description, video is a material artefact in its own right and thus must be situated in the ethnographic context and integrated with other methodologies and data. As Mehan points out, “the videotape is not the phenomenon per se, but is a theoretically motivated perspectival view”.<sup>22</sup> While more expansive than fieldnotes, it does share some of their limitations, as it documents only what it can visually capture through a local position. Furthermore, the video is not pure data in itself, but rather comprises *potential* data, which must be further processed and analyzed by the researcher.<sup>23</sup>

This analysis happens in two ways. First, I go through the data alone and create a brief visual transcript or map, highlighting areas of controversy, or where things appear to ‘go wrong’. (I’m reminded at this point of one installation when a sculpture arrived incomplete and the curator was forced to reconstruct it using found materials). I can also look at how curators ‘edit’ works, by changing details such as their title, spatial position, or context.<sup>24</sup> However, while it is tempting to draw conclusions from what one sees in the video, a video camera cannot distinguish between a ‘wink’ or a ‘twitch’.<sup>25</sup> I have thus

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<sup>20</sup> S. Pink, " Visual Methods " in *Qualitative Research Practice*, dir. C. Seale, G. Gobo, J. F. Gubrium, D. Silverman, London, Sage, 2003, p. 391-406.

<sup>21</sup> R. P. McDermott, K. Gospodinoff, J. Aron, “Criteria for an ethnographically adequate description of concerted activities and their contexts”, *Semiotica*, 1978, p. 245-275.

<sup>22</sup> H. Mehan, *Learning lessons: Social organization in the classroom*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1979, p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> F. Erickson, J. Shultz, *op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> Becker first labeled artistic gatekeepers as ‘editors’, due to their working ability to alter artworks in the exhibition setting. H. S. Becker, *Art worlds*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982.

<sup>25</sup> M. Banks, *Visual methods in social research*, London, Sage, 2001, p. 115.

found it much more useful to use the video in a second way, as an interview tool to further examine how tacit assumptions are engaged during the installation.

## II. The Video-Elicitation Interview

Sociology has long understood that in ethnographic research, even when activities seem slow and mundane, something is always happening.<sup>26</sup> Since video affords multi-stage analysis, there are repeated opportunities to reflexively unpack this passive action in a collaborative interview setting. Specifically, I use the video-taped installation to build upon the photo-elicitation interview from anthropology. The photo-elicitation interview, first described by Collier, is based on the fact that the researcher who produced the video realizes that he knows little or nothing about the cultural information contained in the image.<sup>27</sup> This technique thus helps allow the researcher to better capture the lived reality of the informant by encouraging the informant to verbally reflect on his or her own activities.

This methodology was greatly improved upon by educational studies, which incorporate the use of video.<sup>28</sup> In asking students and academic counsellors to reflect on video of their counselling sessions, these studies succeed 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. As Erickson & Shultz point out, “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” (their italics).<sup>29</sup>

By allowing the informant to stop the video when they see something they would like to discuss, I begin to isolate what is meaningful to them, rather than what is interesting to me. The video is the main stimulus for the interview, setting up an atmosphere for reflection on what usually goes unsaid.

Using this method, one common internal contradiction emerged from the case studies concerning Bourdieu’s thesis of misrecognition.<sup>30</sup> As one curator watched himself 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”. In other words, this curator disagreed with Bourdieu’s thesis that artworks are given cultural value based on the misrecognition of their status as commodity objects; rather, it is because the artworks *are* composed of mass-produced materials that they are

<sup>26</sup> P. Atkinson, "Performance and rehearsal: The ethnographer at the opera" in *Qualitative research practice*, dir. C. Seale, G. Gobo, J. F. Gubrium, D. Silverman, London, Sage, 2003, p. 94-06.

<sup>27</sup> Collier, *op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> A. V. Cicourel, K. H. Jennings, S. H. M. Jennings, K. C. W. Leiter, R. MacKay, H. Mehan, D. R. Roth, *Language use and school performance*, New York, Academic Press, 1974.; F. Erickson, J. Shultz, *op. cit.*; H. Mehan, A. Hertweck, J. L. Meihls, *Handicapping the handicapped: Decision making in students' educational careers*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1986.

<sup>29</sup> F. Erickson, J. Shultz, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>30</sup> P. Bourdieu, "The production of belief: Contribution to an economy of symbolic goods" in *Media, culture & society: A critical reader*, dir. R. Collins, J. Curran, N. Garnham, P. Scannell, P. Schlesinger, C. Sparks, London, Sage, 1986.

able to create such strong possibilities for meaning making. 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.

Furthermore, members of social groups, such as art worlds, will interact and signal each other to maintain a common definition of the situation. According to McDermott, Gospodinoff & Aron, members will formulate or refer to their context through their behaviour, organize their postures to signal the context for behaviour, orient to their concerted behaviour, and hold each other accountable for proceeding in ways consistent with the context for their concerted activity.<sup>31</sup> But, as this often goes unsaid, the interesting thing to look out is *how* curators, artists, and other installation participants signal to each other, which is captured on video. Then when looking at the video with the informant(s), the researcher can begin to pinpoint reasons behind why they do what they do and what they were thinking at the time, and in this way, begin to explore the tacit meaning the context is based on.

To clarify this point, during one installation the curator constantly stepped back from the works to stand in the gallery entrance. In watching this, the curator paused the video and reported that he believes that “When you enter the room as a visitor, you get an initial glimpse of the entire exhibition out of the corner of your eye and you feel, unconsciously, ‘that this is right. . . this works’”. In this way, asking the curators to reflect upon their actions, rather than attempting to independently deduce their motivations, allows the construction of a more accurate picture of what is involved in artistic meaning-formation.

### *III. The Interview as Running Commentary in the Exhibition Space*

Though immensely useful, the video-elicitation interview leaves lingering questions with the researcher, necessitating a further follow-up interview with the informant(s). Thus, the use of audio/video methodologies must be complemented by the regeneration of Denzin’s interactionist interview.<sup>32</sup> While this interview is informal, it must be carefully structured in order to, as I discuss above, provoke the aesthetic intelligence of the curator. The tool of the interview as running commentary, enabled in the present tense, avoids leading informants into the passive exercise of ingrained knowledge or explanation of their activities.<sup>33</sup> The running commentary breaks the ice of art discourse and places us in a more somatic mode of conversation.

In the real-time meeting, I can analyze which resources and discourses are being pointed to by the curators through examining how they perform their work to me in the interview setting. If there was a specific decision that they discussed in the photo-elicitation interview, I can now inquire about that and examine *how* the curators defend or rationalize their decisions. We can also discuss how the curator carries their rationale around with them and how much freedom they have to enact it in the institution.

According to my informants, the role of the contemporary art curator is to set up a framework to enable people to make meaning on their own terms. This is evidently done in a variety of ways, as demonstrated through the following exhibition. This exhibition

<sup>31</sup> R. P. McDermott, K. Gospodinoff, J. Aron, *op. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> N. K. Denzin, *Interpretive Interactionism*, Newbury Park, Sage, 1989.

<sup>33</sup> The author gratefully acknowledges Robert Witkin, The University of Exeter, for his input on this point.

text described the exhibition as dealing with “structure and form in space” and the opening talk discussed “the presence of form and the bodily relation to that”. Likewise, in a formal interview with the curator, he spoke about Paul Valerie’s existentialist 3-Body theory, and how the exhibition referred to the conflict between the first and third body. However, the instant that we began speaking in the present-tense, the exhibition became, “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”. Engaging the curator informant in a more present-tense, aesthetic mode of discourse elucidates entirely new planes of meaning for the exhibition, as well as new insights into the unspoken factors that influence its installation in that specific manner.

Above all, this post-installation interview must take place in the gallery setting and must again be videotaped in order to include visual cues and references by the curator. Speaking with the curator in front of (and often around) the artworks in exhibition provides a final layer of data about what meanings were planned by the curator and which spontaneously arose during the installation process. In one such interview, the curators paused before two artworks in one corner of the space and said, ‘We didn’t intend this, but this grouping of works 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 clarifies how the curator envisions the output of his or her decisions, as well as how the public may begin to make meaning with the work(s).

#### *IV. Additional Reflections on the use of Aesthetic Methodologies*

The development of any methodology necessitates a parallel development of checks for validity and reliability. While the video-elicitation interview allows the researcher to verify his or her “visual map” with the informant, peer review is also possible by cross-referencing specific video experts with the related interview excerpts and offering them for external review. As different researchers conducting video-elicitation and post-installation interviews could influence different interpretations of the artistic meaning-making and gate-keeping process, an emphasis on allowing the curator to choose video footage and to guide the discussion is imperative in guaranteeing transferable data.

Additionally, visual documentation is particularly sensitive as it offers increased possibilities for misrepresenting informants. It is, thus, extremely important to detail specific uses of video footage and stills in the consent form and allow each informant the opportunity to reserve footage from publication or presentation. Above all, common sense discretion must be exercised when using footage, and care must be taken to avoid showing footage including individuals who have not provided consent, such as gallery technicians or others who may come and go during the installation.

Finally, curators often collaborate with each other or with artists in installing exhibitions. Indeed, group interviews are incredibly useful for stimulating issues of interest and prompting informants to engage each other in question. However, because these partners often ‘finish each other’s sentences’, it is important to interview each curator separately as well, to minimize the amount of assumed detail.

Used in isolation, aesthetic methodologies provide immensely detailed descriptive studies. However, following a comparative approach, they can equally be utilized to develop theoretical analyses explaining differences in curatorial behaviour between

certain policy contexts, curatorial generations or audience situations. Additionally, researchers can begin to apply the knowledge gleaned from visual, interactionist research to *test* what they see by focusing on conversations between informants, as well as artistic controversies in the media.

### **Conclusion: Towards Informant Collaboration**

This research program adopts techniques from visual sociology to collect new types of data which have not been previously available to the sociology of art. In particular, the use of these aesthetic methodologies demonstrates the extent to which visual cues and visual knowledge cannot be translated into verbal arguments, as well as elucidates the difference between feeling and reading an exhibition. The curator spans both worlds in creating the exhibition; they ‘feel it’ during the installation, and then they ‘read it’ when they re-present it to the audience by situating it in a historical perspective. Sociologists tend to conflate the two by asking, “what is it about?”. In exploring how curators manifest distinctions between the art objects he or she has chosen, the use of audiovisual technologies helps to further our understanding of the dynamic construction and performance of taste centred on the particularity of the artistic oeuvre, rather than focusing merely on the structural workings of the art world.

The aim of this research project is not to demystify art; intellectualized, art world discourse is very often an individual’s own way of making meaning. Rather, I aim to understand the multi-layered process by which meaning is created in art, in an attempt to bring in the sensuous, physical affordances of artworks to the discussion. Traditional survey or large-scale interview methodologies tend to record the meaning that an art world gives to a work on a macro-level, through processes of value concretization. In contrast, ethnographic interview methodologies focus on the micro-level meaning of an artwork as it is suspended in social interaction. However, the use of reflexive video and present-tense interviews elicits the unspoken influences on gatekeeping, which bridge the structure/agency duality common to the sociology of the arts by aiding in the framing of the artwork in a certain sphere of meaning.

The most important outcome of these aesthetic methodologies is that they aid reflexivity and allow researchers and informants to engage with each other in the common pursuit of understanding. In fact, the very use of audiovisual technology, which can be seen as invasive and distracting, requires mutual collaboration in order to be successful. Fortunately, I’ve found that the use of *digital* audio and video capturing devices allow me to play back images to informants on the spot, generating trust and instant feedback, as well as facilitating pre-publication editing of audio and video transcripts with the informants.<sup>34</sup>

As it is ingrained in context, visual sociology is a useful device to avoid scientific colonialism, defined by Hymes as assuming that the centre of acquiring knowledge about a people is located elsewhere than where they are.<sup>35</sup> Even though Mead and Foucault may think that to watch someone is to learn about them,<sup>36</sup> visual research is better seen as an active and collaborative project between image-makers (the researcher) and subjects (the informants), as long as the informant has the ability to take ownership of the video’s

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<sup>34</sup> S. Pink, *op. cit.*

<sup>35</sup> D. Hymes, *Reinventing anthropology*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1972.

<sup>36</sup> M. Banks, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

contents. Combining video data with elicitation interviews ensures that the anthropologist's restructuring of the events is in synch with how the participants think of it, or rather that what the researcher locates in analysis is also the phenomenon that orients participants.<sup>37</sup>

Above all, current research in the sociology of the arts must be combinatory: it must not be purely observational, but integrated with micro-ethnographic case studies, quantitative methodologies, textual and discourse analysis, and visual representations of data to support theoretical conclusions. A thorough methodology must express dialogic, deconstructive, and contextual validity; it must understand lived realities, unearth mediating discourses, and do so in the greater socio-political context of the research itself. As Geertz points out, participation in art is participation in one of the sectors of the general system of symbolic forms called culture.<sup>38</sup> Thus, with an understanding of the perceptual, present-tense, and affective formation and exercise of taste in art worlds, the sociology of art will be better equipped to inform policy and education, explain ongoing practices of social exclusion, and aid in understanding the changing role of the arts on a wider sociocultural level.

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<sup>37</sup> H. Mehan, 1979, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>38</sup> C. Geertz, *op. cit.*

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