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**Configuring reception:  
(dis-)regarding the ‘spectator’ in museums and galleries**

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## **Abstract**

Despite the growing sociological interest in the object, and the long-standing tradition in the humanities and social sciences with the creation of art and artefacts, there is relatively little research concerned with how people in ordinary day to day circumstances explore and respond to exhibits in museums and galleries. In this paper, we address the conduct and interaction of visitors to museums and galleries and consider how they examine and experience objects and artefacts in collaboration with each other. In particular, we address the ways in which one participant shapes, through gesture and talk, how those they are with look at and respond to exhibits. The paper is based on the analysis of audio-visual recordings gathered in museums and galleries both in the UK and abroad.

Keywords: objects, museums and galleries, social interaction, art

While guidebooks may suggest what a visitor should look at, and even the route that he or she should follow - and the meanings that the single individual might read into the objects encountered along the way - will only rarely coincide with the strategic thinking of the Museum's planners. How a visitor interacts with artworks and their settings is determined by personal needs, associations, biases, and fantasies rather than by institutional recommendations. In considering this history - that of response to, and reception of, the collections - the issue is not with the Museum defined by its official aims and aspirations, but with how it is reconstituted in the individual imagination.

(Baker, 1998: 18-19)

### **Introduction**

There is a curious lack of academic interest in the ways in which people examine and experience objects and artefacts in museum and galleries. Curious, since, as a field of investigation, it would appear to lie at the heart of the substantive and analytic commitments of a number of disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences. In contemporary research in the history of art for example, with its growing emphasis on reception theory and the influence of scholars such as Baxandall (1985) and Shearman (1992) one may have imagined that alongside their rich and insightful historical descriptions of the development and anticipated experience of artwork, that an anthropology of the contemporary spectator may have emerged. More surprising perhaps is the absent viewer in the sociology of art, which, with its concern with the socially organised circumstances in which art is produced (Becker, 1982) and exhibited (Macdonald, 2002) has shown little

interest in how ordinary people in daily circumstances look at and experience artwork or any other objects or artefacts in museums and galleries for that matter.

The relative absence of research that examines the actions and activities of people such as visitors confronting art and other objects and artefacts in museums and galleries would seem unfortunate. It might for example throw some light on the contemporary relevance and experience of artwork and provide some interesting insights into the significance and affect of certain pictorial or artistic conventions. It might provide some insights into the ways in which material resources such as labels, gallery notes, audio guides and the like inform the ways in which people select, approach and discuss exhibits and organise their conduct within exhibitions. It could contribute to an understanding of 'practical aesthetics', that is, the ways in which people, in ordinary circumstances, discriminate, evaluate and experience objects and artefacts in museums and galleries. It might also provide an opportunity to reconsider the psychological, cognitive and in some cases mentalistic conception of experience which has had, for some unfortunately (Puttfarken, 2000), a pervasive influence on our understanding of the perception of art and indeed on the creation of artwork itself (see contributions in, Goguen, 1999; 2000). Most importantly perhaps, it may provide an opportunity to explore the ways in which the experience of exhibits in museums and galleries emerges in and through social interaction, interaction between people, and to consider how people, in collaboration with others, reflexively constitute the sense and significance of objects and artefacts.

The interest in the cognitive and the underlying commitment to the individual and the psychological, rather than the collective and the social,

has had important influence on a body of applied research, known as visitor studies. A substantial range of studies have been undertaken that aim to assess and enhance the effectiveness of exhibits in attracting and holding the visitor's attention and in communicating information to the visitor (Shettel 1973; 2001). Research of visitor behaviour largely concentrates on the relationship between the individual visitor and the exhibit. It primarily addresses the cognitive response of the visitor and how the ways in which response is shaped by the characteristics of the exhibit and associated phenomena such as labels, the structure of the exhibition and the like (Falk and Dierking, 2000; Hein, 1998). The tension between perception and intrinsic characteristics or affordances of the object or artefact, that underlies much of the work in cognitive science, is reflected by the concepts of 'holding power' and 'dwell time'; concepts that are key criteria for the evaluation of exhibits. The commitment to the individual, coupled with a methodological orientation that has primarily relied on questionnaires, interviews and more recently focus groups, has led to a relative disregard, not just of the social, but the events that happen at the exhibit face itself. There are a number of important exceptions and in recent years we have witnessed the emergence of small number of studies that have begun to examine talk and discussion that arises amongst visitors to museums and galleries (Crowley, 2000; Leinhardt et al., 2002; Lucas et al., 1986; McManus, 1994). The interplay of talk with the examination of the exhibit, and the visual conduct and orientation of the participants, remains the stuff of experiencing objects in museums and galleries, remains sadly, neglected.

These applied studies of visitors in museums and galleries have largely emerged independently of developments within sociology and the important contribution of scholars such as Bourdieu (1990, 1991) and Luhmann

(2000). Here, the social and institutional character of art, and the experience of art, is richly revealed, and yet the conduct and interaction through which people examine and encounter exhibits in museums and galleries remains epiphenomenal. Consider for example Bourdieu's splendid essays on the comprehension and meaning of art and the ways in which experience relies upon cultural codes acquired through socialization in families and at school. The perception and communication of art distinguishes social classes and contributes to the reproduction of social structures. Bourdieu, like others, demonstrates the socially organised, institutionally preserved, character of art and our ability to appreciate and experience art. It provides an important counter to the individualistic and cognitive models that underpin theories of (the perception of) art. How these socially organised ways of seeing are accomplished and sustained through practical actions and interaction remain disregarded, and more generally in sociology, despite the growing interest in art and museums, there are few studies of how people encounter and appreciate art in practice and invoke generalised dispositions and attitudes in the highly contingent circumstances of a visit to a museum or gallery.

It is worth mentioning one further area of research that bears upon the issues addressed in this essay. A growing body of research within media studies has underscored the importance of taking the situation in which people experience content, seriously. It has directed analytic attention towards practical circumstances in which people, for example, watch television and demonstrated the ways in which an 'audience' embodies a complex array of different forms of participation and involvement. These studies reveal for example the ways that people interweave listening to and watching television with a range of simultaneous activities and how practical constraints and contingent demands within the domestic environment have a

profound impact on practicalities of 'reception' and 'response' to media. Media and audience studies have increasingly shifted the focus of their research, from the individual de-contextualised recipient, to address the practices in and through which 'content' is received, shaped and experienced, within the practicalities of ordinary day to day activities within settings such as the home (Ang 1995; Lull 1990; Silverstone 1994) or the cinema (Srinivas 2002). Our own research on museums and galleries reflects these developments and is concerned with understanding how the practical experience of exhibits and exhibitions, including art work, is inextricably embedded within the practical circumstances in which it occurs.

In this paper, we would like to begin to address one or two of these issues. Drawing on video-based field studies, ethnographies, of conduct and interaction in a number of museums and galleries, we consider how visitors explore and experience objects and artefacts in collaboration with each other. In particular, we focus on the ways in which one participant shapes how those s/he is with examine and respond to an exhibit, and how their 'response' creates opportunities for exploration and discussion. In contrast to conventional models of the spectator and aesthetic experience, we are interested in exploring the ways in which the perception and understanding of exhibits, including works of art, arises in and through socially organised interaction, and how that interaction, has a profound relevance to the ways in which an aesthetic experience is 'created'. Underlying these concerns, is an interest in revealing the ways in which the participants' bodies, and in particular their bodily and spoken conduct, feature in the perception and experience of exhibits in museums and galleries.

The examples are drawn from a substantial corpus of video recordings and field observations of conduct and interaction in museums and galleries. The corpus includes materials from art and decorative art museums such as the V&A, the Tate Britain and Modern, the Musee des Beaux Arts Rouen and the Science Museum London as well as science centres such as Green's Mill (Nottingham) and Explore@Bristol. In this paper, we have chosen a small number of fragments from the corpus to examine how people approach and examine objects and artefacts and in particular to reveal how they configure how others, both those they are with and those who just happen to be in the same space, examine and respond to particular exhibits.

### **Discriminating objects**

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. Both the viewer and the artwork are removed from the context, the situation in which they encounter an exhibit. These theories rest upon the idea that particular exhibits, be they works of art, artefacts, or even scientific equipment, embody intrinsic qualities or affordances that figure perception, attract visitors and hold their attention (see for example Screven, 1976; Shettel, 1968a; Shettel, 1968b). These theories pervade studies of museum and visitors, just as they underlie certain approaches to aesthetics and the reception of art. In consequence, the contingent and situational character of what people chose to look at and how they look at it, remains disregarded, or worse still, as Baker (1998) suggests, is treated as a form of deviance from an institutionally defined path or pattern. Yet, in visiting museums and galleries, the very presence and conduct of others, whether they are people one is with, or others who just happen to be in the same space, may be

consequential not only to the ways in which one navigates exhibitions but also to how one examines a work of art or artefact.

It is perhaps worthwhile considering an example. It is drawn from a display of porcelain in the 18th century section of the British Galleries at the V&A. The display includes a conventional glass cabinet containing examples of Chinese and British porcelain. Below the cabinet, on a shallow shelf, are a number of actual fragments that visitors can touch to feel differences in the quality of the manufacture. We join the action, as two women, Annie and Freda, who happen to be looking at the display at the same time, begin talking to each other. (All transcripts are simplified for ease of reading).

Fragment 1 - (Annie and Freda)

F: I was trying to see whether they, any of these, (.)  
you have seen these before called Bellamine Jugs:?  
(.)jugs: (.) because there was a Cardinal Bellamine  
which they (.....).  
A: Oh really::  
. .  
A: Yes all these bits isn't that good  
F: Yer:::  
A: look at that.  
(1.2)  
A: Hehheh

Freda begins by explaining what she is trying to find in the cabinet. As she says 'I was trying to see...' - she points to a particular object in the display cabinet. The gesture is momentarily held over the surface of the cabinet and Annie moves closer, but does not immediately turn towards the object. Freda, slightly orients towards Annie, and finding that she is not looking at the object, transforms the projected course of her utterance.- She refashions what she is about to say- turning it into a question;- 'you've seen these called Bellamine: jugs?' rather than a statement'. With the restart, she thrusts the

gesture back and forth towards the object, providing Annie with a more specific reference and encouraging her to look at the object. With the thrusting gesture, Annie turns and looks at the jug.

Freda shapes Annie's examination of the porcelain collection, encouraging her to examine a particular object, and providing a provisional sense of what it might be and the provenance of its name. Freda's actions emerge in the light of Annie's conduct and her initial realignment to the cabinet but failure to look at or find the jug. Freda upgrades the demands on Annie to look at the object in question, transforming the statement in question and demarcating the jug with her gesture (also see Goodwin 1981 and Heath 1986). Through her talk and gesture and its progressive delineation of the object, Freda successfully encourages Annie both to look at the object and respond to its characterisation- with 'oh really'.



A: I like to look at (these)  
 F: I was (trying) to see whether the(y) <any of these (.) (you've^)^ seen these before called Bella:mine: jugs:?  
 A: Oh really  
 ...  
 ...

Moments later, Annie turns away from the jugs, looks down, and moves to touch one of the porcelain fragments on the shelf below. Freda notices the gesture, and immediately grasps the very object that Annie has tentatively approached. Annie takes hold of the adjoining fragment and comments 'yes all these bits, isn't that good'. She then goes on to point out other pieces.



A: yes all these bits,  
isn't that good

The fragment begins to reveal how the participants ongoingly establish co-orientation towards particular objects and encourage each other to look at and appreciate exhibits in specific ways. In the case at hand, one participant, namely Freda, selectively discriminates the collection of objects within the cabinet, and encourages her co-participant to look at, and examine, the exhibit in question. Annie's re-orientation, yet apparent unfamiliarity with the object, engenders Freda's elaboration and naming of the object. Freda's gestures, and her bodily and visual orientation, provide resources through which Annie discovers and examine the relevant object, just as her subsequent shift to the porcelain fragments, encourages Freda to discover the pieces.

The relevant objects, and their momentary sense and significance, emerges moment by moment, within a complex negotiation, through which the participants become momentarily aligned towards a specific exhibit, a jug and a fragment of porcelain. The discovery of the objects and their significance arises within the interaction and the contingent and emerging contributions of the participants. What is seen, how it is looked at, and its momentary sense and significance is reflexively constituted from within the interaction of the participants themselves.

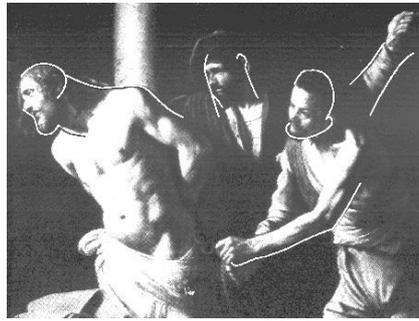
### **Transposing action to the object**

There is a long-standing debate within the psychology of art and picture theory concerning the organisation of perception and in particular the extent to which (common) ways of seeing derive from formal and invariant characteristics of the (organisation of the) object or highly structured cognitive processes (see for example Gibson, 1986 or Neisser, 1976). Even more radical sociological theories of art, retain a correspondence model of the perception of the object, despite their commitment to the socially structured, historical and institutional context which informs the ways in which art and artwork is “decoded” (Bourdieu, 1990). The richness of the insights generated by these very different bodies of work should not be underestimated. However, to a large extent, their theoretical and programmatic commitments inevitably lead to a disregard of what the people do when they are ‘confronted’ with art and artefacts when visiting museums and galleries. These ordinary circumstances, the practical everyday situation of actions and interaction are treated as epiphenomenal; our perception and encounter with art and artefacts deriving from and arising through some pre-existent processes, conventions, models and schemata.

In the initial fragment, we can begin to see how visitors constitute relevant features of the exhibits in and through, their interaction with each other. The participants' talk and gestures, their bodily conduct and visual orientation, serve to establish, if only momentarily, mutual orientation. They provide the resources through which the object is discovered, seen, and discussed.

The participants' gestures are largely concerned with establishing a common focus of visual alignment. The objects themselves, the Bellamine Jug, or the porcelain fragments, momentarily become the focus of mutual concern. The gestures and talk align and realign the visual orientation, but leave the objects intact, 'uncontaminated' by the bodily conduct of the participants. In other cases, the bodily conduct of the participants, even gestures that might principally be thought of as pointing at or referring to an 'object', do more than simply discriminate a seemingly pre-existent environment of objects and artefacts. In various ways, they infuse, flavour, create, the encounter with the object, giving it a particular, occasioned, sense and significance.

Consider the following fragment. It is drawn from a small Caravaggio exhibition in the Musée des Beaux Arts in Rouen. The principal work in the exhibition is *The Flagellation of Christ*. The exhibition notes, contained on a portable A4 card, describe how Caravaggio incised the canvass with his palette knife to provide an outline of the main compositional structure of the picture before painting. In this painting it is the outline of the figures that is of particular significance. We join the scene as a young man, Emile, approaches the painting with his father and mother. He has the gallery notes in hand and with his parents attempts to discover the original incisions on the canvass. The area of particular interest is the Emile's utterance 'Mets toi par d(e)ssous (.) tu la vois (.) avec la bouche' roughly translated as 'put yourself underneath, see there with the mouth' and the father's response 'ah ouais:: (.) ouais ouais' 'ah yes, yes yes yes'.



## Fragment 2 - Musee des Beaux Arts Rouen (Emile and his parents)

E: Mets toi par d(e)ssous (.) tu la vois (.2) avec la bouche (0.6)	E: Place yourself underneath (.) you see (.2) there with the mouth (0.6)
F: <u>ahhh:: ouais::^</u> (.) ouais: ouais: *ouais.	F: ahhh:: yes (.) Yes yes yes
E: (La) (.) tu vois comme ca	E: there you see like that
M: Mais c'est quoi^	M: But what is it?
E: Y'a aussi (une incision) mais en fait c'est...	E: You see there is in fact (an incision) ...

They look at the picture for a few moments. Emile then utters 'Mets toi par...' (put you by..), crouches, and raises his right hand. By 'tu la vois', (you to see), his father has stepped forward. As the father steps forward, his son raises and lowers his hand, encouraging the father to imitate his own crouching posture and point of view. The father adopts a parallel orientation and view-point to his son.

Emile cocks his finger as if to point at the picture, but holds the gesture, mid-flight, until the father has adopted the relevant orientation. As the father crouches and turns towards the painting, Emile thrusts his pointing finger upwards demarcating the incision around the mouth and head of Christ on the canvass. The father follows the gesture, exclaiming 'ah ouais..'; - the rising intonation of the exclamation almost mimicking the rising gesture. The gesture reaches its acme towards the top of the canvass, as the father's exclamation reaches its crescendo.



E: Mets toi par d(e)...

ahhh:: ouais:

Having secured the father's discovery, and appreciation, of the incision that outlines the mouth and head of Christ, Emile progressively reveals further incisions. As the gesture achieves its initial acme, it accelerates with a flourish, revealing the incisions over the neck and shoulders of Christ and the figures in the painting. The father's 'ouais' are uttered at specific junctures during the staggered production of the gesture; successive appreciations of the distinct revelations of Carravaggio's inscriptions. As the pointing finger trails away towards the right hand side of the picture, where the lines become less apparent, the father delivers a whispered 'ouais'.



F: ouais:: ouais:: ouais::

Emile shapes the way his father views the picture and enables him to discover the incised lines created by the artist; lines that might otherwise remain invisible. Emile's instructions, coupled with his bodily alignment and gesture, encourage his father to adopt a particular perspective; a standpoint that foreshadows the revelation of the inscriptions. In turn, the father's standpoint provides the resources to enable the son to create a series of gestures that allow his father to discover, see and experience for himself,

the incised lines on the canvas. The gestures,- the moving, pointing finger progressively highlights particular elements of the painting, rendering visible, the delicate, unobtrusive blemish, below the surface of the painting. The gestures are finely designed to enable the father to examine the painting whilst simultaneously allowing the moving gesture to demarcate the incised lines; the gesture overlays and progressively reveals the lines. It neither conceals the object, nor draws attention to its own operation, but delicately reveals 'intrinsic' features of the object. It renders these fine features visible whilst masking, or glossing its own production as it moves across the surface of the painting revealing the incised lines.

The father's discovery and appreciation of the incisions on the left of the painting, in turn provide the son with the opportunity and encouragement to demarcate further incisions, which in turn elicit recognition and inform the gesture's subsequent articulation. The gesture emerges, and is shaped within the course of its articulation, with regard to the visible and vocal conduct of the father. His actions, are seen and heard as responsive, not to the gesture, but to the incisions themselves, as they are progressively emerge, by virtue of the flowing gesture.

The gestures however do not simply point to, or demarcate, aspects of the painting. The incisions are not only slight, but at various parts of the painting invisible. The continuity of the lines has to be inferred from the fragmented visible elements. Emile's gestures exaggerate the incisions and give them a continuity and flow they do not 'actually' have. So for example as the pointing finger begins to 'trace' the lines that surround the figures in the painting, it elongates the actual distance and curvature of the line, making it more marked, more dramatic. The gestures enliven, give vivacity

to, elements of the painting, which might otherwise remain unnoticed or prove commonplace. The father, with his ‘ahhh:: ouais::^’, provides a splendidly appreciative response; displaying a sense of discovery and awe, that respects the integrity and character of the gestures and the ways in which Emile, almost magically, renders the seemingly invisible, visible.

The perception and experience of the painting emerges, progressively, within the interaction. 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. The participants' bodies, and in particular the orientation and gesture of the son, overlay, frame and animate selective elements of the picture itself; they provide a way of seeing, discovering and responding to the picture or better, particular features of its production.

It would seem inappropriate to suggest that abstract perceptual principals, cognitive models, or socially structured dispositions predetermine the perception and experience of the picture. Rather it emerges, progressively through a complex configuration of action, bodily and spoken, through which the participants come to discover, see and experience the painting in particular ways. While it is Emile who figures the discovery of the painting, his actions are transposed to the picture, and the father's reaction, of awe and appreciation, is responsive to the object itself, rather the ways in which he has been encouraged to look at it. The father responds to the painting, as if the object had rendered itself manifest, independently of the son's actions.

### **Transposing the object to the body**

We can begin to see therefore how participants render visible particular aspects of an exhibit and, in so doing, establish relevant ways of responding, or reacting, to the object or artefact. The ways in which they shape the co-participant's orientation to the painting or artefact cannot be disassociated from the ways in which they encourage the participant to react to the object in a particular way. The perception of the exhibit emerges within the interactional and sequential framework through which it is rendered visible and relevant. The bodily conduct and talk of the participants provide the resources through which the sense of the object is reflexively constituted and by which it gains local interactional significance.

Action is entailed, or embodied, within the 'object'. The response of the participant is a reaction to an aspect of the object itself rather than conduct or characterisation of the co-participant. To use an overused term, the interaction is 'mediated' through the jugs, fragments or painting.

In some cases, the body itself, or rather, bodily action becomes a focal point. The object, or better, the action, is transposed to the body of the spectator.

Consider the following fragment. It is drawn from Explore@Bristol, a new science centre that focuses on the workings of the human body and mind. The fragment is drawn from an exhibit that illustrates the function of the heart and circulation of the blood around the body. It consists of a plastic heart that when squeezed sends a blood-like liquid up a vertical tube to a reservoir. The blood then returns down a parallel tube to the heart below. We join the action as the mother of a toddler illustrates the operation of the exhibit to her young son.

### Fragment 3 – Heart Spurt, Explore@Bristol - Mother and Son

M: Squee:ze  
(1.0)  
M: And that moves the blood up and then it moves down  
again  
(0.4)  
M: Squ::eeze it up  
(0.5)  
M: That's just what our heart does (.) It squeezes the  
blood through our bodies  
(1.4)  
{M. leaves the exhibit}

The mother squeezes the plastic heart, and with the utterance 'and that moves the blood up...', points to the movement of the blood up the tube towards the reservoir above and down again. The toddler grasps the heart. The mother places her hand over the child's and uttering "squee:ze it up", encourages the child to help her send the liquid around the system. Once again she gestures alongside the tube, encouraging the child to watch the blood rise and fall. He continues to look at the reservoir. The movement of the blood passes unnoticed.



M: Squeeze



M: And that moves the blood up

Failing to encourage the child to look at the blood circulating the system, the mother transforms the ways in which she attempts to engage her child. With, 'that's just what our heart does', the mother turns her body away from the exhibit and faces the child. By the word 'our', she is bending down and clasping her own chest with both hands. - The child continues to look at the

reservoir, grasping the plastic heart. His mother takes her open hands, positions them close to the child's face and simulates squeezing, by opening and closing her hands. As she says 'through our bodies' she sweeps her right hand around the right hand side of her body; the part of her body which is closest to the child's alignment towards the exhibit. Sadly, the dramatic illustration, through which aspects of the exhibit are momentarily overlaid on the mother's own body, pass unnoticed.



M: That's just what our heart does ...

The mother begins therefore by attempting to delineate and animate aspects of display for the child. She encourages the child to notice the blood's movement successively look at different elements of the exhibit. She attempts to have him see and understand that the exhibit itself represents the human body and the operation of the circulation system. Not unlike the previous fragment, the gestures and talk provide a vehicle through which the co-participant is encouraged to look at and experience the exhibit. The mother both delineates the movement of the liquid and simultaneously animates the process through a series of gestures and vocalisations. The gestures overlay the successive features of the exhibit, configuring what should be seen and how it should be seen, but preserving the integrity of the exhibit itself.

The child's failure to look at the flowing blood around the system, the very purpose of the exhibit, has the mother reconfiguring the way in which she attempts to have the child engage in the exhibit. Having demarcated and animated the exhibit itself, she superimposes its operation, or rather the operation that it represents, on her own body. She transposes the exhibit, and creates the actions it represents, on her own chest, revealing the functioning of her own heart by virtue of the exhibit's operation. Through the transposition, she attempts to reveal how the flow of the liquid in the perspex tubes represents the flow of liquid, blood, around her own body, and perhaps by association his own. In a curious way therefore, she uses the exhibit to reflexively constitute, an image of her own bodily functioning, to have the child see and experience what is happening beneath the surface of his mother's skin and his own.

### **Negotiating the object**

We can begin to see therefore how people embody objects, aspects of exhibits, within action, and encourage others to respond to the object in specific, sequentially appropriate ways. The actions of the participants discriminate, encompass, and entail the objects, the particular exhibits, and provide a framework for the ways in which they might, even should be, responded to. Through their action and interaction the participants progressively constitute, or attempt to constitute, a momentary, reciprocity of perspective, with regard to the exhibit, and interchangeability of a standpoint that is accomplished through the revelation of the object and the ways that co-participants respond. However, the fragments reveal the emergent, highly contingent, character of the objects' significance to the participants, and the interaction;- the ways in which the 'mutual'

constitution and experience of the exhibit may be fragmented and involve distinct forms of participation.

Once again, establishing and creating the sequentially relevant response-to-the-object, necessitates a trajectory of action through which the co-participant is positioned to experience the exhibit in a particular way, and through their encounter with the object, to 'naturally' produce the projected, sequentially relevant, reaction.

It is worthwhile considering the following fragment. It is drawn from the British Galleries at the V&A in London. The piece in question is a highly decorative late nineteenth century washstand by Burgess. To the right of the piece is a small monitor on a stand that plays a two-minute film, which illustrates the design and operation of the piece. At successive points during the film there are subtitles that summarise features of the piece, for example "The cistern is filled with water". If you turn from the film to look at the piece even for a few moments you inevitably miss part of the presentation.

The fragment raises some interesting issues concerning how participants attempt to shape each other's encounter with an object and the ways in which information displays can provide competing demands for looking and talking. The participants in question are Charles and Audrey. Charles stands to the left, Audrey to the right. It is a long and complicated fragment and it is perhaps helpful to discuss the action section by section. We join the action as Audrey is watching the film. She momentarily says 'the cistern's filled with water' voicing a sub-title in the film. She begins to look up, asking 'what cistern', and in response, Charles steps forward and thrusts his

newspaper towards the top of the washstand and replies, ‘It’s probably (.) It’s probably in there:’

#### Fragment 4a – Burgess’ Washstand, V & A (Audrey and Charles)

A: The Cistern’s filled with water.  
A: What Cistern?  
(0.4)  
C: It’s probably (.) it’s probably in there  
A: The top’s filled with water.  
C: And it comes out of there and goes (\_\_\_ \_\_ \_).

Charles however does not simply point to the area containing the cistern. As Audrey turns to where he is pointing, he transforms the gesture, and with a newspaper in hand, encircles and exaggerates the area of the washstand housing the cistern. The gesture clarifies the description in the film. It links the textual description of the washstand as voiced by Audrey, with the object itself. It also encourages, if not demands, Audrey to inspect the cistern more closely.



Audrey fails to respond and does not even remain oriented towards the cistern. She turns back to the film and a moment later voices out-loud the next sub-title “The top is filled with water”.

Charles attempts to re-engage Audrey in looking at the object itself rather than watch the film. He builds on her description (‘and it comes out of there’), and uses his newspaper to dramatically demarcate the flow of water from the cistern to the bowl below. Unfortunately, Audrey does not look up; she continues to watch the film and his illustration passes unnoticed.

The tension concerning the focus of the participants' alignment and how or even whether the washstand should be viewed, is nicely embodied in Audrey's next action. Rather than respond to Charles' description and animation of the object, she continues to watch the film and simply utters 'Then'. The utterance, coupled with her visual alignment towards the screen, not only serves to project further talk, but talk that again quotes or summarise the sub-title of the film. For her own part therefore, Audrey attempts to use the film and her voicing of the sub-titles to configure how Charles should look at the washstand, whilst, given her orientation, ignoring his attempts to have her look at the object itself.

#### Fragment 4b

A: Then

C: And it tilts

A: You turn the ta:p

C: Look look

(0.6)

A: (..)

C: [British Rail used to have these:. D'you remember?

A: Below the taps is designed as mythical beasts

(1.2)

C: (er)

A: Oh yes I remember it was lovely.

Audrey's attempt to secure the floor to describe the piece with regard to the film, is resisted by Charles, who tags "And it tilts" to his description and stretches forward towards the basin itself. Audrey continues to watch the film and produce the projected description, once again a quote from one of the subtitles.

Charles resists the import of Audrey's actions, dramatically upgrading his attempt to secure her alignment towards the piece and his characterisation of the washstand. Taking hold of the basin, he lifts it and utters 'look look'.

Audrey momentarily glances at the basin, but immediately turns once again to watch the film.

In attempting to have her look at and appreciate what he is showing, Charles turns towards her, and grabbing hold of the basin, announces that British Rail used to have similar washbasins. It looks as if all is lost, the basin's movement will pass unnoticed, but with her quote at the beginning of the next subtitle in the film, 'Below the taps is designed as mythical beasts', Audrey looks up to inspect the beasts in question. As she glances towards the washstand, Charles seizes the moment and once again waggles the basin up and down. The dramatic revelation of the object's operation receives a momentary glance and passing appreciation. "Oh yes I remember it was lovely" and a moment later Audrey begins to look for the item mentioned in the subtitle. As she turns back to the film, Charles walks away from exhibit in seeming disgust.



C: British Rail used to have these:  
D'you remember?

The fragment reveals a complex negotiation in which the participants attempt to progressively establish particular features of the exhibit and information display as the principal focus and the way in which the exhibit should be viewed. They not only attempt to foreground particular features of the exhibit, but in securing the alignment of the other, establish, in turn, distinct alternative trajectories of action and involvement. In other words, in embedding features of the object or information display within a specific action, each participant successively attempts to establish a particular form

of alignment by eliciting a response that would provide a vehicle for further observation and discussion. As the fragment develops it is as if an *ad hoc* division of labour emerges through which one person watches and quotes aspects of the film whilst the other reveals the relevant features at the exhibit itself. In this way, we have a sense of the ways in which the participants' discovery and experience of the piece emerge, contingently moment by moment, and through their interaction the participants interweave the representation of the object with actual features of the washstand; the talk and gestures 'bridging' the divide.

The fragment raises some interesting issues concerning the ways in which participants use information sources such as labels and displays to engender ways of seeing and discussing objects in museums and galleries. In the case at hand, we find that as with more conventional labels, one participant reads out-loud or reformulates aspects of the information for an other and in various ways, the quote or rendition informs comment, inspection and discussion. The electronic display however markedly differs from more conventional textual information and labels. The short film has a carefully constructed narrative structure that undermines the visitor's ability to both watch the film whilst simultaneously glancing at the object. When you look up during the film to examine the relevant features of the object, even for a few seconds, then you inevitably miss the next part of the film. In some cases people simply watch the film and then inspect the washstand. However, in the case at hand, we can see how the object and its representation on film can provide competing foci of attention, foci that prove difficult to reconcile within the developing course of the film.

Despite these difficulties however, we can begin to see how one party does not simply demarcate and animate particular features of the exhibit, attempting to configure how it is looked at and experienced, but rather the ways in which action is entailed in the object itself. This washstand, this inanimate physical artefact, is manipulated to dramatically illustrate its operation, how it was used, and through its manipulation gains a signifi- cance, if only momentarily, it does not otherwise have. Charles's attempt to secure the alignment and interest of Audrey, to draw her from the film to the object, and the failure of his earlier attempt to realign her orientation and commitment to the emerging narrative, has him wagging the bowl both to attract her attention and reveal something interesting, curious and amusing about the piece itself. Interestingly perhaps, Audrey's response is directed to the description, rather than the dramatic functioning of the piece, and in this way serves not simply to forestall further discussion of the basin's operation, but to curtail the sequential trajectory it foreshadows; a trajectory that would have viewing the object as its focal point rather than watching the film.

## **Discussion**

The maker of a picture or other historical artefact is a man addressing a problem of which his product is a finished and concrete solution. To understand it we try to reconstruct both the specific problem it was designed to solve and the specific circumstances out of which he was addressing it. This reconstruction is not identical with what he internally experienced: it will be a simplified and limited to the conceptualisable, though it will also be operating in a reciprocal relation with the picture itself, which contributes, among other things, modes of perceiving and feeling.”

(Baxandall, 1985: 14-15)

An individual's experience of objects and artefacts in museums and galleries may not simply derive from the cognitive or psychological dispositions or abilities that he or she bring to bear when looking at an exhibit, nor necessarily the knowledge they have of particular forms of art, artefact and the like. Their investigation and experience of the exhibit may emerge, then and there, through their interaction with others, both those they are with and those who happen to be within the same space. Their knowledge and understanding of particular forms of art and artefact, their cognitive and psychological abilities have to be deployed with regard to the contingencies at hand at any particular moment, in their interaction with others. The interaction does not so much permeate a set of pre-established dispositions or bodies of knowledge, but rather provides the material and interactional circumstances through which people come to see, and understand, exhibits in particular ways. The 'situated' or 'occasioned' conduct and experience of visitors are hardly reducible to cognitive abilities and dispositions of the participants; rather emerge in and through socially organised actions and interaction. What is noticed, seen, inspected, reviewed, discussed, and experienced, arises from within interaction and is contingent upon the occasioned conduct of the participants themselves.

The fragments suggest ways in which the body and talk is used to selectively discriminate objects and artefacts, to negotiate, momentarily what to look at and how to look an exhibit. The orientation of the participants and ways in which the object is seen, emerges within the developing and contingent course of the interaction. The actions of the participants may not simply selectively discriminate an object amongst a collection of objects, but fashion the ways in which selective elements of the object are examined. As we have seen, features of the objects or artefacts are progressively revealed

and come to life by virtue of the ways in which the body and talk reveal, highlight and animate seemingly innocuous, even invisible, characteristics of an exhibit. Gallery notes, labels and the like provide the participants not simply with a resource with which to talk to each other, but more importantly with ways of seeing and have others see and experience the particular object. The body itself may become a receptacle, or better, vehicle, for revealing aspects of an exhibit, the participants superimposing, aspects of the object, including its function, on the body, itself. The perception and experience of objects and artefacts in museums and galleries is accomplished through socially organised action and interaction; the body and talk providing resources through which features of an exhibit gain their occasioned sense and significance.

In different ways, we can begin to see how participants themselves create and engender response to objects and artefacts in museums and galleries. The examples point to ways in which the 'reception' of exhibits is occasioned and accomplished, then and there, within action and interaction. The talk and bodily conduct of the participants, their gestures and the like, does not stand independently of the objects and artefacts themselves; it is intelligible by virtue of the particular exhibit, just as the particular object or artefact reflexively informs how the participants organise their conduct and make sense of the exhibit. In and through their talk and bodily conduct, the participants transpose action to the object and encourage the co-participant(s) to see and respond to the 'enlivened' exhibit. Whether it is the incised lines on a canvas, the flow of red liquid through perspex pipes, or the decorated, tilting bowl of a nineteenth century washstand, the object becomes an object-in-action. The spectator or 'recipient' is encouraged not so much to respond to the actions of the other, but rather the en-lived object,

the exhibit in and through which action is embodied. The interactional and sequential force of the participant's action is entailed in the object; it is the object to which the co-participant responds not to the ways in which it is rendered visible or significant by the other. In one sense therefore we find a powerful and distinctive example of 'mediation', and the ways in which actions are configured within an object to create and engender a particular response to the object itself.

It is worth briefly reflecting on how participants are able to preserve the integrity of the object whilst simultaneously embodying action in and through the exhibit. Take gestures for example. - In revealing the incised lines of the Caravaggio, the young man produces a series of gestures that delicately demarcate the pattern of incisions beneath the surface of the paint. The shape of the hand and pointing finger progressively direct the viewer's line of regard and exaggerate the pattern and continuity of the incisions while remaining on the periphery of the father (and mother's) visual field. By encouraging his parents, in particular his father to adopt a particular viewpoint, the son is able to foreground and animate the incisions whilst the gesture remains in the background; revealing aspects of the painting whilst masking or glossing its own operation. The son's gestures remain subservient to the object and yet simultaneously reveal and enliven the incisions, the focal aspect of the object, then and there. Similarly, the mother's upward gesture tracking the flow of the blood in fragments three, and the husband's gestured demarcation of the cistern in the Burgess washstand, reveal features of the objects, whilst concealing or masking their own operation. The body, or rather the gestures, overlay the object and reveal particular characteristics, and yet, the ways in which they give sense and significance to the exhibits necessitates their occlusion. The bodily

conduct of the participants is 'seen but unnoticed'; embodying the object with sense and significance, then and there within the interaction, that it would not otherwise have.

A long-standing academic concern, at least from the pioneering work of Baumgarten (1761/1750) onwards, is the distinctive character of the aesthetic and how it differs from mundane, practical experience. Whilst the aesthetic attitude or standpoint is often associated with reflection and contemplation, it is also believed to entail raw, unadulterated experience; a confrontation with and reflection on the object in its own right. Here lies a pervasive distinction in aesthetics between seeing for oneself and having an object described, between immediate experience and a mediated encounter, be it a picture, a sculpture, novel or building. This theoretical distinction also informs the ways in which participants themselves orient to, and orient others to, objects and artefacts in museums and galleries. In the fragments discussed in this paper, we find participants distinguishing how those that they are with encounter an exhibit. In particular, we find participants, not simply informing those they are with, but rather shaping the other's encounter with the exhibit, so that they discover and see or themselves certain aspects of the object. So for example, the father discovers for himself, a secret of a Caravaggio painting, just as a partner confronts the tipping bowl of a Burgess washstand. Moreover, we find visitors not simply informing those they are with of what they have seen or are looking at, but rather going to some trouble to shape the ways in which co-participants confront the object. The object retains an element of surprise or curiosity by virtue of the ways in which one participant configures how it is seen and experienced by another; the confrontation with the object giving rise to pleasure, curiosity and surprise. In other words, through their interaction

with others, participants shape the ways in which they ‘collaboratively’ experience the various objects and artefacts. The very ways in which an exhibit is revealed provides the spectator with a unique and seemingly uncontaminated encounter with the object;- the co-participant confronts the object and its particular characteristics as if independently of the very ways in which they are being 'instructed' to look.

In recent years, we have witnessed a growing interest within the social sciences with the ways in which objects and artefacts, including works of art, entail a body of convention, practice and reasoning. The thrust of this research, reflects the substantive and analytic standpoints, that can be found in very different traditions such as art history, and reception theory, with its emphasis on production, the social context of creative practice, and the embodied, entailed, assumed, or idealised reader or recipient. The object and its sense and significance within ordinary, everyday circumstances, has received little attention, and the vulgar competencies that people bring to bear in exploring, examining and understanding exhibits in museums and galleries remain disregarded. How people respond to art and other forms of object and artefact in museums and galleries may bear little resemblance to the motivations, intentions, production practices, and social circumstances in and through which the work was created, and yet it is within those ordinary mundane circumstances that these objects gain their contemporary sense and significance. It seems somewhat surprising that despite the burgeoning interest in the social sciences and humanities with the object and aesthetics that so little attention has been paid to how exhibits, in museums and galleries, including works of art are 'received and read' in ordinary, everyday circumstances. Practical aesthetics, the conduct, interaction and practice, in and through which the sense and significance of objects and

artefacts are constituted, would seem worthy of a little analytic attention from the social sciences.

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