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**Semiotics of Cultures
The Notion of ‘Art Gallery Going’**

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Table of Contents

<u>Introduction</u>	Page 3
<u>Part One - Structure, Composition of the Lebenswelt of the Artworld Public</u> ...Page 4 - 14	
Introduction – How we define ‘art’, ‘social actor’, ‘artworld’ and ‘artworld public’	
The museum/gallery, its role within the artworld/society and the notion of art gallery going	
Typical Social Networks	
Typical Activities	
Temporality	
Social Space	
Environment	
<u>Part Two – The Language Culture Specific to Art Museum Visitors</u> Page. 15 – 21	
Preliminary notes on the language of art	
The language of art	
Education and the language of art	
Further notes on the language of art	
<u>Estonian Art Museum Visitors</u>	Page 22 – 24
<u>Conclusion</u>	Page 25
<u>Bibliography/Netography</u>	Page 26

The Notion of 'Art Gallery Going'

Introduction

In this project, the notion of art gallery going will be discussed, taking into account the institution of the art museum/gallery as a physical entity and also the life world of its social actor – the artworld public (the art museum/gallery visitors). The topics to be covered include a discussion of the lifeworld characteristics of our social actor, a more detailed analysis of the language of art and an overview of art gallery going in Estonia. The methodology adopted is essentially case-study and aesthetic theory orientated.

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Part One – Structure, Composition of the Lebenswelt of the Artworld Public

Introduction – How we define ‘art’, ‘social actor’, ‘artworld’ and ‘artworld public’

In this chapter we intend to give a comprehensive description of the art gallery (or art museum) as an institution within the artworld, the public within which forms our social actor. However, before embarking on such a description, we shall firstly give concise explanations of the key-words involved in the former sentence in order to clarify our specific interpretations of these terms. Hence to our minds, the term *art* (in its broadest sense) denotes quite simply the expression of creativity and/or imagination. However, on a more academic level (as the Wikipedia encyclopedia points out) art has several characterising aspects which (in our opinion) have at least to be mentioned in any scholarly explanation of this arguably subjective concept. These characteristics are as follows: Art...

- requires creative perception both by the artist and by the audience
- is elusive
- communicates on many levels and is open to many interpretations
- connotes a sense of ability
- is an interplay between the conscious and unconscious part of our being, between what is real and what is an illusion
- is any human creation which contains an idea other than its utilitarian purpose.
- is that which is created with intention to be experienced as art
- is a search of different forms of beauty (see Ref. 1)

However, for the purposes of this project (although bearing in mind the above characteristics) we shall restrict ourselves to *The Institutional Theory of Art and the Artworld* perspective of philosopher George Dickie, who defines art as ‘an artefact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public’ (Ref. 2: p2). The reason that we have adopted this definition, is that significantly, Dickie’s theory is the first to take into account the *context* of the work of art, that is, its location within the artworld public social actor. Already in the former sentence two important terms have been used which (in our opinion) need explaining, they are ‘social actor’ and ‘artworld’. To begin with the former ‘ambiguous’ term, *social actor*. This is a term used to describe (according to lecturer Peter Stockinger’s course materials),

any (human, animal, “artificial”,...) *agent* such as a group of persons, an individual, an organised group (a company, union, a party,...), who 1) possess a *common* cognitive framework and 2) requires the possession or acquisition of a specific competence for

understanding, accepting and dealing with this common cognitive reference frame (see Ref 3).

In other words, a social actor (for example the ‘artworld public’) is shaped and given its identity through *specific cultural forms* (such as national, scientific and shopping “cultures”) which are embodied in people, spaces, periods, objects, artefacts etc. Significantly, the word ‘common’ (italicised in the above passage) is particularly important in understanding the concept of a ‘social actor’, as it is believed that the central characteristics of the lebenswelt (life world) of any type of social actor are based (as is often implicitly suggested in use of the term “culture”) on common ground (e.g. common places, languages, activities, temporality...). This commonality can certainly be seen in the lebenswelt of the artworld public, the social actor that we shall now turn to explain.

Arthur Danto in *The Artworld, Journal of Philosophy* (1964) first gave the concept of the “artworld” a philosophical definition, he wrote : ‘the artworld provides the *theories of art* which all members of the artworld tacitly assume in order for there to be objects considered as art’ (Ref 2: p2). The artworld can also be considered (according to the online resource *The Institutional Theory of Art and the Artworld*) as ‘a network emerging from many smaller micro-worlds, sub-communities, all with greater or lesser knowledge of the entire network’ and whose primary function it is to ‘continually define, validate and maintain the culture category of art’ (Ref 2: p5). Hence the artworld public is (are) the visitors who pertain to the museum/gallery. And it shall be on these understandings that we compile our project.

The museum/gallery, its role within the artworld/society and the notion of art gallery going

In this paper, the notion of art-gallery going (in Britain) will be observed. Informed by *The Institutional Theory of Art and the Artworld* online resource, we suppose that the art-museum/gallery could be considered a ‘micro-world’ of the artworld, an institution whose role it is to ‘enact and perpetuate the art world, while at the same time negotiating kinds and levels of cooperation in a mutually understood careerist and competitive context’ (Ref 2: p5). However, it should be noted that the above definition of the art-gallery’s role within the artworld is perhaps the most rudimentary we could find after ‘an

art gallery is a space for the exhibition of art, usually visual art and usually primarily paintings, illustrations and sculpture' (Wikipedia Ref. 1). Through our reading within aesthetic theory, it soon became apparent that there are several definitions of what an art gallery actually is and perhaps more crucially, many more opinions and attitudes as regard to the art museum/gallery's role within society. For example, it is sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's view that the art museum holds a fundamentally exclusive role in society, in *The Field of Cultural Production* he writes that

the museum gives to all, as a public heritage, the monuments of a splendid past, instruments of the sumptuous glorification of the great figures of bygone ages, but this is false generosity, because free entrance is also optional entrance, reserved for those who, endowed with the ability to appropriate the works, have the privilege of using this freedom and who find themselves consequently legitimized in their privilege (1993: 237)

However, in absolute contrast to this perspective, is art critic René Huyghe's belief that art

has never seemed so important, to the point of becoming an obsession, as in our own day. Never before has it been so widely accessible, so greatly appreciated....the museum has the privilege of speaking the language of our times, which is a language intelligible to all and the same in every country... The museum has become part of our way of life. Soon it will be the necessary complement and parallel to all our activities (McClellan 2003: 3).

A view which is also supported by the international organization UNESCO, which maintains that 'what was essentially an aristocratic stronghold is nowadays a meeting place for ordinary people' (in McClellan 2003: 1).

However, in this project we base all our opinions on recent first-hand observations made in three governmentally/privately funded art museums/galleries in London and Cambridge, which were visited over a period of several weeks and on various occasions. The aim of our visits to the *Fitzwilliam Museum* and the *Kettle's Yard Gallery* in Cambridge and the *Tate Modern* museum in London though, were not only to ascertain the role 'the gallery' plays in contemporary society, but also gain actual insights into the lebenswelt of the artworld public through the 'micro-world' of the art-gallery. It is commonly perceived that the lebenswelt (life world) of any social actor can be judged via analyzing the typical social networks, activities, temporality, space, environment and language relevant to the actor (Ref. 4). Therefore whilst in the above stated art museums/galleries we considered the 'life-world characteristics' listed in the former sentence and wrote down any perceived observations in a notebook.

Typical Social Networks

Upon analyzing the observations written in our notebooks, we have since come to think (more in the vein of Huyghe than Bourdieu) that many different ‘categories’ of people visit art galleries – it did not appear at all to be “the preserve of the elite” (a common myth). We saw in all the museums (at least on one occasion), parents with their young children, teenagers and generally people who neither though their attire nor demeanour gave the impression of being remotely ‘upper-middle class’ (as far as we imagine to British upper-middle class to ‘look’ like), which would certainly appear to support painter Charles-Antoine Coypel’s view that ‘there is no one public for art; the public for art is diverse and divided by interests and levels of knowledge, confidence and class, not to mention ethnicity and gender’ (in McChellan 2003: 1).

However, if one provides Andrew McClellan’s view (posited in his book *Art and its Publics*), that ‘for some, the lingering aura of privilege is intimidating, but for just as many it is part of the allure’ (2003: 2) as a reason for why there appeared to be a diversity of people in the art galleries we visited, then perhaps Bourdieu, Darbel and Schnapper’s contention that the art museum is ‘almost exclusively the domain of the cultivated classes’ (1991: 14) can be upheld. Moreover, how we ourselves felt when walking around the art museums in London and Cambridge could also be interpreted to fit Bourdieu’s class based perception of the artworld. To a greater or lesser extent, we both felt whilst walking around the art museums/galleries, that we were not achieving all that we were meant to achieve through looking at the exhibits, we felt that we somehow couldn’t quite ‘lock-into’ the art work on display. Feelings which we think could be explained using Bourdieu’s view that not everybody is equipped with the *habitus* (“feel for the game”, practical sense) for truly interpreting works of art and anybody outside of this habitus is likely to remain there. Certainly it did feel like we were just part of the ‘wrong habitus’ on occasions, like members of a majority ‘out-group’ distinguished from the ‘in-group’ through a lack of art knowledge (or ‘cultural capital’, Bourdieu). In *The Field of Cultural Production* Bourdieu does offer some hope however, through stating that ‘students...can unconsciously absorb the rules of art...by giving themselves up to it’ (1993: 228), which in our view could possibly constitute an ‘intermediate’ category of art-gallery goers.

Typical Activities

As regard to the second listed characteristic of the life world of a social actor, the ‘activities’ performed there, we have noted in our notebooks, several observations of the sort of activities occurring in each of the three museums we visited. It is perceivable that these activities can be divided into five categories, with all those related to ‘governance practices’ going into the first, all those related to ‘intellectual practices’ going into the second, all those related ‘power practices’ going into the third, all those related to ‘reproduction and consumption practices’ going into the fourth and finally all those related to ‘communication activities’ going into the fifth (Ref. 4). We shall now give an example of an activity from each of the above categories.

An example of an activity occurring in the art museums/galleries we visited which relates to the ‘governance practices’ category (and arguably to the ‘power practices’ category as well), is the act of invigilating by art museum/gallery staff. This act was very much observable in each of the three art galleries (although perhaps to a lesser extent in the Kettle’s Yard gallery) and was itself characterised by men and women usually in dark shoulder-padded smart jackets and shirts walking slowly around the museum/gallery looking to quell any ‘disorder’ (i.e. behaviour outside of the institution’s ‘rules’), often by moving their index finger from side to side to remind gallery-goers that there is no touching of the art works, photography or use of mobile phones, for example. Although to most, the governance practice of invigilation via art museum/gallery staff is simply a necessary way of preserving the artworks on display and the tranquil environment of the public space (and certainly it *is* necessary), we can’t help thinking after reading Andrew McClellan’s book *Art and its Public*, that ‘as one hand invites the public to partake of its treasures, the other hand courts collectors and sponsors with a deference fit for the great Mæcenas of old’ (2003: 2). In other words, we often get impression when visiting art museums/galleries, that there are double standards operating within the supposedly democratic ‘micro-worlds’ of the artworld.

An example of an activity we observed that relates to the ‘intellectual’ practices category, is a ‘free’ guided tour we saw in progress at the Tate Modern museum in London. In

addition, we observed many visitors using the Tate Modern's 'audioguides' (hired for two pounds) and also children sitting with their parents 'drawing' the art they saw in front of them. Apparently, the Tate provides art materials for families to borrow whilst they are in the museum as a way to "get more young people into art" (helpdesk assistant). This drive is particularly important in our view, especially when considering Bourdieu's perception that

art education [in school] can be of full benefit only to those who owe the competence acquired by slow and imperceptible familiarisation to their family milieu, because it does not explicitly give to all what it implicitly demands from all (1993: 232).

Explaining this view by adding that

'familiarisation by repeated perceptions is the privileged mode of acquiring the means of appropriating works of art because the work of art always appears as concrete individuality which never allows itself to be deduced from principles and rules defining a style' (1993: 228).

An example of an activity we observed that relates to the 'reproduction and consumption practices' category, is the sale of postcards, books, stationary and gifts in all of the three art museums/galleries' shops. It is interesting to note here, that these shops on the occasions we visited, appeared to attract as many visitors as the actual museums'/galleries' artwork itself. This indicated to us that on the occasions we visited the museums/galleries, there may have been a high proportion of 'very occasional' visitors or 'special exhibition' tourists within who, 'the feelings of obligation which constitute the feeling of belonging to the cultivated world' (Bourdieu et al. 1993: 24) may have been reawakened through tourism. We also considered that those visitors buying famous painting postcards may have been naively trying to "buy" themselves into a seemingly exclusive world which may not really have felt part.

Finally, an example of an activity we observed that relates to the 'communication practices' category, is the distribution of maps, pamphlets and handbooks about the exhibits within the three museums/galleries. The above stated genre were readily available at the museums/galleries and served as useful props in order for the 'less privileged' of us to understand the art works on display. Whilst visiting the art museums/galleries, we also observed how the visitors communicated ideas both verbally and non-verbally. Visitor behaviour that we have frequently noted in our notebooks, is

the non-verbal act of leaning into a painting to observe it more closely (which communicated to us that the person was interested in/intrigued by the painting) and also conversely, the non-verbal act of scrunching up one's nose (which communicated to us that the person was not at all interested/didn't understand the painting on display and perhaps wanted to express this opinion to another).

Temporality

The third characteristic that the lifeworld of any social actor can be judged by, temporality, is something that was very observable both within the pamphlets available in the art museums/galleries we visited and within the actual environment of these 'micro-worlds' of the artworld themselves. For example, the opening times of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Kettle's Yard gallery and the Tate Modern museum are clearly marked within the corresponding pamphlets and each display art from a variety of historical periods, with the more recent of these being at the Kettle's Yard gallery (contemporary art) and the least recent of these being at the Fitzwilliam museum (which houses art spanning many centuries). The Tate Modern (in our view) falls somewhere in between these establishments, in terms of the temporality of artwork it displays. Also mentionable within the 'temporality' bracket, is that special exhibitions, events, workshops, talks etc punctuate both the usual schedule of all the three museums focused on in this project and the 'usual' timetable or routine of art-gallery goers. These frequent 'punctuations' in our view help to maintain public interest in the cultural act of going to the art gallery, as they help to combat the possibility of inertia that can sometimes result from a highly routinised pattern of living, from setting in.

Social Space

The fourth characteristic that the lifeworld of any social actor can be judged by, is social space. For the art world, one of its most important 'spaces' is the art museum or gallery. This 'space' or 'territory' of the artworld public, seems to us (through walking around the Fitzwilliam museum, Kettle's Yard gallery and the Tate Modern museum) to be an umbrella space for many other types of spaces, for example the rather aloof space kept between the art 'guards' and the visitors, the space kept between visitor and art object

(we observed that this space was usually around one metre), the more intimate space between couples and families (we often saw couples walking around the museums/galleries holding hands) and the ‘polite’ space kept between strangers (which we observed was usually around one metre, although this proximity was probably less than this in the relatively small building of the Kettle’s Yard gallery). From these observations of ‘space’ (in particular that between strangers) in the art museums/galleries we visited, we have deduced that unlike a typical nightclub for example, an art gallery is not somewhere to go to make friends or find a partner, but rather a place to be inwardly contemplative and reflexive.

Environment

We now turn to comment on the environment (the fifth characteristic) with respect to the individual art museums/galleries. To begin with the Fitzwilliam Museum; the environment in this artistic/historic space, is one geared towards preservation, with glass cabinets housing ancient artefacts and gilded frames causing the 2D paintings on display to radiate a prestigious aloof aura, the environment of the museum felt rather aristocratic and “cold”. We did not get the impression whilst in the museum that we were able to interact with the environment in anyway other than look with our eyes, this message made even explicit through ‘Do Not Touch’ notices placed upon chairs, cabinets etc and by ropes cordoning off certain sections of the museum. These environmental features of the Fitzwilliam made us feel a little more excluded and ‘unworthy’ than we already felt walking around the museum’s halls and upon feeling these emotions, we could perceive how Bourdieu, Dabel and Schnapper in *The Love of Art* can consider that

it is probably not excessive to suggest that the profound feelings of unworthiness (and of incompetence) which haunts the least cultivated visitors as if they were overcome with respect when confronted with the sacred universe of legitimate culture, contributes in no small way towards keeping them away from museums (1991: 53)

Certainly, although the Fitzwilliam did not discourage our own personal desire to view art, we did feel that the environment of the Fitzwilliam museum was not overly welcoming to the general public.

The Kettle’s Yard gallery on the other hand, with its white-washed walls, simple style frames, notable absence of anything painted in gold leaf or coloured royal red, definitely

felt less of a ‘sacred’ environment and arguably more of a ‘democratic’ space than the Fitzwilliam museum. The reason the word ‘arguably’ has been used in the above sentence, is because between ourselves, we cannot quite decide whether the simple, non-intimidating decoration of the Kettle’s Yard gallery and helpful information boards next to each of the exhibits displayed (features which we think contribute to a ‘democratic’ atmosphere) can really counterbalance the observation that the art displayed there is mainly contemporary, which is, (in our view) probably the most complex category of art to understand (especially when there is no ‘in-house’ guide on hand to ‘explain’ the artwork) and hence this is where the notion that the gallery is ‘free’ to all collapses. We are also somewhat dubious to pronounce the Kettle’s Yard gallery a ‘democratic’ environment, as in the back of our minds we have Bourdieu’s view that

being the keystone of a system which can function only by concealing its true function, the charismatic representation of art experience never fulfils its function of mystifying so well as when it resorts to a ‘democratic’ language (1993: 225).

The environment of the Tate Modern museum (in our view) again falls somewhere in between that of the Fitzwilliam museum and the Kettle’s Yard gallery as regard to the level of ‘democracy’ it infers. As in the Fitzwilliam museum, we observed that there were many stern looking art guards walking around the Tate Modern’s halls and there appeared to be numerous ‘Do Not Touch’ signs dotted around the exhibits. However, dissimilarly to the rather ‘aloof’ environment of the Fitzwilliam museum and more similarly to the quasi ‘democratic’ environment of Kettle’s Yard gallery, the Tate Modern museum seemed to have invested a fair amount of time adhering lengthy information plaques next to each of the exhibits displayed, signs to inform visitors where exactly in the museum they were and where they could perhaps to go next and also (at least on the occasions we visited the Tate Modern) there appeared to be a comparatively high proportion of children walking around, which further inferred to us that the Tate Modern had succeeded (much more so than the Fitzwilliam museum) at presenting itself as a ‘democratic’, ‘open to all’ space, certainly (at least in part) this was the image it projected to us. However, taking into account the nature of some of the artwork on display at the Tate Modern museum (such as the Abstract Impressionist paintings of Jackson Pollock), we consider that any such analysis that should be tempered by this crucial observation.

The symbolic objects, products and realizations relevant to our social actor within the context of the art museums/galleries we visited shall now be commented upon. From our observations within the Fitzwilliam museum, the Tate Modern museum and the Kettle's Yard gallery, we have come to consider that the original pieces of 2D artwork and 3D sculptures, the wealth of information, courses/lectures, guided tours and exhibitions available (to a lesser or greater extent) in all of the above stated museums/galleries are in essence, the most symbolic objects, products and realizations of the artworld. And it is chiefly these elements (in our opinion) which procure the prestigious status of 'art-gallery going' as a cultural phenomenon.

The sixth characteristic that the lifeworld of any social actor can be judged by, language, is an aspect which will be addressed in Part Two of this project.

Part Two – The Language Culture Specific to Art Museum Visitors

Preliminary notes on the language of art

One feature that characterises the world of art and distinguishes it from other spheres of life, is its use of a highly specific language. Over time, a complicated linguistic code, a special vocabulary, an intricate web of terms and associations has evolved that is known to those belonging to the ‘in-group’ (people with knowledge of art and art gallery experience, usually better educated), but largely e(xc)cludes the members of the ‘out-group’ (those who are less acquainted with the art world and visit museums less frequently). To elaborate further, under the specific circumstances in which they were brought up and the education they received, some people possess ‘linguistic’, ‘cultural’ or ‘symbolic’ capital (to use terms adopted by Bourdieu to describe prestigious knowledge, that in his view incorporates linguistic signs and artistic symbols in a system of communication that sets apart the powerful members of the society from those with less power) that others with different life experiences lack.

To contextualise, art museum visitors comprise both those who belong to the in-group and have a greater command of the language of art (e.g. curators of galleries and museums, art historians, critics, collectors, dealers, teachers, connoisseurs and people interested in art and culture in general) as well as those who are not part of the in-group and hence have limited access to linguistic resources in scholarly discussions of art and also to the methods of achieving the optimum pleasure from the viewing of art.

The primary purpose of ‘art-language’ can be summed up as follows: art vocabulary and terms are necessary when giving perceptions of art, when listening to someone recount their experiences with art and when reading texts which relate to art. In other words, occasions that call for familiarity with the language of art have to do with the discussion of art either in oral or written form.

The language of art

The language used when talking about art differs from everyday language in terms of the art-specific vocabulary and special concepts used. Terms employed when referring to art include words that are widespread and understood by all, as well as expressions which are less frequently used and thus require prior knowledge for their comprehension. Examples of lexical fields that incorporate ‘art words’ include materials (‘gum acacia’), tools (‘armature’), colours (‘fuchsia’), adjectives used for description (‘linear’, ‘monochromic’) types of painting (‘vanita’, ‘aquarelle’), methods or techniques (‘lithography’, ‘anamorphosis’, ‘impasto’) etc. Whilst some of these terms *are* part of the common lexis and accessible to all (including ourselves) other more complex terms are likely to be used only by those with more extensive knowledge and/or interest in art.

Testifying to a large variety and quantity of terms used when talking about art, is a need for dictionaries, lists and reference books of art words. The website www.artlex.com, for example, contains ‘definitions for more than 3,600 terms used in discussing art / visual culture’ (Ref. 5). The sheer volume of concepts to do with the subject, means that an ordinary person without a special interest or who hasn’t been introduced to the world of art from early childhood by his/her family, is unlikely to know more than a fraction of those words. Even members of the in-group cannot be expected to be familiar with all the terms, though their command of the language of art undoubtedly surpasses that of those who belong to the out-group.

In addition to familiarity with art-specific terms, the language of art also encompasses knowledge of styles and authors, biographical facts of their lives, the interconnections between the authors, recurring motives in their work, their use of colour, the schools they belong to and so on – a plethora of different background knowledge without which one cannot ‘correctly’ discuss art or artistic experience. In conversations about art, names of artists occur as if they were words in their own right and the conversational partner is assumed to recognise the artist behind the name. Those belonging to the in-group will invariably know more names of artists as well as facts concerning their lives and work

than those belonging to the out-group. Bourdieu has noted that ‘the proportion of visitors who cite schools of painting increases with education’ (1991: 55). Whereas members of the in-group are likely to have at least some familiarity concerning authors outside the canon of art, the knowledge of those in the out-group is usually limited to the more famous artists taught as part of school curricula. Furthermore, members of the out-group may encounter difficulties when trying to relate names of the famous artists with the schools or styles they painted/sculpted in. An example of this could be found in a sense of uncertainty of whether Degas belonged among the impressionists or the post-impressionists among two students discussing art. When compared to members of the in-group, the linguistic competence of members of the out-group in the field of arts can be considered deficient.

Also, discussions of art often draw on and borrow words and concepts from other areas of the humanities (e.g. feminism, semiotics, psychoanalysis), the knowledge of which needs special preparation. Additionally, the stock of words employed keeps expanding and getting ever more complex. The book *Artwords: A Glossary of Contemporary Art Theory* aims to aid those who read art criticism, history or theory providing ‘over four hundred terms or phrases that have recently entered the discourse of the visual arts’ (Patin and McLerran, preface, 1997). Amongst the concepts featured, are those like ‘multivalent’, ‘fantasmatic’, ‘misprision’ and ‘exegesis’ that are likely to appear in contexts demanding a high level of erudition from the reader and indicating the complex nature of the language involved in the discussions of art.

A further, more covert layer of the language of art is formed by interpreting what can be *seen* in an artwork. Language being essentially a system of signs, it could be argued that the same applies to art – which can be perceived as encompassing a maze of signs and symbols left by those who create art to be decoded by those who view it. Spectators of art with a more thorough background knowledge undoubtedly have the advantage when deciphering the various messages and meaningful elements found in artwork over those who have merely been acquainted with the basic concepts and styles in their schooling. The former can ‘read’ much more in artwork as for them, the work communicates

information which the latter do not possess the means of grasping. Bourdieu expresses the above stated in *The Love of Art* as ‘an adequate understanding of a work of culture, and especially of high culture, presupposes, by virtue of an act of decipherment, possession of the cipher, in which the work is encoded’ (1991: 69). In other words, members of the in-group (it should be reiterated) possess this cipher, whereas members of the out-group do not.

Art can be experienced at different levels, depending on the preparedness of the viewer to view art. For Bourdieu there are ‘two extreme opposing forms of aesthetic pleasure’ – “the joy which accompanies aesthetic perception reduced to simple *aesthesis*, and the delight brought by informed appreciation’ (1991: 46). Of these he considers that the delight produced by informed appreciation superior. The gratification gained when looking at works of art depends on prior knowledge of art, thus those having more background knowledge can be perceived to draw more satisfaction from their visits to art museums/galleries. Indeed, it is author Kenneth Clark’s opinion that ‘one can learn to interrogate a picture in such a way as to intensify and prolong the pleasure it gives one’ (1960: 15). Clark also notes that ‘one cannot enjoy a pure aesthetic sensation (so-called) for longer than one can enjoy the smell of an orange, which in my case is less than two minutes’ (1960: 16) suggesting that for a true experience of what a artwork has to offer, time must be spent to unravel the symbols and meanings it contains and allow for the work to truly captivate one’s senses.

During our visits to the museums/galleries, we noticed that the a great number of visitors did not spend much time examining an individual artworks and many looked at a painting, read the notes beside it and moved on to look at the next painting, thus indicating that they did not have access to the cipher which would have allowed them to decode the artworks and to take informed pleasure out of viewing it.

Education and the language of art

Competence in the language of art is enhanced by education and repeated exposure to works of art. The process of enculturation into the world of art should preferably start

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from childhood. Knowledge of the language of art can be gained as a student at school or less formally, through childhood outings to museums/galleries, or a mixture of both.

Schools have an instrumental role in raising awareness of art and its language for future generations of possible art museum visitors. In addition they have a role in giving students the basic vocabulary used when discussing art and an overview of different styles and artists in art history; some schools also endeavour to develop students' ability to read the messages behind paintings, sculptures and other works of art. This can be done by handing students lists of questions they should ask themselves when visiting museums and looking at artworks for instance, or by pointing out different clues found on paintings during collective viewings of artworks. The Nebraska K-12 Curriculum frameworks for the Visual and Performing Arts, for example, instructs teachers to make students ask themselves questions like, "How does this particular work construct meaning through form, symbols, techniques and medium?", "What do you suppose the artist intended to communicate through this work of art?", "What are the characteristics of this work that make it art of a particular style?" or "Is this work expressing a significant idea or emotion?" as part of the process of learning the language of art – of learning to find the meanings hidden into works of art (Ref. 6). Nevertheless, art education provided by schools will supply only the most essential knowledge of art and the language of art and as students also have other subjects to concentrate on, most are not likely to devote time to acquiring the vocabulary of art in any depth. As a result, although general knowledge of and familiarity with art may be said to have risen alongside the expansion of the middle class, the command of the language of art by the layperson remains relatively poor.

Bourdieu argues that the best way of obtaining the language of art is through imbibing the relevant terms, names and codes of looking for hints in works of arts in one's immediate surroundings. For him, it is the environment provided by the family that determines the cultural capital a child will have as an adult, and as he encapsulates, 'cultural capital reproduces cultural capital' (1991: 70) (a wide-ranging, broad knowledge of culture and the ability to enjoy art to the fullest that is not possessed by all members of

society, defined in Wikipedia (Ref. 7) as ‘forms of knowledge; skill; education; any advantages a person has which give them a higher status in society’). Linguistic competence in the field of art can be incorporated in the wider concept of cultural capital, which some visitors of the museum/gallery have while others do not (or possess it to a lesser extent). While schools give students the basic knowledge of the language used when discussing art, the linguistic skills and artistic insights acquired *unconsciously* in one’s childhood (as an extra layer to prepare for subsequent schooling) are bound to have a more lasting effect on one’s character.

This is not to say that members of the out-group are destined to stay in the out-group. The language of art can be learned if one is determined to build upon the knowledge gained from school and devote time to acquiring the proper codes and interconnections. But this requires effort that people are rarely willing to put in. Even if one stands outside the in-group, one can always enhance one’s appreciation of art. For example, art historian Bernadine Barnes has contributed a piece titled *Getting more from a Museum Visit* to Encarta Reference Library DVD advising those who wish to gain insights into looking at works of art to ‘look at the building’ as the physical environment surrounding the works of art, ‘check out the museum’s Web site’ beforehand to familiarise themselves with the best works on offer, ‘look at the labels last’ not to be overly influenced by what is written there, ‘consider the groupings’ etc – step by step instructions are given to enable lay visitors to enjoy their visit more. Also, contemporary art museums have mainly taken the course of educating children in the field of art from early on, providing introductory talks, games, opportunities to create artworks and to acquire information on computers thus encouraging their interest in art in general. The educational work museums are currently engaged in should result in a wider public becoming more interested in visiting art museums and exhibitions in the future – museums are trying to educate themselves a public in times to come.

Further notes on the language of art

The language of art can be considered a prestigious variety of any natural language. Its possession is valued as it is indicative of the cultural capital of its user, giving rise to associations with education, sophistication, intelligence and possibly a higher social standing. The command of this specific linguistic code is on the one hand highly desirable due to the positive connotations that accompany it and on the other hand not particularly practical because of the low utilitarian reward it yields. For those who lack the natural enculturation into the language of art, acquiring it to a comparable degree with the members of the in-group is not an immediate necessity, underlining again the tendency for cultural capital to produce cultural capital and for the layman to settle with the knowledge gained in school.

The language of art, the vocabulary, the names and the styles can be used both when discussing art orally and in written form. The written language could be said to be more complex and dense in its use of art-specific terms. Reading a piece of art criticism can be a daunting task for someone with no prior experience with the critics' use of language. An example of art criticism could be found in Carroll Dunham's article on the art of Elizabeth Murray:

“Possessed of a bouncy, indeterminate emotional content and nodding toward *cartooning* while not wishing away the physical and formal self-awareness of recent *post-Minimalist abstraction*, they rehabilitated discarded structures from earlier *modern painting*: The *biomorphic silhouettes* of *Arp*, the pulsating *Platonism* of the later *Kandinsky*, and the *spatial fractures* of *Stuart Davis's colonial Cubism* were all hovering just offstage, present if not fully accounted for.” (our italics to indicate art-specific terms) (Ref. 8)

Not only does Dunham use a number of words relating to art, but the overall style of the article makes demands on the general level of education and sophistication of the reader.

To sum up, the language use of those who might visit art museums remains divided along the same lines as the group itself is divided – while those belonging to the in-group have the linguistic and cultural capital that enables them to discuss art using highly complex terms, allude to a web of background knowledge and find various hints and signs in works of art, members of the out-group, because of their lesser familiarity with the

specific forms of language that pertain to the discussion of art, may find themselves confused when coming into contact with artwork.

Part Three – Estonian Art Museum Visitors

To give our project a dimension of interculturality, a short discussion of Estonian art museums and art museum visitors will be provided by the Estonian contributor to this project. She must note, however, that she has not been an avid art museum visitor herself. The last exhibition she attended was *Genius Loci: Classics in Estonian Art from the 18th Century to 1940* in The Knighthood House (the then temporary main building of the Art Museum of Estonia) in August 2005. Preceding the visit there was a four year gap in her visits to art museums in Estonia (during which she *did* go to several museums abroad as a tourist). Thus she is not in a position to make far-reaching judgements about Estonian art museum or their visitors.

Significantly, the history of art museums in Estonia is shorter than that of the museums in Western Europe. The first private exhibitions must have been organised by the Baltic-German cultural elite in the 19th century, if not earlier. Eha Komissarov (Ref. 9) comments on the lack of preparedness of the society at large in 1919 when the Art Museum of Estonia was established via the drive and enthusiasm of a handful of ‘fanatics’. According to Komissarov art museums during the soviet period had the role of being warehouses to artwork produced by reputable artists. Following the independence museums have had to struggle financially. For Komissarov, Estonian art museums are still holding on to the values prevalent in the museums of the 19th and 20th century instead of moving to the 21st century like western European and American museums have done. This situation could change however, as in the forthcoming winter the new building of the Estonian Museum of Art (KUMU – Kunsti Muuseum / Art Museum) will be opened. On the basis of articles in the media, it will be comparable to other modern museums in the world. This has sparked debate and discussion about the nature and role of art in the society – whether art exhibitions *should* be reserved essentially for the more culturally-minded or whether they should be made more accessible to the masses of ‘commoners’. The trend currently seems to be towards making museums more welcoming to the general public. In 2004, the total number of visitors to Estonian art museums increased by 10.000 as compared with the number of visitors in 2003 (Ref. 10).

While Estonia, on account of the absence of the traditional aristocracy and the homogenising influence of the soviet occupation could be said to be less rigidly stratified into social classes than Britain for example (although a process of stratification appears to be under way), an in-group and an out-group can be distinguished in the midst of art museum visitors there too. Art museum visiting seems to have an air of elitism and appears to belong to the sphere of the more intellectual members of the society. Associations of cultivation, sophistication and education spring to mind when thinking about those who go to see art exhibitions. Although many in the wealthier layers of society like to demonstrate their love for art and culture to gain prestige, a lot of those with heightened interest in culture (like teachers) cannot boast great material affluence. In-group membership also seems to be passed down in the families with parents taking children to art museums and encouraging their interest in culture in general. While the small number of those belonging to the in-group and those with increased levels of education visit galleries and museums more frequently, ordinary Estonians are more random in their visits. Art museums have to compete with other ways of spending leisure time and without a special interest in art people are not very likely to go there regularly, especially seeing that in Estonia art museums tend to be quite formal and that people do not have much free time.

The art museum I visited in August is a 19th century neo-renaissant building in the Old Town of Tallinn. I did not plan to go there but as I was passing by on the spur of the moment I thought – ‘why not’. The concession ticket cost 5 kroons (about the equivalent of a small bar of chocolate). Although the building lacks the awe-inspiring grandeur of Fitzwilliam in Cambridge, it does have the humbling effect old houses often have. What I remember most poignantly, is the silence and emptiness of the museum. Apart from me, the guards, a few tourists and one or two other visitors there was no-one there and the few visitors present took care not to make much noise. The lack of visitors could perhaps be explained by the fact that it was noontime during a weekday and the sun was shining outside. There was no giftshop, nor was there a possibility for an audio-tour. Next to the entrance into each room there was a plaque explaining why the works in the room had been grouped together, the signs along the actual paintings giving only the name of the

author, the painting, the year of completion and perhaps also the materials used (of the latter I am not sure). My experiences of visiting art museums in Britain have been different. Museums have had free entry, more visitors, more talk, better facilities for seeking further information (computers in addition to leaflets) and giftshops. They have seemed more alive than the museum I visited in Estonia in August and the museums I visited four years ago.

Looking at the web-site of the Estonian Art Museum, it seems that its branches are currently putting much emphasis on educational work featuring informative lectures, special programmes for the young and guided tours to enhance the visitors' knowledge and aesthetic experience. Although modestly equipped, it appears that art museums in Estonia are also slowly heading towards becoming more accessible to the lay visitor, especially considering the opening of KUMU. Unlike some of the existing art museums KUMU will be fitted with all the modern facilities, striving to offer visitors a truly educating, cultivating and entertaining visiting experience. It optimistically aims to cater for everyone, or as a quote from a recent KUMU press release states: 'KUMU exposition must address all museum's visitors - more educated people and people with less knowledge of art, younger and elder generation, countrymen and tourists, pupils and their teachers, authorities and people interested in art. It must have educative, popularizing, "discovering" and also research function' (Ref. 11). It undoubtedly looks like the patterns of art museum visiting in Estonia are set to change, the expectation being that the frequency art museum/gallery visiting in Estonia will rise – we certainly hope so.

Conclusion

In this project we have intended to provide an analysis of the notion of art gallery going. We have done this through discussing the six lifeworld characteristics of our social actor, those being social networks, activities, temporality, space, environment and language; focusing in particular on the language characteristic of the six. We have also provided a brief overview of art gallery going in Estonia. Through compiling our project, we have come to the conclusion that the artworld public is a stratified social actor divided chiefly into a majority out-group and a minority in-group. We also conclude that the artworld public is a multi-faceted heterogeneous actor which is in the process of continual change. Museums themselves are also in the process of continual change – moving away from an aura of ‘elitism’ towards a more open for all ‘democratic’ image. To sum up, the notion of art gallery going (in Britain and Estonia) is by no means a static conception, rather it is a dynamic activity which in our view should be subject to periodic review.

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