Art Museums and Contradicting Ecologies.

Worldviews and Boundary Work.

Paul Buckermann

Abstract.

Navigating a complex social ecology, art museums face multiple and contradicting demands. This article contributes, first, to a deeper understanding of cultural organizations' practices, and does so by taking their worldviews into consideration. Based on an interview study with museum professionals in Germany and Austria, I reconstruct museum professionals' understanding of their world to relate specific strategies with professionals' specific assumptions about art organizational publics like experts, visitors, politicians, sponsors and journalists. Second, I apply concepts from the sociology of the arts, sociology of (scientific) knowledge and organizational studies to grasp the role of organizations and professionals for the autonomy of art. I show how art museums function as filters and translators across symbolic boundaries between art and other social domains. Conducting this boundary work, museums produce fine-tuned information and products to meet contradicting demands and, simultaneously, protect art-specific criteria. These findings shed a new light on cultural fields and coping strategies regarding pressures from ›hostile worlds‹.

Zusammenfassung.

Kunstmuseen sehen sich in ihrer komplexen sozialen Ökologie multiplen und sich teilweise widersprechenden Erwartungen gegenüber. Dieser Artikel trägt erstens zu einem tieferen Verständnis von Kulturorganisationen bei, indem professionelle Weltsichten mit konkreten Praxen in Verbindung gesetzt werden. Auf Grundlage von Expert*inneninterviews wird die Weltsicht von Museumsprofessionellen in Deutschland und Österreich rekonstruiert, um spezifische Strategien mit professionellen Annahmen über organisationale Publika wie Kunstexpert*innen, Besucher*innen, Politiker*innen, Sponsor*innen und Journalist*innen analytisch in Relation zu setzen. Zweitens greife ich auf soziologische Konzepte zu Kunst, (wissenschaftlichem) Wissen und Organisationen zurück, um die Rolle von Organisationen und

Professionellen für autonome Strukturen und Logiken der Künste zu erkennen. So zeige ich, wie Kunstmuseen als Filter und Übersetzer an symbolischen Grenzen zwischen Kunst und anderen Sozialsphären fungieren. In diesem boundary work produzieren Kunstmuseen zugeschnittene Information und Angebote, um multiplen Erwartungen auch bei Widersprüchen gerecht zu werden und gleichzeitig kunstspezifische Kriterien zu schützen. Die Ergebnisse bieten eine neue Perspektive auf kulturelle Felder und Anpassungsstrategien gegenüber den ›hostile worlds‹ der Künste.

1. Art museums and conflicting pressures

Research on contemporary arts and culture has shown increasing pressures on cultural fields and institutions by »hostile worlds«[1]. Due to shifting resource-dependencies, neoliberal politics, and new performance measures, cultural organizations and professionals are faced with logics that are not only conceived as external to the arts but even contradicting art historical or aesthetic reasoning. Grasping this situation, studies on heteronomization[2], commodification[3], corporate colonization[4] or political instrumentalization[5] of culture state, implicitly or explicitly, that external pressures on arts and culture had been weaker or even non-existent before the rise of neoliberalism and new public management. However, art museums – as a prime example of public cultural institutions and the case of the following study – have always been object to multiple interests and conflicting expectations since their historical appearance in the late 19th century.[6] Because challenges for art museums have in fact been shifting constantly [7], I put an emphasis, in turn, on the constant need for navigating complex social conditions to open novel research prespectives on professional practices in cultural fields. Therefore, I suggest analyzing art museums as active agents pragmatically operating across symbolic boundaries based on their knowledge about their world. I argue that conceptualizing professional coping strategies regarding contradicting demands in this way shows how museums react to growing non-artistic pressures without immediately falling prey to power and profit-driven logics. This perspective then contributes to central questions of the sociology of the arts like: How do logics rooting outside the arts influence

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[1] Velthuis. *Talking Prices*, p. 24.

[2] Alexander. *Heteronomy in the Arts Field*.

[3] Gray. *Commodification and Instrumentality in Cultural Policy*.

[4] Aroles et al. *Culture for Sale*.

[5] Gray. *Instrumental Policies*; Hadley/Gray. *Hyperinstrumentalism and Cultural Policy*.

[6] Bennett. *The Birth of the Museum*; Bennett. *Machineries of Modernity*; Hooper-Greenhill. *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*; Prior. *Museums and Modernity*.

[7] Burton/Scott. *Museums*.

cultural organizations? Are cultural professionals and organizations still able to follow their art-historical, curatorial and educational mission or do they fall prey to hostile worlds?

The suggested perspective contributes to an understanding of professional work in cultural fields dealing with organizational »dissonance«[8], »contradictions«[9] and respective »tensions of mission«[10] rooting in different value regimes internal and external to the arts. Furthermore, concepts like »boundary work«[11] and »trading zones«[12], which have been developed within the history and sociology of science, focus on such professional strategies across symbolic boundaries. For the case of art museums, this would mean that professional practices linked to art, politics, media, market, and law aim at mobilizing resources for organizations and, simultaneously, at protecting art-specific logics against heteronomic pressure.

For a deeper understanding of cultural fields, this conceptual focus on museums in complex ecologies contributes to theorizing functions of organizations for the arts on a general level. In conducting boundary work, professionals in art museums, theatres or opera houses show a certain functionalty for the arts that goes beyond their role as »instances of consecration«[13] and institutionalized »aestheticians«[14]. Cultural institutions not only ascribe reputation and artistic value but also channel material and immaterial resources beyond this field-specific symbolic value through wide networks of art worlds. Furthermore I argue, that cultural organizations translate and buffer logics in a twofold way: First, art museums mediate and explain artistic practices to politicians or journalists, which means that artists or curators may primarily follow aesthetic logics in their production of cultural artefacts. Second, organizations in turn translate external expectations for this agents in cultural fields.

Empirical investigations into different activities and related publics of art museums[15] are key for this argument. Based on the latest definition of the *ICOM*, a museum »researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage« for the purposes of »education, enjoyment,

[8] Stark. *The Sense of Dissonance*.

[9] Benson. *Organizations*; Seo/Creed. *Institutional Contradictions, Praxis, and Institutional Change*.

[10] Zolberg. *Tensions of Mission in American Art Museums*.

[11] Gieryn. *Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science*.

[12] Galison. *Image and Logic*; Galison. *Trading Zone*.

[13] Bourdieu. *The Rules of Art*, p. 229.

[14] Becker, *Art Worlds*, p. 164.

[15] Fyfe/Jones. *Introduction*; Kirchberg. *Museum Sociology*; Kirchberg. *Gesellschaftliche Funktionen von Museen*; Macdonald. *Introduction*.

reflection and knowledge sharing«.[16] While this multiplicity of institutional goals already hints at possible contradictions between respective »evaluative cultures«[17], organizational constraints beyond these core activities paint an even more complex and more contradicting institutional landscape for art museums. If politicians, journalists, sponsors, artists, insurance agencies, art historians, visitors, collectors and others all have very different interests in a museum, these »conflicting pressures«[18] call for professional coping strategies. However, symbolic economies at the autonomous ends of cultural fields tend to reject economic or political logics.[19] Therefore, art museum professional will risk losing field-specific reputation if they immediately align their practices with art-external demands.

While the concept of boundary work was developed for science, a cultural field equally needs to »present images« of its activities and infrastructures to »promote their authority over designated domains of knowledge«[20]. Researching, exhibiting and mediating art works is such a domain of specialized knowledge. If an exclusive authority over these issues is successively established, it may be »cashed in for copious material resources and power«[21]. To understand professional strategies relating to such different value regimes, I suggest analyzing professionals' knowledge about their own field of cultural production and about an organizational ecology including multiple interests in the arts and in museums. This methodological approach is based on key insights from the sociology of (scientific) knowledge and connects them with the sociology of the arts. I assume that all kinds of classificatory[22], evaluative[23], and comparative[24] observations have to be plausible and intelligible for observers within their holistic worldview[25]. This connection between epistemic regimes and the concrete production of exhibitions or reports refers

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[16] This definition was approved by the Extraordinary General Assembly of ICOM on 24 August 2022: https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/.

[17] Lamont. *Toward a Comparative Sociology of Valuation and Evaluation*; Berli et al. *Bewertungskulturen*.

[18] Alexander. *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

[19] Bourdieu. *The Field of Cultural Production*; Zahner. *Die neuen Regeln der Kunst*.

[20] Gieryn. *Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science*, p. 783f.

[21] Gieryn. *Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science*, p. 783f.

[22] Fourcade. *Ordinalization*; Fourcade/Healy. *Classification Situations*; Zerubavel. *Lumping and Splitting*.

[23] Hutter/Throsby. *Beyond Price; Lamont. Toward a Comparative Sociology of Valuation and Evaluation*.

[24] Espeland/Stevens. *Commensuration as a Social Process*; Heintz. *Wir leben im Zeitalter der Vergleichung*.

[25] Buckermann. *Vermessung der Kunstwelt*; Buckermann. *Ranking Art*.

to seminal approaches from the sociology of knowledge in general[26] and of scientific knowledge in particular[27]. Professionals in arts and culture base their action on a collective understanding of themselves and their environment, which, at its core, includes knowledge about art works, professionals, institutions. In addition to this field internal perspective, professional worldviews need to place art in society as a whole and in relation to other social spheres. I argue that in the arts, collective epistemological foundations[28], »paradigms«[29] and shared »styles of reasoning«[30] not only structure communication within a profession and a symbolically autonomous sphere but also across symbolic boundaries.

To develop these arguments, I present empirical results on museums for contemporary art. Semi-standardized interviews with museum professionals in Germany and Austria about their practices and their internal and external evaluations have produced data that enable linking analytically activities and communicative framings on the one side and professionals' assumptions about their world on the other. I show how museum professionals base their art-historical choices on a particular understanding of art and how they are, simultaneously, engaged in boundary work with external publics. Strategies and tactics to fulfill diverse demands cover official reports, PR and special events that are manufactured as »boundary objects«[31] to adress different publics and mobilize different resources without immediately following economic or political objectives.

The article will proceed in four steps. In part 2, I present a theoretical and methodological framework for researching art museums in contradicting ecologies. In part 3, I present empirical findings on the connection between museum professionals' worldviews and professional practices. In part 4, I discuss these practices as boundary work to show their functionality for the autonomy of the arts. In part 5, I conclude with implications for both studies on cultural organizations and sociology of the arts.

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[26] Mannheim. *Ideology and Utopia.*

[27] Fleck. *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact.*

[28] Abend. *The Love of Neuroscience*; Knorr-Cetina, *Epistemic Cultures.*

[29] Kuhn. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.*

[30] Hacking. *Language, Truth and Reason*; Hacking. *›Style‹ for Historians and Philosophers.*

[31] Star/Griesemer. *Institutional Ecology, ›Translations‹ and Boundary Objects.*

2. Art museums and worldviews

In the 21th century, art museums are involved in multiple controversies centering around broader social issues like inclusion, canonical knowledge, post-colonial entanglements, migration, economization of culture, ecological sustainability, working conditions, public funding, sexual harassment, nationalism, sponsorship by arms or pharmaceutical industries and many more. All of these discussions and their effect on museums refer to questions that trouble not only museum professionals but sociologists, too: To what extend is the art museum influenced by ideological, political and economic factors rooting outside the arts? What are the specific effects of these interests on a museum's core activities? Is the public museum able to defend its art-historical, curatorial and educational mission – which are already contradicting each other – or do evaluative criteria of the arts fall prey to power and commerce? Climaxing in the interdisciplinary, so-called *New Museology*[32], the idea of museums as passive containers or representation of objective scientific knowledge have long been rejected. Focusing on the social embeddedness of cultural organizations has received deeper scrutiny ever since. Museums are typical institutionalized organizations in modernity and they have always been active agents of cultural narratives, classificatory grids and social exclusion within broader ideological, imperialist, sexist, capitalist and racist power structures.

Studying art museums in this sociological way needs to consider the complexity of a museum's organizational ecology and its contradicting demands. In turn, art museum professionals' interpretation of these conditions constitutes a central research topic to understand the complex interrelations of museums and society. Art museums are described as »pluralistic institutions«[33] with multiple goals. These »pluralistic purposes«[34] produce »tensions of mission«[35] within an organization. Emphasizing a specific link between a single missions and an organizational public, I argue that professional knowledge about these publics is critical. To explain what museums actually do, I suggest reconstructing art museum professionals' understandings of different stakeholders, of different value systems and of related criteria, with which they are confronted. In this way, it doesn't matter what e.g. a donor objectively is or what s/he objectively desires but what museum professionals think s/he was and what they think the donor wanted because concrete actions can only depend on this knowledge.

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[32] Vergo. *New Museology*.

[33] Zolberg. *Conflicting Visions in American Art Museums*, p. 119.

[34] Alexander. *History in Motion*, p. 36.

[35] Zolberg. *Tensions of Mission in American Art Museums*.

Several groups and agents not only offer resources but also impose requirements on a museum, which are related to indicator-driven politics, volatile capital markets, commodification of cultural artefacts, differentiated scholarly discourses, migration and demographic change, traditional journalism and social media, feminist and post-colonial critique and much more. These formal and informal coercions constitute the relevant environment for organizations and have already been proven to shape organizational types and fields.[36] If contradictions emerge from the requirements or within one requirement, the museum is confronted with organizational dilemmas[37], which necessitate choices in view of highly different interests and norms. Sociological research has been able to link such »conflicting pressures«[38] with the factual work of museums. Investigating one of the core activities of art museums, Alexander[39] shows that formats but not necessarily contents of exhibition change in respect to different types of funding. However, such analytical models of political, economic or religious influence on the museum have rather been pre-supposing relatively stable interests of homogenous typological agents. Equally, an art-specific interest of art museums (in opposition to politicians, sponsors etc.) have remained rather unproblematized although it conceptually shapes research designs regarding influence of external pressures. I suggest investigating art world agents' particular understandings of their complex ecology including their understanding of their art world. Such a worldview consists of an interrelated set of assumptions about different social spheres, relevant sectors and agents as well as interpretations of multiple interests in the arts and respective modes of valuation. These epistemological foundations, I argue, make organizational practices analytically plausible because each activity has to make sense within a comprehensive worldview.

Switching to the museum's very own perspective of its constantly shifting social ecology advances the study of art museums and other cultural institutions. This conceptual and empirical shift follows seminal approaches from the sociology of (scientific) knowledge and connects them with research on art. For the arts as well, I assume different sets of collective knowledge and epistemological regimes in ›thought collectives‹[40]. In relation to this collective epistemology, a certain ›thought style‹ structures what one can see at all and in which way. In case of art world professionals, sociologists have described such observational foundations as »aesthetic systems«[41], »principles

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[36] DiMaggio/Powell. *Iron Cage Revisited*.

[37] Blau/Scott. *Formal Organizations*, p. 222.

[38] Alexander. *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

[39] Alexander. *Pictures at an Exhibition*; Alexander. *From Philanthropy to Funding*.

[40] Fleck. *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*.

[41] Becker. *Art Worlds*, p. 131.

of vision and division«[42], or semantic foundations of »self-descriptions«[43]. Although science and art differ in how knowledge is created and what counts as legitimate assumptions[44], I assume different epistemic regimes[45] with paradigmatic[46] approaches in the arts as well. If these concepts are a proper tool, the modes of production and circulation of knowledge about the arts, different values and assumptions about the arts' role in a society will all relate to epistemological foundations[47] including a consistent set of assumptions about objects of interest.[48]

Instead of placing a cultural institution in a however given world, this ›seeing like[49] a museum‹ reconstructs what museum professionals know about their complex shifting ecology and how they act upon this cognitive map. To test such a comparative perspective on multiple knowledge regimes within the arts, I therefore assume that museum professionals' strategic adaptions and particular practices can be analytically linked to their paradigmatic worldview. This worldview would be key to understand why professionals in cultural organizations are doing certain things and communicate these activities in certain ways. Furthermore, worldviews could then explain how contradicting demands can be met through certain practices without sacrificing one mission or the other.

Researching worldviews goes beyond agents' knowledge about their own field but asks for necessary knowledge about field-external structures and agents, too. A relation between organizational environments and specific actions has already been elaborated in organizational studies. Neo-institutionalism situates museums in contradicting worlds and relates expectations and coercions to different museum practices and strategies in a professional field.[50] The literature beyond the arts shows that organizations do not immediately follow external expectations but rather apply coping strategies like, for example, decoupling actions and formal structures to maintain institutional myths[51], or, public representation of activities and actual activities

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[42] Bourdieu. *The Rules of Art*, p. 58.

[43] Luhmann. *Art as a Social System*, pp. 244ff.

[44] Chong. *Legitimate Judgment in Art, the Scientific World Reversed?*

[45] Knorr-Cetina, *Epistemic Cultures*.

[46] Kuhn. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

[47] Buckermann. *Ranking Art*.

[48] Abend. *The Love of Neuroscience*.

[49] Fourcade/Healy. *Seeing like a Market*; Scott. *Seeing Like a State*.

[50] DiMaggio. *Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston*; DiMaggio, *Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston, Part II*; DiMaggio. *Nonprofit Enterprise in the Arts*; DiMaggio. *Constructing an Organizational Field as a Professional Project*.

[51] Meyer/Rowan. *Institutionalized Organizations*.

might differ and only be loosely coupled.[52] In this sense, various forms of »talk and action«[53] can be related to contradicting organizational publics and goals. While my approach equally assumes socially embedded organizations and respective organizational adaptions, I reject understanding organizations as trivial machines with a linear »environment-output link«[54] rooted in inevitable resource dependency[55]. When Alexander[56] writes that art museums ›make‹ sponsors by identifying and convincing corporations to become sponsors, she refers to Weick's concepts of enactment in sense-making organizations[57], which, I argue, needs to be applied in a more radical-constructivist[58] sense. First, organizations need to develop knowledge about their ecology in their own terms. Then, they act plausibly upon these assumptions. From an analytical point of view, one cannot assume »fixed and unproblematic entities«[59] in organizations environments, which is why I propose to research organizations in their problematic relation to their ecology[60] rather than applying pre-defined definitions of politics, sponsors or visitors.

Instead of taking ›politics‹, ›art‹, ›media‹ or ›capitalism‹ for given entities, I ask for museum professionals' construction of such agents and their interests. Based on empirical research, the following section shows selected strategic communication and actions realized by professionals and relates them to worldviews. Especially in representing the museum's activities for certain publics, communicative strategies include quantification[61], different evaluations[62], comparisons[63], commensuration[64] and categorizations[65]. While the perspective laid out in this part structures the following analysis in part 3, the results prepare further discussions in part 4 regarding cultural organizations' practices across symbolic boundaries role for the autonomy of the arts:

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[52] Orton/Weick. *Loosely Coupled Systems*.

[53] Brunsson. *The Organisations of Hypocrisy*.

[54] Alexander. *Pictures at an Exhibition*, p. 798.

[55] Pfeffer/Salancik. *The External Control of Organizations*.

[56] Alexander. *Pictures at an Exhibition*, p. 828.

[57] Weick. *Sensemaking in Organizations*.

[58] Luhmann. *Organization and Decision*; Weick. *Making Sense of the Organization*.

[59] Abbott. *Linked Ecologies*, p. 246.

[60] Abbott. *Linked Ecologies*, p. 246.; Hannan. *Ecologies of Organizations*.

[61] Espeland/Stevens. *A Sociology of Quantification*; Mennicken/Espeland. *What's New with Numbers?*

[62] Hutter/Throsby. *Beyond Price*; Lamont. *Toward a Comparative Sociology of Valuation and Evaluation*.

[63] Heintz. *Wir leben im Zeitalter der Vergleichung*.

[64] Espeland/Stevens. *Commensuration as a Social Process*.

[65] Fourcade. *Ordinalization*; Zerubavel. *Lumping and Splitting*.

Museums are engaged in direct and indirect trades with politics, experts, visitors, journalists and others, but still follow their core missions of supporting, researching and displaying art based on their autonomous professional criteria.

3. Organizational publics and museum strategies

3.1 Methods and research design

Combining organizational theory, sociology of the arts and sociology of (scientific) knowledge, I approach art museums as sense-making organizations that possess a cognitive map about their symbolically diverse ecology and strategically align their practices based on these worldviews. Venturing from this heuristic, my research design includes an interview study about different museum practices and different forms of success. Based on 16 in-depth interviews with high-ranking art museum professionals in Germany and Austria, I have reconstructed an archetypical cognitive map of a museum. The semi-standardized interviews with fourteen directors, one head of public relations and one head of an education department were conducted between 2015 and 2017. There had been 706 art museums and 315 exhibition venues for art in Germany in 2015 and 64 art museums in Austria in 2014.[66] Following a first exploration of the field, I decided to contact institutions in one state [Bundesland] institutions because I assumed similar public and private funding opportunities as well as comparable visitors. After this I contacted more institutions in Germany and Austria keeping. Searching for assumptions about world and their relation to particular practices, I have interpreted transcripts of more than eighteen hours of audio material. Here, I focused on broader patterns which would hint at broader collective professional knowledge rather than individual particularities. The process of coding started with general codes like ›goal‹, ›success‹, ›museum practice‹, ›organizational public‹, ›interpretation of different evaluative logics‹, ›feedback‹ to identify relevant passages. Successively extending the code system inductively, subcategories developed for specific ›types‹ of goals, success, practices, interpretations, feedback, and publics. While particular problems differed from case to case in various dimensions (location, budget, staff, art historical focus), I was able to synthesize how museum professionals see themselves and their world on general level. The interviewees almost never mentioned collecting when it came to publicly recognized museum activities but

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[66] Institut für Museumsforschung. *Statistische Gesamterhebung 2015*; Museums in Austria: https://www.museen-in-oesterreich.at/.

clearly focused on other main goals of public museums: researching, exhibiting, entertaining and educating. This is why my results also focus on the production of exhibitions and supplementary events as well as the representation of these museum activities.

I present results on two levels: First, I reconstruct analytically what museum professionals see and think of art, professional peers, visitors, politics, and media. Second, I show connections between specific practices and assumed expectations of these publics. I begin with the central dual purpose of education (3.2) and art-historical contributions through research and display (3.3). After describing audience targeting strategies (3.4), I outline museums' activities based on assumptions about mass media (3.5) and politics (3.6).

3.2 Museums and education: Aesthetic experience, canon, and multiperspectivity

All interviewees described their museums as educational institutions and highlighted the exclusive potential of the arts for individual and collective development. The museum was a »classic educational institution«[67] with a formal assignment to mediate art and teach on cultural aspects. One of the museum's »main purpose« was being a part of an »educational process« that concerns every human being in the most general, modern sense. This necessitates accessibility to cultural products on both a formal and a content level. »We have to offer something for everybody«, one interviewee said in this inclusive way. Although different institutions are part of an educational landscape, most cultural organizations differed decisively from schools because there is nothing like compulsory schooling in museums and many cultural organizations still raise entrance fees. Therefore, museums have to take certain actions to attract visitors. However, the art museum would have exclusive advantages compared to other educational institutions because the museum had a privileged »content and way of mediation that cannot be found anywhere else«. This special feature was an individual, immediate experience of original cultural artefacts, which not only differs from group discussions of reproductions used in schools but challenges »all senses and energy resources«.

While museums are supposed to offer sensual and aesthetic experience, they also teach art-historical facts, scholarly classification and critical commentary: »The museum is always historical narrative and collective memory«, which is why one could learn »how past generations thought and saw their

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[67] All quotes are my translations from German.

world«. Especially contemporary art could transcend this educational process into the present as well the future: »How will we see the world? What could be the perspectives?«. Enabling an understanding of »personal embeddedness into society, into history, is, for me, actually the main purpose of a museum«, which hints at the arts' attributed capacity to provoke reflections on contingency in human perception and contingency in a civilization's history.

3.3 Museums and art history: Research, consecration, novelty

Although the art museum was described as an inclusive educational institution throughout the interviews, the museum directors simultaneously warn of a strict orientation at 'the public' in its most universal sense. Most of the interviewees are trained art historians and discipline-bound knowledge was the reason why this collective, »as art historians«, had »certain competences in particular fields«. One director claimed that museum professionals »obviously have a vision of what art should accomplish and what it is in the early 21st century«. This consecrational power needed to be used »to position selected art and leave a mark« in art history. Such categorization, acknowledgment and evaluation of art works is not only based on a collective mission but also performed within this peer network, which is characterized by mutual observation: Professional selections had to be critically recognized by other institutions and experts.

Descriptions about professional criteria stay rather opaque: »It just has to be good art. It has to be art, that I am convinced will last.« However, my data shows that novelty is a crucial criteria applied in a professional network of curators, art historians and museum directors to justify, verify, and validate their choices. Within this collective understanding of a historical stock of art and its institutional presentation, multifaceted novelties are possible. Obviously, recently produced works or the ones that have never been shown publicly before are considered to be new. However, the interviewees rather stress novelty through curatorial and art-historical (re-)contextualization of works. Old or well-known art works may produce novelty through new scholarly arguments, through an art-historical discovery, through revealed formal references or through an intellectual link to contemporary discourse. Curators not only strive for the discovery of newly produced, relevant art but they equally aim at a »spectacular art-historical line of thought« to produce and promote »new narratives« or a »new interpretation of works we already know«.

In these varieties of novelty, experts scrutinized exhibitions on whether »a project, may it be historical or contemporary, has produced a new level of knowledge in an art scene«. These forms of novelty only work in regard to

collective professional knowledge about history and can only be evaluated and validated in a group of experts. A »peer group« is considered to be operating »on the same level of experiences and thoughts«, which makes it sociologically plausible to assume ›thought collectives‹ and ›thought styles‹ known from studies on scientific knowledge[68] for the arts as well. An »exclusive expert audience« with »general expectations« consisted of those persons, »who make the same things that I am doing and who are facing the same dilemma that I am facing. They can evaluate all those patterns and roles I am acting in«. Anticipated collective experience of museum professionals in a complex world leads to a kind of collective coherence and to different strategies to defend professional criteria against politics, mass media or the »totally different world« of the market.

This central role of »a peer network« makes knowledge about its internal structure necessary to detect relevance and generate orientation in a field, which consists of countless organizations and professionals. Indeed, professionals constantly and selectively observe their world but they do it a very certain way. Although there are clear differences in range and depth of focus, the interviewees share a common criterion to structure this group from within: reputation. Interestingly enough for sociologists who are research symbolic structures of art themselves, reputation is as a practical and epistemic tool to order the professional field from within[69], because it works pragmatically for orientation in this complex field.

For example, »the image of a house, its standing«, is weighed when it comes to possible cooperation. On the other side, feedback itself is evaluated based on a reputational structure. Here, selective art magazines were important, which »are not read by a broad public but by art historians, students and persons that are highly invested in the arts«. Such publications particularly functioned as a factual display of public recognition and reputation, which »are perceived by other institutions, other museums«. In this critical discourse, museums observe not only others but also themselves through the eyes of an expert community: »You see who is or isn't successful. And you can easily locate yourself in this room of success and see how you are doing.« Here, a public arena based on a collective thought style and value system enables professionals to make evaluations for inevitable decisions.

Because certain critics, art historians and museum experts are assumed to apply specific criteria, professionals link reputation, which is publicly indicated by collaborations and media coverage, to the quality of a museum's activities. This observation of proxies indicating art-historical and curatorial

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[68] Fleck. *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact.*
[69] Pachucki. *Classifying Quality*; Buckermann. *Power 100*

quality is itself described a demanding operation due to volatile rhythms of discourse on exhibitions as well as (slow) academic publication rhythms. If »I can make 40 exhibitions and if I am lucky, one will provoke resonance«, it can possibly take »years, many years« even for this outstanding one until a publication or another exhibition refers to it. This directly links to novelty: From the perspective of directors, real novelty can only be validated through an external acknowledgement of this novelty. The specific temporal mode of publications and exhibition projects, however, only produces delayed facts of acknowledgment. In this sense, something can never be new for sure in the moment. Only a reaction at another place at another time can recognize this novelty as valid.

Reputation links artists with institutions, too. Like institutions, artists are placed in a similar comparative realm by curators. Depending on their own reputation, artists have a double role in a trade of reputation. Relatively unknown artists form an abundant supply in light of scarce art world resources. In this situation, an acknowledged museum increases an artist's reputation through public recognition. If an artist has gathered reputation through such institutional representation and critical attention, the relation of abundance and scarcity reverses. In this situation, the artist's resources (works of art, time) are scarce compared to abundant options for exhibitions in museums interested in the artist. Here, an artist in high demand is able to increase a museum's reputation because s/he has accumulated reputation through former representation of acknowledged institutions. Especially if two museums don't »play in in the same league«, artists are assumed to transport reputation of the »bigger institution« to the »smaller« one.

Professional observations of such reputational hierarchies as well as the relation between reputation and quality are already demanding. However, this knowledge cannot be the only criterion for professional decisions, if we remember the educational goal of museums. The interviewees expect only selected experts in certain professional groups – artists, art historians, curators, critics – to be able to acknowledge and evaluate novelty. These targeted experts differ from the audience addressed by a museum's educational mission.

Professionals translated an »internal dialogue« of experts, conducted during research and conceptualization of an exhibition, for the regular visitors. To attract this general public, museum professionals have a relatively stable image of the population of visitors and non-visitors. Directors outline different segments of visitors and refer to numerous anecdotal evidence gathered over their careers. Intriguingly, systematic (non-)visitor studies are often described as obsolete because they anyway would confirm what museum professional already know. If one director says, »I'm producing exhibitions for thirty years and I roughly know who is attracted by what«, visitor studies

seem to be concerned with something that is »no big secret«. However, museum personnel apply indeed social scientific categories – namely from sociology of cultural consumption and social structure – for understanding (potential) visitors and their interests in a museum. First, museum directors split up the population into groups defined by categories like age, place of residence, gender, cultural background, and education. Then, they attribute cultural preferences to these groups. For example, a »lost generation« of young persons had never experienced a »first contact« with museums and insofar lacked art-historical interests. Nevertheless, art museum can attract these (potential) visitors because young people were assumed to be more likely connecting with new media art, broader social issues, experience-based exhibitions (performances, choreographies, happenings), references to mass culture (cinema, video games, popular music, comic) and intersections with applied arts (e.g. fashion design, graphic design, industrial design).

Museums have a double reference because they want to enable expert discussions in one dimension and mediate the findings to a broader public on another, »so that humans understand what we are doing here«. When core goals of the museum – education and art history – produce different expectations about museum work, practical problems appear. Instead of a controversial understanding of ›education vs. aesthetics‹ and ›elitist vs. popular‹, my data hints at another direction. The interviewees recognize problems and look for productive combinations instead of sacrificing one for another. My analysis shows that the central art-historical criteria, novelty, actually mediates the two main goals. In an educational dimension, art is supposed to irritate everyday routines and perceptions by offering alternative perception of world. An ongoing process of irritations urges for novelty because aesthetic forms and curatorial contextualization become familiar and routinized over time. Although the two goals differ on many levels, the need for novelty in an expert community simultaneously seems to ensures new irritations for educational purposes. This unintentional function of a permanent call for novelty weakens a conception of an antagonistic opposition between educational and art-historical goals of a museum.

3.4 Targeting visitors and experts: Menus and modularization

Because art-historic novelty is not to be assumed a proper reason for the broader public to visit museums, strategies to target this audience have to be developed. Based on personal experience and confirmed by studies on (non-)visitors, directors mainly speak of two methods to mobilize as many visitors and experts as possible. First, there is a combination of different exhibitions

ranging from what is to be assumed popular taste to expert interests. This worked liked a »menu in a restaurant, so that there is something for every target group«, one director says, and a combination of different exhibition types worked either simultaneously or in a temporal sequence in one museum. Second, educators and directors understand content of an exhibition, its mediation, educational programs, special events or publications as individual modules that each can target different audience segments. In combination, this should attract a diverse population ranging from experts to kids or experience-seeking party people, possibly at ›the same‹ exhibition. Here, the professionals' idea of different motive-based »reasons-to-visit« [Ger.: Besuchsanlässe] shows clearly how professionals' assumptions about individual interests shape the manufacturing of specific events like artist talks, scholarly lectures, live cookings, family events, DJ performances or guided tours for nudists/dog owners/blind persons/expats/female migrants and many more. Combining these different attractions to offer a diverse »product line«, museum professionals aim at mobilizing as many visitors as possible, preferably to the same exhibition. They try to »set in motion a large carousel between these poles and then there is a certain swing in it and you reach different target groups«.

On the one side, all these strategies targeting experts and general visitors can be explained by basic assumptions about these audiences' specific interests. On the other, there is clear indication that museums are engaged in a variety of activities that are not directly guided by art-historical or educational logics. But, in producing the fine-tuned ›reasons-to-visit‹, which have no direct impact on the core form and content of an exhibition, the museum attracts visitors and media coverage without applying other criteria than their own for the selection and contextualization of art works in the exhibition space.

While these strategies gravitate around to the two main museum goals, museum professionals are, furthermore, confronted with a set of secondary goals, respective audiences and their expectations. The following section briefly shows how secondary goals referring to politics and media play an additional role for a museum's activities.

3.5 Museums and mass media: Public spheres and news-values

Mass media and journalists fulfill various functions for a public museum. On the one hand, potential visitors and other journalists are informed on exhibitions and events in the museum. On the other, critics and journalists produce public verdicts on quality and relevance. For mobilization of visitors, the interviewees related specific visitor segments to equally specific media

segments and hoped for a broad coverage to attract different milieus. On a more general level, journalists are assumed to react to certain triggers. »Innovation« and »novelty« were examples for »media and marketing buzzwords«. The museum needed to produce »a high news value [Ger.: Neuigkeitswert], it needs to offer new approaches«, which is why » [t]his is how we frame it anyway, 'shown for the first time', or 'for the first time in twenty years' or 'for the first time in Germany'«. Like their understanding of visitors, directors conceptualize mass media logics in a quasi-sociological manner, when they name mechanisms (and in this case even the scientific term) that are object of communication research for decades.[70]

While coverage is assumed to be positive on a general level, critical evaluations in more general newspapers play an ambivalent role. Except from selected individual critics, assessments in mass media were clearly distinct from those in expert publications. While directors are deeply interested in expert verdicts on their work, the content of a critical coverage in general newspapers or broadcasting does not matter too much because the basic fact of attention by well-known mass media is more important than a critical verdict on quality. This is the case because museum professionals assume that non-experts like local politicians and general visitors acknowledge these popular media as relevant. Appearing in one of them is considered to be a success in its own regard but not immediately as an art-historical success. »Media reception« is, one interviewee says, »a very typical form of evaluation in politics«, which is why media coverage was »an indicator to politicians that we are not pursuing a hobby here but that there is critical recognition by an independent instance«. This is why certain ›reasons-to-visit‹ may primarily target a broader audience but in doing so it is equally understood as a ›reason-to-report‹.

3.6 Museums and politics: Numbers and efficiency

Politicians and public administration are important for my interviewees because their museums were all mainly funded by public resources. Although national differences in cultural politics are crucial for cultural institutions' funding[71], I can offer some general insights that might contribute to other cases. Regarding the educational and art-historical goals, museum assemble »a colorful bouquet of things« to shape the »opinion of those, who are important for us because they give us the money«. Indicators that should fulfill

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[70] Galtung/Ruge. *The Structure of Foreign News.*

[71] Alexander et al. *Art and the challenge of markets*; Alexander/Rueschemeyer. *Art and the State*; for Germany see Zahner. *The Economization of the Arts and Culture Sector in Germany After 1945.*

formal requirements and informal expectations are »guided tours, academic publications, visitors, approaches to the digital word, and media coverage«. In communicating these activities and resonances, the museum professionals try to establish a positive view of the museum on a general basis. To accomplish this positive image, communicative contents take certain forms because directors perceive that they have to talk with »persons in the administration, who have no idea about culture«, and who have no interest »what is actually happening here«.

Politicians are not considered to be »interested automatically in a museum« or »in our research questions or the practice behind the scenes«. Rather, politicians are assumed to work with »hard facts« and »clearly numerical things like 'what did it cost and what's the output?' «. This emphasis on quantitative information is perceived ambivalently by museum professionals. On the one side, numbers needed to be interpreted because not only the »numbers men should discuss efficiency of a cultural institution«. On the other side, the interviewees talk about certain strategic, quantifying adjustments in mediating information. Media coverage, guided tours, publications and academic events are not depicted in a qualitative sense assessing their individual art-historical, critical or educational success but rather in form of lists and tables showing the quantitative amount of these indicators in order to proof a museum's activities. To provoke a certain interpretation of numerical data, reports are supplemented with anecdotal highlights like awards, a single article in a well-known newspaper, a well-respected sponsor, or a cooperation with another famous cultural institution. All this is based on relatively stable assumptions about external expectations and value systems. For example, one director described that »we are trying to explain politicians that there is a difference between regional newspaper and an international expert magazine. They get this, sure, but it is not an evaluative criterion for them«. The next section focuses on such strategic work on the boundaries of art and proposes more general implications for the sociology of the arts.

4. Boundary work and autonomy of the arts

In this section, I theorize how cultural organizations' practices across symbolic boundaries relate to an autonomy of the arts. I conceptualize those strategic activities described so far as boundary work in a complex symbolic ecology. Paradigmatic worldviews explain such complicated practices by museum professionals because I claim that my study shows how paradigmatic assumptions about the arts' role in society, a field of art world professionals and institutions, artists, visitors, politicians, and the media shape specific museum strategies to meet multiple and contradicting goals simultaneously.

Compilations of exhibitions and specific events as well as strategic communication then show that museums do not directly align their activities with just one logic, let it be art-historical, educational, political or journalistic. Rather, they produce a range of fine-tuned products and communicative representations of their work. The form and content of these activities, which go beyond exhibitions of art works, can be linked to assumptions about organizational publics, their expectations and their logics. In addressing these contradicting goals pragmatically based on their worldviews, professionals and institutions' art-historical practices still on autonomous criteria.

My data shows how the autonomous logics in categorizing, comparing and evaluating art works and artists are directed toward a flexible understanding of art-historic novelty. However, discovering and validating novelty are deeply embedded in a professional field shaped by symbolic resources. My data and other studies[72] show that art professionals possess sophisticated knowledge about the structure of their institutional field based on reputation. Here, a second layer of symbolic autonomy of the arts plays an epistemological role for the production of art-historical knowledge. Symbolic resource distribution supports agents to identify relevant art and evaluate feedback on their work. It is this autonomy of certain criteria that stabilizes and changes symbolic structures.[73] While there are major differences in various methodological and theoretical sociological approaches to autonomy[74], I sketch a perspective on cultural institutions' ›boundary work‹ that connects with different concepts of autonomy.

While numerous concepts of symbolic boundaries refer to distinctions between persons, objects, social groups or cultural classifications[75], I highlight boundaries of symbolically autonomous social spheres known from Bourdieusian field theory and Luhmanns theory of functional differentiation. My results show processes of the arts' active demarcation or struggles between worldviews within the arts, which research calls »boundary work«[76]. While internal struggles and shifts take place in professions anyway[77], my results stress those aspects of the concept that approaches »protecting professional autonomy« in avoiding »controls by government or industry«[78]. Constituting

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[72] Pachucki. *Classifying Quality*; Buckermann. *Ranking Art*. Buckermann. *Power 100*.

[73] Becker. *Art Worlds*; Bourdieu. *The Rules of Art*.

[74] Karstein/Zahner. 2017. *Autonomie der Kunst?*

[75] Lamont/Molnár. *The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences*; Lamont et al. *Symbolic Boundaries*; Pachucki et al. *Boundary Processes*.

[76] Gieryn. *Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science*; Gieryn. *Cultural Boundaries of Science*.

[77] Abbott. *The System of Professions*.

[78] Gieryn. *Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science*, pp. 789f.

a social sphere in regard to such boundaries, countless curators, museum directors and more collectively contribute to this kind of boundary work by offering information and interpretation about the art world accessible and appropriate for diverse agents and logics.[79] Here, the collective body of knowledge of a ›thought collective‹ turns to an object of inquiry for sociological research in art and society because it explains several, decentral and potentially uncoordinated actions. However, the particular ›thought style‹[80] shown in my study goes beyond the production and validation of knowledge about art. While this »style of reasoning«[81] about art is in fact structured by autonomous criteria like novelty and reputation, cultural professionals possess a much more diverse knowledge about their ecology beyond the arts to meet multiple demands from politics, mass media or sponsors.

Based on these holistic worldviews, disputed quantitative data like visitor figures, amount of media coverage and more is manufactured by the museum because it assumes politicians and media to easily comprehend this form and content of information. Additionally, educational programs, parts of exhibitions and all sorts of events equally function as ›boundary objects‹[82] that are directed at different visitor segments, expert milieus, politicians, journalists or critics in order to generate different resources. Numerical communication's capacity for smooth de- and recontextualization[83] across a multiplicity of boundaries becomes particularly productive when museums communicate quantitative data to deal with highly different symbolic spheres. When Porter[84] writes that »[i]n intellectual exchange, as in properly economic transactions, numbers are the medium through which dissimilar desires, needs, and expectations are somehow made commensurable«, we can observe how the production of numerical information is already shaped by professionals' assumptions about other stakeholders and their »desires, needs, and expectations«.

Galison[85] describes trading zones as spatial and symbolic places, where different groups exchange resources despite »radically different significance for the donor and recipient«. Based on my analysis, museums navigate a variety

[79] Bowker/Star. *Sorting Things Out*; Star/Griesemer. *Institutional Ecology, ›Translations‹ and Boundary Objects*.

[80] Fleck. *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*.

[81] Hacking. *Language, Truth and Reason*; Hacking. *›Style‹ for Historians and Philosophers*.

[82] Star/Griesemer. *Institutional Ecology, ›Translations‹ and Boundary Objects*.

[83] Espeland/Stevens. *Commensuration as a Social Process*; Espeland/Stevens. *A Sociology of Quantification*; Heintz. *Numerische Differenz*.

[84] Porter. *Trust in Numbers*, p. 86.

[85] Galison. *Trading Zone*, p. 146.

of such trading zones both coercive to collaborative in nature[86] related to public and private funding, art-historical and art critical discourse, freedom of the press, parliamentary and activist politics, education and entertainment, the (art) market, other cultural institutions, artists and much more. However, the production of modularized exhibition programs, special events, and communicative representations traded in these multiple zones complement the art-historical work and help to meet secondary goals without giving up art-specific criteria.

In this way, activities and strategic communication described in this paper are not immediately symptoms of economization or neoliberalization. Professionals' do aim at generating symbolic and financial means for production of art but equally shelter art-specific logics by either feeding abstract and instrumentally framed information to politicians and mass media or attract a range of highly different visitors through target-oriented components of exhibition programs and special events. This work at the boundaries of autonomous art via ›boundary objects‹ in multiple trading zones[87] not only protects professional autonomy of museum professionals but also the whole autonomous sphere of art.

5. Implications for research on cultural organizations and the sociology of the arts

My empirical and theoretical findings hint at different research trajectories for studying cultural organizations as well as for theoretical developments in the sociology of the arts. First, my analysis contributes to sociological debates on cultural organizations' autonomy allegedly under threat by hostile worlds: Museums can in fact apply various strategies to meet external demands and simultaneously protect their core logics regarding art. These strategies, I argued, are based on holistic worldviews combining knowledge about art, its social embeddedness and relevant organizational publics. This perspective is easily applicable to other organizations in the visual arts, e.g. biennales, commercial galleries, critical publications, awards, art schools – or organizations in other arts like theatre, music, literature or dance. Furthermore, a comparative perspective on worldviews drawn from sociology of (scientific) knowledge and organizational studies enables historical studies as well as investigations into regional particularities. Taking into consideration concepts on symbolic boundaries on more cases and more comparative dimensions

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[86] Collins et al. *Trading Zones and Interactional Expertise*.

[87] See also Gorman. *Levels of Expertise and Trading Zones*.

will show in more detail, if and how cultural organizations navigate complex social ecologies.

Second, my results on museums functioning as filters, brokers, and translators show new trajectories for research on autonomy of the arts. Those institutions that have been researched regarding heteronomy, commodification, instrumentalization, and a neoliberalization of the arts, are in fact crucial infrastructures for art worlds to mobilize resources and enable art-historical discourse. Besides funds and attention, museums provide necessary selection and expert recognition in the field, which is capitalized by artists, curators, and others in other parts of the art world. While the power of such cultural »gatekeepers«[88] is widely discussed, an inevitable need for selection and evaluation cannot be ignored. I argue in line with major sociological contributions on the history of autonomous art[89] that art after feudalism, is characterized by deregulation because earlier authorities controlling access to artistic fields as well as form and content of art works have withered away during the 18th and 19th century. In the liberal script of modernity (and in many regions of the world today), almost no formal restrictions regulate what is an artist, a curator, a museum, a critic, a work of art, and so on. This leads to a vast amount of cultural artefacts, personnel and institutions, which turn into abundance in regard to limited resources. In these conditions of »too little, enough, and too much«[90], categorizations, evaluation, and selection are as necessary in the arts as they are contingent. On the one side, art museums in fact function as one established institution ensuring these necessary selections of art works, artists and curators. On the other, these selective processes of art are themselves embedded in selective processes and symbolic structures reducing the abundance of institutions and the collective production of certain ›authorities‹ with accumulated symbolic power in a field of cultural production. To understand how exactly qualitative and quantitative complexities are reduced by art world agents, I propose researching multiple paradigmatic worldviews. If the impact of certain »aesthetic systems«[91] and the capacity to produce acknowledged legitimate categorizations and evaluations is based on mutual recognition[92], logics for recognition should be found in single worldviews. In case of my interviewees, reputation is the central resource to structure this world of art, which enables observation and

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[88] Bystryn. *Art Galleries as Gatekeepers*. Kawashima. *Distribution of the Arts*.

[89] Bourdieu. *The Rules of Art*. Luhmann. *Art as a Social System*. White/White. *Canvases and Careers*.

[90] Abbott. *The Problem of Excess*, pp. 2.

[91] Becker. *Art Worlds*, p. 131.

[92] Bourdieu. *The Rules of Art*.

validation of novelty. Important insights into recent shifts in the field for visual art have been produced[93], dealing with dimensions like autonomy/heteronomy[94]; local, regional, and global levels[95]; or geographical centers and peripheries[96]. Here, further research will show how such dimensions are reconstructed in worldviews and how these selective understandings link to different practices.

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[93] Alexander/Bowler. *Art at the Crossroads.*

[94] Graw. *High Price*. Zahner. *Die neuen Regeln der Kunst.*

[95] Buchholz. *What is a global field?*; Buchholz. *Global Rules of Art.*

[96] Buchholz. *Rethinking the Center-Periphery Model*; Quemin. *Globalization and Mixing in the Visual Arts.*

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