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Sifakakis, Spyros

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# Contemporary art's audiences

## *Specialist accreditation and the myth of inclusion*

**Spyros Sifakakis**

*University of Central England*

**ABSTRACT** While postmodernist claims for contemporary art's pluralism, inclusive character and interpenetration with everyday cultures proliferate, little attention is paid to the actual practices, discourses and realities of the art world, its institutions and the interest groups that are involved. Based on findings of the author's recent ethnographic research on a leading contemporary art gallery in Britain and through an analysis of art's audiences as an insider construct, this article argues that a distinction exists between informed and uninformed audiences which is directly associated with two competing types of cultural recognition. These are specialist accreditation and public recognition; the domination of the former in their struggle is presented as decisive in art's socio-cultural legitimization and as manifest in the content and limited range of the audience as an insider discourse.

**KEYWORDS** *art galleries, audiences, contemporary art, discourse, institutionalized artistic production, legitimacy, postmodernism, public recognition, specialist accreditation*

Exposed: Turner Sex that Will Cause Uproar. (Smith, 2003)

Turner Prize Shock: out of four serious competitors, the best artist wins. (Kennedy, 2004)

Many would argue that in the past ten years there has been a sea change in public appreciation of the visual arts ... I would, of course, argue 'no'. For in spite of much greater public interest in all aspects of visual culture, including design and architecture, the challenge posed by contemporary art has not evaporated. We have only to recall the headlines for last year's Turner Prize. (Serota, 2000)<sup>1</sup>

**The controversial cultural** state of high visual art<sup>2</sup> can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century, when a range of innovative and unfamiliar compositions, objects and artists' programmatic statements marked



a substantial reorientation of culturally recognized artistic production. This transition, which is now broadly recognized as modernist, then marked a dramatic break with conventional art and its established academic rules and conventions, transforming it beyond cultural recognition. Whereas the diversity and pluralism of contemporary artworks is now celebrated by most art theories and postmodernist discourses (Fox, 1987; Jencks, 1992; Lyotard, 1982; Prior, 2005; Wynne and O' Connor, 1998), the rapid succession of modernist movements is still historically unprecedented in terms of the frequency and diversity of orientations, synthesis, medium and content (Crowther, 1996; Danto, 1987), and this dramatic reorientation has formed the grounds of art's crisis of legitimacy (Molyneux, 1998) and controversial cultural status. Celebrations of contemporary art's diversity and pluralism are a key component of postmodernist discourses and academic theories of art and culture whose inputs are dominant in academia and western art worlds. In effect, the key items of this dominant discourse, art's diversity, pluralism and the subsequent concept of inclusion – which stand for its increasingly accessible and inclusionary socio-cultural state – are among the major strategic goals of the Arts Council of England (Arts Council of England, 2003), and similarly among the major items of the agendas of contemporary British galleries whose core budgets are provided by it.

However, despite these celebrations of pluralism, diversity and inclusion, it is notable that the British art world, one of the outstanding and most visible artistic fields at an international level, is marked by significant controversies which most often arrive in the form of sceptical responses on the part of some academics, critics or the general public concerning the artworks of contemporary galleries, their market value, meaning or even their very artistic status. Public discourse, a considerable part of the British media, press and critics (e.g. Beckett, 1997; Searle, 2001) see this art as a confidence trick or practice that is built around solid connections, market awareness and deliberate marketing tactics with a view to profit-making, and take the art world as a glamorous circle of sharp entrepreneurs – patrons and collectors, dealers, directors and managers of key institutions, celebrities and big money.<sup>5</sup>

Such sceptical approaches and postmodernist theories of art present imperative questions in theoretical and methodological terms, and also problems in view of some of the key facts and conditions of contemporary art worlds. Pluralism, diversity and inclusion, all key terms in most – if not all – British institutional galleries' mission statements and discourses, and increasing public attendance at contemporary shows, are celebrated by postmodernist accounts. However, public and critical scepticism and a crisis of the legitimacy of contemporary art are evidenced by a range of incidents and exhibitions that are poorly received even by gallery-goers or critics, and claims about increasing attendance figures tend to have as their reference point a particular range of renowned institutions of international status, such as Tate Modern. In those terms, an increasing public



interest in art is straightforwardly assumed when the galleries that are the key reference points of the art world may be used by many in various ways: for example, as capital tourist attractions or target institutions for art professionals, students and specialists. Moreover, the proclamation of the dissolution of the boundaries between art and everyday culture relies heavily on the assumption that art is increasingly accessible and inclusive, and that the artworks' polyphonic character in stylistic, visual and thematic terms is the key determinant of how the public experiences art in its institutional places. In these terms it is assumed that gallery-goers as audiences are actively involved in the construction of the meaning, significance and value of art, which are then thought to be constructed across the boundaries of individual identities and artworks as texts.

The questions that are raised about both the analysis of art and the dominant postmodernist and pluralist discourses in view of this state of affairs are of critical importance and involve problems for theory and methods. Does the institutionalized presentation of contemporary art sustain conditions of cultural inclusion? What is the significance of art's critical success and public legitimacy to the operation of the art world and its values and institutions? How is art experienced and used by the public, including gallery-goers, in its institutional places? What are the inputs of the 'audiences' to contemporary galleries and exhibitions? Finally, what is the place of gallery-goers and the general public in the workings and discourses of the key socio-cultural settings of artistic production that are institutional art galleries? The postmodernist accounts and social theories that endorse the pluralist discourse rely heavily on strong assumptions concerning the operation of art institutions, people's audience practices and insiders' discourses and priorities – in effect social actors, cultural practices and socio-economic determinants that are spoken for rather than examined, as the elimination of empirical research and primary data from those lines of enquiry is paradigmatic.

The physical detachment of academic analyses of art from the art world, its institutionalized workings, insiders, interest groups and practices, is a pressing problem. The complex relationships between socio-cultural conditions and forms of power on the one hand, and art, its cultural significance and people's audience practices on the other hand, can be exposed only through the analysis of the latter within the particular socio-economic and cultural conditions and forms of power that govern contemporary art worlds and their institutions. Indeed, how the discourses, practices and lived realities of the institutions and social actors that are involved in the operation of the art world are played out or spoken for by postmodernist theories and a significant range of pluralist social analyses is a mystery, as the former, their practices and meanings of action are the major referents of those theories and the objects on which claims for art's pluralism and interpenetration of everyday culture are ultimately based.



This article focuses on art's audiences as a construct of the workings of art institutions and their insider discourses, and discusses the question of art's public legitimacy, its relevance and significance to the workings and values of the British art world. It is based on particular findings of the present author's recent research, which focuses on the construction of art through the operation of a leading British art gallery and its insider discourses. In theoretical and methodological terms, the case that this article presents is that the study of art institutions, their workings, insider practices and discourses in the way they are practised and lived in the social world is a fundamental prerequisite for the analysis of contemporary art and its socio-cultural and economic state. The next two sections focus on the author's research on Platinum, a British art gallery of high specialist status. They describe the fieldwork and strategies that formed the methodological framework of the research and identify the data collected and methods of analysis. The following sections present and analyse research findings on the construction of 'audiences' through Platinum practice and discourse.

The article then summarizes the findings and presents answers to the research question. These findings are put in the context of contemporary art's institutionalized production and the case is made that a distinction between informed and uninformed audiences of contemporary art is identified in Platinum's discourse, which is associated with the demarcation of two distinct contexts of art's recognition. The case presented is that despite postmodernist and social-theoretical claims for art's pluralist and inclusionary character, a rigid socio-cultural distinction between specialist and public recognition exists where the former, its institutionalized objects, actors, discourses and values dominate, while the audience practices of many are subordinated and sceptical. Finally, the theoretical and empirical implications of these results are discussed within the context of present and future critical research on contemporary art production.

## **Studying contemporary art galleries and their audiences**

Institutionalized galleries, their operation, insider practices and discourses play a decisive role in the construction of contemporary art in specialist, public and broader socio-cultural contexts. This role makes them key settings for academic research and analysis of art. It is in these institutions, where public and specialist actors, contexts and practices meet, that the discursive struggle for the construction of art and its significance takes place through the public presentation and experience of art, based on insider acknowledgements of what art is, insider decisions, judgements and audience practices around what is publicly presented as art. Contemporary galleries are the places where art meets the public sphere and is constructed as a distinct discourse; a specific category for distinguishing, understanding, producing, using and talking about objects of distinct visual and cultural



significance and economic value. The placing of art as a distinct discourse in its broader socio-cultural and economic context is an integral part of the analysis of art as a social phenomenon. However, the construction of art as discourse and the attachment of distinct socio-cultural significance, value and uses to the objects of this discourse is ultimately a local matter of art's institutional places.

In these terms, galleries are the key institutions and ideal case studies for the analysis of art, as they form the primary socio-culturally established category of contexts of interaction in which art is selected, publicly exhibited and experienced, and as the settings which bring together the most significant actors and components of the art world in a single, if complex and multilayered, context. Galleries are the primary contexts that bring together the art world's key insiders (directors, curators, artists and art professionals), their crucial acts of selection, judgement and decision-making with artworks, insider and specialist acknowledgement of art and its value, gallery-goers and audience practices and a range of other major players of the art world such as public funding bodies, critics, dealers, collectors and private sponsors. Thus it is notable that social research has paid little attention to the workings and insider discourses of contemporary galleries and is marked by a characteristic absence of empirical, qualitative analyses of the artistic field – an absence that seems to owe much to the domination of the art world by art-historical accounts and its own specialist discourses.

Particular critical developments in social and cultural research on art have shown the way forward by demystifying the problems, severe limitations, flaws and implications of approaches that focus on the artwork as an object with inherent qualities or on the author as a privileged creator (Bird, 1988; Bourdieu, 1995; Bourdieu and Darbel, 1991; Tagg, 1992). Further, developments in organizational analysis have presented valuable insights on how institutional workings, hierarchies, formal and informal settings, insider discourses and realities can be approached as effective components of an organizational culture. Among the basic points of neo-institutional theory is that institutions are complexes of cultural rules that are collectively rationalized and practised in organizational contexts (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Their socio-cultural significance is realized in that 'social knowledge, once institutionalised, exists as a fact, as part of objective reality, and can be transmitted directly on that basis' (Zucker, 1977: 726). It is only by focusing on the content of that 'social knowledge' – that is, the discourses and practices of an organization's insiders as parts of a broader institutionalized culture and discourse – that the operation of an institution can be explained within its own context and located in the broader socio-cultural and economic context of which it is a part. Despite these developments, contemporary critical research pays very little attention to artistic production. When it does, it is striking how even critical studies continue to be distanced from art's institutional places,



maintaining conventional art history's ahistorical focus on artworks and their inherent qualities.

The social analysis of art and its institutionalized cultures necessitates a strong ethnographic methodological angle: ultimately, it has to rely upon the generation of data of a qualitative nature. Becoming a part of an institution's culture and realities, and studying its operation, insider practices, discourses and conflicts in the way in which they are lived, provides the basis for analysing how art is constructed as a discourse that associates its designated objects with distinct significance, values and uses through the operation of the key socio-cultural settings that are institutionalized galleries and the actors that are involved in their operation. Other than the designation of objects as artworks, a range of other objects is constructed in the process of the construction of art, such as the value and significance of art, the roles of the social actors that are involved, their positions in the process, art's audiences and the modes of power that operate in the artistic field. The significance of audiences in this process concerns their crucial role in the socio-cultural legitimization of art. Paradoxically, this is demonstrated also by the central position of audiences and their practices in postmodernist hypotheses and pluralist theories that celebrate the interpenetration of art and everyday culture.

## **Method**

### **Platinum: methods, fieldwork and data collection**

Based on a critique of the object-based focus that haunts most analyses of art, the problems and severe partialities of which owe much to the notable detachment of theories of art from the contemporary art world's institutions, their actors and discourses, this research presents a theoretically informed, comparative ethnographic study of Platinum,<sup>4</sup> a renowned British gallery of high specialist status. The identification of this gallery in Bridgetown as the main case study was based on its value and relevance to questions concerning the institutionalized production of contemporary art. At the time, Platinum was (and still is) a nationally and internationally acclaimed gallery of high specialist status with a stated and broadly recognized exclusive focus on the presentation of innovative, cutting-edge contemporary art. As a gallery of such status, regularly attracting highly-reputed artists – including 'stars' of contemporary art – and in light of the periodical controversies that surround its exhibitions, Platinum receives extensive publicity in the specialist, national and local press and media. Its director is a dynamic figure who has worked for a number of high-status galleries and events of international standing in London and abroad and whose credibility and networks in the British art world are outstanding. Finally, education, community engagement and participation, along with innovation and excellence, are the gallery's key objectives in the terms of its mission statement, which make Platinum an ideal case study and



a paradigmatic case of the institutionalized discourse of pluralism and inclusion in art.

The research on which this article is based focuses on the construction of art and its value through the institution's operation, policies, insider discourses and practices. Its methodological framework comprised three main strategies, each targeting a particular category of data in order to embrace the institution's operation, everyday discourses and culture in the way that they are lived and practised by its social actors. These strategies were: participant observation; semi-structured interviews of gallery staff across the hierarchy and of other significant insiders involved in the gallery's operation; and collection of qualitative and quantitative data concerning various aspects of the institution's operation, from its financial organization and policy-making to attendance figures and visitor surveys.

The fieldwork was conducted over a six-month participatory placement (full-time December 2001 to June 2002) and was the purpose of an appointment by Platinum as an intern on an unpaid, voluntary basis. Working alongside Platinum's programme coordinator as her assistant enabled cooperation with staff in all departments of the gallery, while the author's status as a participant and learner granted access to various settings of strategic importance to this research, such as staff meetings, particularly programming and fundraising meetings where significant decisions about the gallery's operation, policies and exhibitions are made. This fieldwork was exceptionally rewarding as it enabled collection of three comprehensive sets of high-quality data: fieldwork notes, including observations and pieces of everyday discourse; semi-structured interview accounts; and documentary data, including official gallery appraisals, internal and external gallery correspondence, agendas and minutes of meetings, attendance figures, audience and marketing surveys.

### **Sample**

The interview sample comprised 21 participants including 15 Platinum staff, a senior corporate figure who had been Platinum's chairman for 10 years, two key staff (director and curator) of other galleries in the region and three artists, two of whom exhibited their work at Platinum during the fieldwork. Each set comprises rich and diverse data of a distinct nature, but the sets are directly comparable in that they concern different aspects of Platinum's practice and insider discourse.

### **Data analysis**

Different methods of analysis were applied to each set of data. First, recurrent issues and themes were identified in fieldwork notes and semi-structured interview accounts. The recurrent themes of interview accounts were coded; coded extracts were compiled in separate files according to theme, key features of insider discourse were identified and inferences were drawn on that basis. In the process these themes and features were





formulated through cross-examination and comparison to the themes that were identified in the fieldwork notes. Further, documentary data were divided into sub-categories and each subcategory was interpreted and analysed depending on its nature (e.g. policy documents and correspondence as qualitative, budget allocation, visitor surveys and attendance figures as quantitative). Then particular interpretative and analytical frameworks were applied in accordance with the specific contextual conditions of production of each sub-category. Inferences were drawn from this third set. Finally, the three datasets were triangulated, which resulted in establishment of the inferences and findings concerning Platinum's practice and insider discourses.

## **Findings and discussion**

### **Studying the institutional production of contemporary art's audiences**

Platinum's construction of an audience through its operation and insider discourses is a key issue in this research, as art's audiences hold a key position in the institutionalized processes of the production of art. They form a pressing question for the analysis of art and their place in postmodernist accounts, pluralist theories and discourses of inclusion is crucial. The 'audience' is a concept which has received much critical pressure as its content, uses and context-dependent nature make it a sensitive and complex case. The overwhelming production and dissemination of visual and verbal texts through a broad range of media, associated with rapid technological advances and their broad application in all fields of cultural production under advanced capitalism, have demystified the understanding of audiences as groups of people. Critical attention has been drawn to issues such as audiences' shifting reception and engagement (Morley, 1988), resulting in the replacement of the problematical concept that is the audience by the understanding of audience as practice and process. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) presented a refined critical version of the argument, noting that the constant dissemination and reception of texts in all contexts of social practice make the process of reception, and similarly 'audiences' as a concept, unexceptional and its boundaries uncertain. These debates directly address the problematical nature of the boundaries between the audience as a practice, as a position and as a presumably distinguishable category of people, highlighting the need for demystification of the different uses of the concept in contemporary culture.

The present analysis approaches the audience as a context-relevant discourse that is made up of the attributes by which groups of people – in this case gallery-goers and the general public – are being conceived by different groups as a single category with reference to practices of gallery-going and experiencing art in or outside its institutional places. To the extent that it is used by insiders with reference to identifiable common



attributes, the audience reaches the status of a category in the art world, which makes it much more significant than an insider discourse. The construction of the audience as an insider discourse also informs people's art-related practices in the way that policies concerning agenda-setting, attendance and participation are formulated and how gallery-goers and the public are positioned in the operation of art galleries – including the distinguishable range of alternatives and inputs that this positioning may offer. Finally, the identification of art's audience as an insider discourse does not sidestep the realities, hard facts and objective and distinguishable socio-cultural and economic conditions concerning the interest groups and practices at stake. In contrast, it is based on the understanding of those processes, realities and groups of actors as a complex totality of agents, conditions and affairs which are exceptionally diverse and not necessarily tuned to the attributes that art world insiders and interest groups may attach to them. For this reason (and in view of postmodernist accounts and pluralist theories that rely heavily on particular assumptions concerning audiences and their practices), the analysis of the audience as an insider discourse must be a key component in the analysis of art, which then can show how gallery-goers, the general public and their practices are positioned and may (or may not) fit into the institutionalized processes of the production of art.

A comprehensive analysis of people's practices as audiences would necessitate the consideration of a range of factors from class, income, education and gender to the public mediation of art, how visitors and the general public understand art, the processes through which art is selected and publicly exhibited as well as their understanding of their position in these processes. Such an analysis would have to be based on a long field-work study with a strong focus on participant observation of visitors and their practices in galleries and interviews, alongside an extensive sample of visitors both inside and outside gallery settings.<sup>5</sup> Based on the dominance of insider agencies and key specialist interest groups in the process of the selection, acknowledgement and public exhibition of art, the present analysis of the audience as an insider discourse has a different and very specific focus on the placing of gallery-goers and a general public in the institutionalized process of the production of art, and how that process and the key insider groups, practices and workings that it involves inform people's audience practices.

Platinum insiders consistently identified strong scepticism with the practices of most visitors and the general public. In the vast majority of cases, insiders associated this scepticism with the visitors' lack of understanding of contemporary art. Understanding had a key position in Platinum's insider discourses, as it was used as the concept which captures: i) the visitors' main concerns and goals in their practices as audiences recognizing the exhibits' artistic status, properties, meanings and/or value; and ii) a particular disposition to the act of being an 'audience'



which is obtainable by means of social training or informal education: recognizing the artistic properties of exhibits can be a feature of this disposition, but was not seen as an ultimate component of it.

### **Understanding as recognition of artistic properties**

At many points of their accounts, all the insiders who were observed and interviewed used understanding to identify what they saw as a major concern and goal for gallery visitors. In these cases, understanding was used to refer to the audiences' acts of recognizing the contemporary artistic stylistic, formal or thematical properties of the exhibits. The recognition of such properties was described by most insiders as an essential precondition for audience practice, as they directly associated it with visitors' engagement with the exhibits and recognition of their artistic status. Further, they unmistakably related that recognition of artistic properties with whether visitors like contemporary art or not. On that basis, the majority of Platinum staff identified the gallery's audience practices with a lack of understanding of contemporary artistic properties, which they mainly associated with the legacy of traditional figurative painting. References were made also to the dominance of a mass culture which is built around consumerism and lacks critical thought, as some staff saw this as a key determinant of the audiences' lack of understanding.

Susan's job as a curator of education involved initiating workshops with visitors and gallery talks, which made her interaction with gallery visitors more frequent than most of her colleagues. She attributed the lack of understanding of a significant number of visitors, their non-engagement, intimidation and even confrontational responses to particular shows to their lack of confidence, which in her view is caused by their familiarity with traditional art (such as figurative painting and naturalistic representation), and their consequent incapability to recognize the artistic properties, status and significance of contemporary exhibits:

If you perceive art as something in a gold frame, then that's what you're used to seeing. Then when you come into somewhere like Platinum, which shows black lines on the floor, then it's a massive leap to make to consider that as art ... Especially when you see work which makes you feel a bit stupid, you know, *you know* there's something going on and you're not sure what it is. And you feel thick. No one wants to feel like that and so you lose your confidence and then you get angry. But it's just lack of confidence, isn't it? (Susan, interview 17 May 2002; emphasis in original)

The significance of Susan's account lies also in what it rules out. In this passage the only two possibilities available for the audience are to accept the artistic status of exhibits or be disengaged – intimidated or indifferent – which effectively deprives audience practice of the possibilities for evaluating artworks or making judgements of taste.

Similarly, Steve, one of Platinum's education assistants, associated visitors' understanding with their capability to recognize contemporary



artistic properties. He noted that contemporary conceptual shows are poorly received as visitors do not understand the exhibits, and explained that understanding is an essential condition in visitors' engagement and judgements of taste. In his words:

More traditional work means ... more engagement for the visitors, as they can appreciate and understand what work goes into that. With more conceptual shows ... all I've seen is that people tend to spend not so much time in the gallery space. A good example of that was 'Anja Knefler',<sup>6</sup> where we had lots of people who just walked through ... rather than engaging with what's in the gallery. I think ... the visitors' engagement depends on what's in at the time and whether they understand it or not ... I suppose the art they like are things like ... again things they understand ... It'd have to be something that's quite figurative, human bodies, or landscapes in photographs, or paint on canvas. (Steve, interview 2 May 2002)

This view was also shared by Gemma, Sonia and Nick,<sup>7</sup> who in their own ways stressed that most people understand and therefore engage with those exhibits that involve identifiable representations, recognizable symbols, mediums and formats. Similarly, Michelle, Platinum's programme coordinator, also identified the audiences' understanding with their recognition of artistic properties and noted the direct relationship between that recognition and the audience's judgements of taste. Michelle added that this understanding and liking of the artworks is a condition that is anticipated in galleries to the extent that it becomes synonymous with the act of being an audience. She identified this as being an imposed (even if it is only perceived as such) peer expectation for being an audience. She also described it as a real pressure felt by many people, including herself, when part of an art audience.

### **Understanding as cultivated disposition**

In their second use of the term, Platinum's insiders associated audiences' understanding with a specific disposition which can be acquired by means of socialization into a particular discourse. This cultivated disposition and the pieces of discourse that identify it are related to the insiders' first use of understanding, as in both uses of the term the recognition of artistic properties, status and value are presented as the main goals and endpoints of audience practice. The distinctive feature of this second use is that it associates understanding with a disposition that is obtainable only by means of socializing into a specific discourse; it is not necessarily related to taste, and it even can be totally irrelevant to taste and the identification of specific artistic properties in exhibits.

Following a question about regular visitors to Platinum, Susan's response was straightforward: 'Usually informed audiences ... usually students ... people who already know what to expect. Aquamarque<sup>8</sup> is like, too off High Street, and it doesn't really attract lots of passers-by.'<sup>9</sup> (Susan, interview 17 May 2002).



Steve also distinguished visitors into informed and uninformed audiences depending on their aptitude in understanding contemporary art – an aptitude which he described as obtainable by means of the informal education that is provided by Platinum. Sonia, Platinum’s curator, whose input to the gallery’s leadership and programme were decisive, also divided gallery visitors and their audience practices into those two categories. She informed me that art lovers engage well with the art, but similarly to most of her colleagues, identified attitudes of doubt and non-engagement among a significant section of the visitors. Sonia associated those attitudes with the visitors’ incapability to understand what was on show, which she put in a broader context of consumerist mass culture lacking critical thought:

On the whole art lovers will engage very well with it, whether they like an exhibition more than another, or whether they criticize an exhibition more than another, but the engagement is strong. But you also get other people who walk past them and don’t really assimilate what’s going on. Because, I think, you know going back to the shopping and this whole attitude is very much to look rather than to think. To consume rather than ... a very hard thing to overcome. So the Platinum doesn’t fit within that at all. (Sonia, interview 25 April 2002)

In Sonia’s words a rigid distinction exists between contemporary art and mass culture, whose uncritical consumerist orientations make it incompatible to art and make a significant majority of people incapable of understanding art. Still, as with Susan’s account, it is remarkable that Sonia’s explanation and the rigid cultural distinction it presents denies most visitors and the general public the benefit of a range of possibilities that should be essential to the process of experiencing art: namely, the possibilities for acts of evaluative judgement that come in the form of somebody not liking particular exhibitions or artistic agendas, and the benefit of the doubt in people’s attempts to justify (or to have justified) the artistic status, purpose, significance and subsequent monetary value of contemporary exhibits.

Sarah, Platinum’s facilities manager, distinguished the gallery’s visitors between these two main groups – in effect, informed and uninformed visitors – and went further by attributing distinctive attitudes and motivations to each group with reference to their practices at the gallery. She identified informed visitors as a regular group yet a minority, described their attitudes and went on to describe the attitudes of both groups in relation to one another:

I mean ... it’s just a huge range. People who have an empathy because they work in the arts ... who have a real empathy and, you know, even if they don’t ‘like’ it – they’re prepared to understand it, like it or not ... Right down to the people who come in because they know somebody who knows somebody who ... and ... They don’t understand it, they can’t stand it, and they get angry ...



They cannot understand where that money went ... There might be a few [informed visitors] but I think they're a minority. Also ... the art galleries are like a mystique, almost snobbish, an élitist thing ... The thing with the general public is that they want to understand. And they want the right answer that we're talking about. They want something concrete ... whereas people who are more experienced are happy to have that [unfixed, undefined as it is]. (Sarah, interview 18 May 2002)

In those terms Sarah associated informed audience practices with empathy and a cultivated disposition to understand and accept anything, no matter whether they like it or not. Understanding contemporary art is not a problem for informed audiences since they do not ask for something concrete or specific, be it a stylistic trend, identifiable properties, themes or meanings. In contrast, the practices of uninformed audiences are built around the need to identify in the artworks a meaning, theme and purpose, which is associated with their intent to justify (or to have justified) the value of the money that is invested in art.<sup>10</sup> It follows that whereas understanding is out of the question for informed visitors, it is a real, pressing question for uninformed visitors, including the general public, who make up the majority of art's audiences.

### **For a marginalized audience**

These uses of understanding, a major component in Platinum's insider discourse on its audiences, are marked by two key features. First, their art-centred focus, which discloses a particular relationship between the institution and its insiders on the one hand, and its visitors and the general public as audiences on the other – a relationship which effectively subordinates and marginalizes the audiences within the context of the institution's operation. The intense art-centred nature of this insider discourse is evidenced by its identification of audience practice with a single kind of response when experiencing contemporary art, which concerns the recognition of artistic properties and meanings, and marks two possible alternatives: in effect, engagement or disengagement, which are both presented as dependent on the recognition of the properties of exhibited objects. When audience practice does not rely on the identification of such properties, it is presented as the disposition to recognize anything as art, irrespective of the extent to which particular properties concerning its form, content, meaning or purpose can be identified. In turn, this is identified with informed audience practice. This aspect of insider discourse discloses insider anticipation for the object and content of institutionalized recognition and acknowledgement – both products of specialist accreditation – to be accepted and legitimized by the general public.

The second key feature of this discourse is its strong element of pre-judgement, an element that is laid open in the strikingly narrow provision of that discourse to audiences: either to recognize artistic properties and meanings in exhibits, or disengage and be 'handicapped'



when experiencing contemporary art. This denies gallery visitors and the public the benefit of a broad range of possibilities and diverse responses that should be central to the practice of an art audience. That is, doubt, scepticism, bringing one's own interpretation to the artwork, judgements of taste in the form of expressing dislike for an artwork, theme or exhibition or questioning the purpose and value of the use of public money that is invested in art. On that basis, both features of the Platinum discourse demarcate a specific positioning of audiences and their practices in the process of the construction of art through the institution's operation. This positioning is marked by the very limited alternatives that discourse offers to gallery-goers and the general public, the content of these alternatives and the subordination and marginalization of what is identified as an audience in that process.

By its positioning audiences in the process of the construction of art, this insider discourse effectively demarcates the boundaries and relationship between specialist accreditation and public legitimacy. A rigid demarcation between specialist and public contexts is presented by Platinum insiders, where each context is marked by distinct motivations, interests and types of cultural recognition and is positioned distinctively within the institutionalized process of the construction of art. A decisive aspect of the relationship between these two contexts is that art's specialist accreditation and the power that is central to it do not require public legitimization in order to operate. They are unrelated to public recognition and legitimization and their domination is manifested in, and underpinned by, this particular autonomy and the limited alternatives that they offer to their audiences. It is the establishment of a discourse of art – which demarcates its properties, significance, values, uses and audiences, and the ultimately specialist and exclusive character of this discourse and its production – which underpin the domination of specialist power in the process of the construction of art. This was described by Sonia as an inevitable process, based on insider selections and specialist recognition, which is followed by institutionalized acknowledgement in the public sphere and accomplished in the long-term, for art is bound to reach a legitimate status in the public sphere despite public response, scepticism or antagonism. Sonia's view of the inevitability of this process is evident in her description of it as natural selection:

But again ... there's the issue of time, you know. One thing I always try to say is that, you know, we're living *now*, and do look back at old masters and accept them but before three or four or 500 years *then one had to accept them*. And what comes through over time, out of 400 to 500 artists of that time ... maybe 20 have come through. It's been a natural selection in a way ... through the time. Now, in 100 years from now ... who knows which of those will figure in history and which will not? (Sonia, 25 April 2002; emphasis in original)

The exclusive character of the discourse that underpins specialist power is exposed by how it constructs and detaches a significant majority of gallery-goers, the general public, their interests and anticipations from



the significant processes of agenda-setting and decision-making, and how it eliminates from audience practice alternatives such as evaluative judgement and criticism which are not only intrinsically linked to the act of experiencing art, but also the ultimate practices involved in institutionalized decision-making and agenda-setting processes. Despite – or exactly in view of what insiders identified as – antagonism, hostility, disinterest, philistinism or aesthetic conservatism, the art-centred focus and the limited alternative offered to audiences by insider discourse constructs the latter in particular ways. Their participation and anticipations are effectively eliminated from the processes of the selection of art; their judgements and responses are inconsequential to what is presented, valued and institutionally accredited as ‘good art’ and to what is then constructed and culturally established as ‘art’. Informed audiences stand on the boundaries of this relationship, in that when their identification as ‘informed’ does not rest on a specialist background or specialist motivations, it is based on their disposition to grant recognition to the artistic status, significance and value of the object of specialist accreditation.

### **Conclusion: specialist accreditation versus public legitimacy**

This construction of the audience and its marginalized position in the production of art is consistent with the findings of this research on Platinum’s operation, agenda-setting and policies. The discontinuous relationship between accredited contemporary art and a significant majority of the general public is among its major findings, as is the rigid demarcation of the two distinct and competing types of the socio-cultural recognition of art. These types of recognition are *specialist accreditation*, which concerns specialist and insider contexts, actors, discourses, practices and interests; and *public legitimization*, which concerns the general public (including non-specialist gallery visitors), its discourses and practices. Each has its own position and significance in the institutionalized process of the production of art; the nature of their relationship is profoundly competitive and the socio-cultural legitimization of contemporary art is the long-term result of the struggle between these two types of recognition. It is a struggle in which specialist accreditation effectively overpowers and subordinates public legitimization: that is, the recognition that may be granted by the general public, including the significant interest group of non-specialist gallery visitors.

Whereas inclusion and community engagement are key items in Platinum’s mission statement and are among the basic criteria of the Arts Council on which the gallery’s annual budget depends, this research found that the notable detachment of the institution from its local community and the general public was bound closely with Platinum’s focus (particularly of its key insiders and leading figures) on a struggle for





specialist accreditation: that is, the recognition and credibility which can be achieved within the specialist context that is made up of the key players, institutions and specialist discourses of the art world. Specialist accreditation is distinct to public legitimization and shares with it a profoundly competitive relationship. Each process is located in distinct social contexts and involves distinct social groups, motivations and interests. The former is located in exclusive specialist contexts and is associated with particular powerful insider groups of the art world and their discourses, while the latter is situated in public contexts and is associated with the general public, who may or may not recognize and legitimize art, its developments, values, purpose and/or significance. The exhibition spaces of galleries may form the primary meeting-point for these two contexts. However, the case of Platinum has shown that the presence of most staff, except invigilators and particularly the leading figures from the gallery, at these spaces is minimal. Similarly, it has revealed that key processes of decision-making and agenda-setting were not only rigidly detached from the gallery's exhibition spaces and audiences, but also were most strikingly exclusive and safeguarded within the gallery's entire organizational structure, along with staff assessment, as access to these was restricted to all staff but the few who formed the gallery's leadership.

Platinum's focus on the struggle for specialist accreditation as well as its detachment from the public and its legitimacy was evident in all important aspects of the institution's operation and statistical records. The operation of the organization and the practices and concerns of its staff were focused predominantly on specialist insider and art-related concerns, including Platinum's networking with other institutions and art professionals, and its aims to build the gallery's profile. Education and participation are presented as major objectives in Platinum's mission statement and are among the major criteria on which the gallery's annual assessment and budget depends; however, the gallery's educational performance is assessed on the basis of internal records and appraisals. While attendance at educational and participatory events from 2000–2 represented 3.77 percent<sup>11</sup> of the overall figure, 96.23 percent represented visits to gallery-based exhibitions which, in turn, makes the content of the institution's statistical records unsurprising. Some significant instances include the following. Despite Platinum's high national and specialist standing, its attendance for 2000–2 amounted to 39.68 percent of that of the Cradwell Gallery, which is located in the same region in a town with a population only one-quarter of that of Bridgestown. Further, Platinum's poor relationship to its local and regional public showed in that a standard 25 percent of its visitors for that period were students, the only specialist category which could be distinguished on the basis of the survey's categories. An impressive 42 percent of the entries for 1998–2002 represented first-time visits.



The gallery's discontinuous relationship with its local and regional public, evidenced by a range of figures and observations, is consistent with the dichotomy presented by its insider discourse on its audiences, providing evidence of how the significant majority that it identifies as the audience is positioned within the institution's operation and artistic production. That is, on the margins of these processes, with its (audience) practice defined either as antagonistic and disengaged – against specialist insider practice – or as willing to embrace any new development in contemporary art that is a result of that practice. In the meantime, while the institutionalized production of art places it as the object of accreditation of a specialist artistic field, the formulation of its spectacular market prices depends on the recognition and purchases that are enclosed within the very limited circles that comprise art world key players – art critics, directors, curators, collectors, dealers and wealthy individuals and corporations. With the exception of the special case of architecture, visual art remains the only art form in which critical and financial success are almost totally unrelated to popularity, when in all other art forms financial success is at least to some extent (if not directly) associated with popularity (such as numbers of records or books sold, seats sold for films or performances; Molyneux, 1998). No doubt, uninformed audiences who make up a significant majority of the general public, including gallery-goers and people who take little or no interest in art but are still among its audiences insofar as they are classified by insiders as such, who are informed about art, its values and controversies by the media and the press, and who are the major subscribers to the budgets of public contemporary art institutions, remain sceptical, unconvinced and excluded.

Alongside this insider anticipation for audiences to understand and embrace the object of specialist accreditation – an understanding whose short- and mid-term lack but long-term inevitability were identified by Platinum insiders as key parameters of audience practice and the public reception of art, public experiences and visitor practices in art's institutional places – are diverse and discontinuous. The practices of a significant section of gallery-goers involve much more than an endorsement of the object of specialist accreditation or a failure to endorse that object, its artistic status and value. If the struggle for the construction and cultural legitimization of art is initiated in specialist contexts, and fought and won by specialist discourse in public contexts in the long-term, in the short- and mid-term its public legitimacy is in crisis and the relationship of a significant majority of people (including gallery-goers) to contemporary art is problematical.

Located as it is in the British cultural field, where pluralism and inclusion are strategic items of the discourse of art policy-makers and attendance at contemporary shows is indeed on the increase, the case of Platinum, with its discontinuous and competing relationship between specialist accreditation and public recognition in the context of art's socio-cultural legitimization, decisively undermines the bold and distanced



claims of pluralist discourses and theories of the interpenetration of art and culture. This presents a range of pressing problems for the critical social analysis of contemporary art. One of the most significant is that the concept of cultural legitimacy as the extent to which objects attain their artistic status, significance and value in a cultural context by means of broad public recognition is in urgent need of critical revision. Whereas postmodernist accounts and theories that endorse the pluralist discourse are markedly detached in methodological terms from the social actors, workings and practices that are their key reference points, the struggles between specialist and public recognition and the relationships between the processes of accreditation and legitimization – and how both types of recognition and the practices they involve are intertwined in the operation of art institutions – show the effectiveness and relevance of ethnographic methods, organizational and discourse analysis to the socio-cultural practices and realities of contemporary art worlds.

Placed in the context of the most basic socio-economic conditions of the artistic field, the primacy and domination of specialist accreditation betrays the continuing role of art as the most elevated form of socio-cultural distinction and the most elevated symbol of private property, and the institutionalized exhibition of artworks in the public sphere makes art the most elevated and simultaneously the most contested cultural form an understandable paradox. Claiming that the boundaries between art and everyday cultures are dissolving and then refusing the very notions of distinction and distinctiveness is guaranteeing a failure to grasp the most significant conditions, facts and lived realities of the artistic field. It is exactly on those boundaries that the production and construction of art, the struggles for the legitimization of art and the formulation of its socio-cultural distinctiveness, take place.

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### **Notes**

1. Nicholas Serota is one of the most significant figures of the British artistic field. He is director of the Tate Gallery. He curates contemporary exhibitions and is chair of the board of the Turner Prize, probably the most significant and broadly mediated event of the contemporary art world; his place on the board is permanent. The Turner Prize is an annual competition that presents a shortlist of contemporary British artists whose work is then exhibited at Tate Britain, London. The event receives broad national and international media coverage in a public and specialist context and results in awarding the prize to the shortlisted artist whose contribution



to contemporary British art is judged by the Turner Prize board to be the most significant. In most cases the Turner Prize has an immense effect on the careers and reputations of shortlisted artists and the market prices of their artworks, as it guarantees systematic media exposure and specialist and public visibility at a national and international level.

2. By 'high art' I refer to a particular category of art production: that is, the latest innovative developments of the time, and particularly those that were or are institutionally exhibited, acknowledged and publicly represented as such.
3. Elements of this view are taken even by some insiders of the British art world such as Julian Spalding, former director of the Glasgow Gallery of Modern Art and Nicholas Logsdale, director of the Lisson Gallery in London, who identified contemporary institutional galleries as strategic showcases of the art world in a process that focuses on building artists' reputations. In BBC Radio 4's programme *Club Class*, Spalding described how he has refused in the past to exhibit artworks that he did not like, noting that turning down the propositions of the key players of the field is a thankless task in the art world (*Club Class*, Radio 4, 13 November 2005).
4. This research is based on the principle of informed consent and on the condition that the identities of the participant institutions and insiders will remain strictly confidential. The names of institutions, including Platinum, names of cities, regions, locations and individuals have been changed to protect the identities of those represented. All efforts have been taken to choose names that do not coincide with real names so that coincidences may be avoided. Any resemblance between names and/or entities of this research and real entities is purely coincidental.
5. In this case the length of research and fieldwork, an extensive sample which is broad in scope and collaboration of a team of researchers are pressing preconditions, as the 'audience' is a category that refers to a range of social actors and practices which are both extraordinarily broader in scope, motivations and variety and therefore more demanding and difficult to identify and analyse than the ones identified by institutional policies, insider discourses and practices – which, in turn, are informed by specific sets of institutional priorities, organizational and economic conditions and patterns of operation concerning the artistic field.
6. 'Anja Knefler' (pseudonym) is a German installation artist of international acclaim whose work was exhibited at Platinum during the fieldwork. Her work is marked by its highly abstract, minimalist and conceptual elements and involves a reasonable degree of improvisation.
7. During the fieldwork Gemma was employed by Platinum as an education assistant, Nick as a marketing assistant and Sonia as the gallery's curator and a key figure in its programming team, which is responsible for the formulation of the agenda and content of its exhibitions.
8. Aquamarque, where Platinum is located, is a prime development site of Bridgestown which is adjacent to one of the largest cultural centres of the city. The cultural centre accommodates a range of events from classical and contemporary concerts to theatrical plays and poetry, while Aquamarque is a complex that accommodates various leisure venues (e.g. bars, restaurants, cafés) and office space.



9. Out of the sample, Susan was the only insider who noted that the majority of Platinum's visitors are informed audiences. Julian (Platinum's director), Sonia and Nick talked about a fair balance between informed and uninformed audiences, whereas Michelle, Gemma and Sarah shared the view that the majority of Platinum's audience is made up of uninformed visitors. According to Platinum's audience-monitoring files, a significant part of the gallery's regular visitors, an unwavering 25 percent of the figure for the period from 1999 to 2002, was made up of students and an arresting 42 percent of that figure represented first-time visitors.
10. This also coincides with the main responses of the British public to contemporary art, which fall into three interrelated categories: i) there is no purpose in contemporary art exhibitions; ii) such exhibitions are a waste of public money; and/or iii) contemporary exhibits are not art (they do not have artistic properties that people can identify, and/or their making does not require identifiable artistic skills). This was supported by the content of the visitors' book for British Art Show 5 in 2002, extracts from which I was permitted to photocopy following my request to one of the major collaborative bodies of the event. Taking place every five years, the British Art Show is one of the biggest national events in the British artistic field. It is a nationwide touring show that showcases artists whose impact over the last five years has been significant. The above also represents the major categories of the participant responses to the BBC's (2004) online survey about whether museums deserve more public money. The online presentation of the survey results and the article that accompanies it are notably partial, i.e. in support of museums, and the full list of responses is not available at the BBC website. However, a selection of participants' responses is available, most of which are negative, sceptical and fall into the above categories. In contrast, the vast majority of positive responses address cultural heritage, which further demonstrates the public scepticism that is characteristic of contemporary art's reception.
11. All exact figures come from Platinum's official records and are converted into percentages to protect the identity of the institution.

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### Biographical note

Spyros Sifakakis is visiting lecturer at the School of Theoretical and Historical Studies, Birmingham Institute of Art and Design, University of Central England. ADDRESS: School of Theoretical and Historical Studies, Emma Jessie Phipps Building, BIAD, University of Central England, Corporation Street, Gosta Green, Birmingham B4 7DX, UK. [email: [Spyros\\_Sifakakis@uce.ac.uk](mailto:Spyros_Sifakakis@uce.ac.uk)]

