Museum Choreography:

Mapping Movement in Art Institutions through Live Scoring and Performative Curatorial Practice

by

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Abstract

As visitors, we are choreographed by instructions, or ‘scores’: the architecture, the arrangement of artworks, verbal descriptions (labels, panels, audio-guides), and tacit codes of behaviour that shape museum visiting. Art workers move across the same institution, between its ‘back-of-the-house’ and ‘front-of-the-house’, navigating spatial dynamics of power.

This research investigates movement in the institutional space of the art museum in relation to socio-political readings of space and ‘everyday movement’; the discourse on ‘scores’ in dance studies; and institutional critique in museology, including readings of museums as disciplinary institutions of power and the socio-cultural conditioning behind physical codes of behaviour.

Within this context, the project interrogates:

1) How can body movement be studied in relation to the ideas of agency and resistance to the institutional choreographies of art museums and its ‘scores’?

2) How does the body of the art worker, as artist-curator moving inside and outside an institution, negotiate agency within its institutional choreography?

3) How can the choreographic practice of scoring and movement notation be used to investigate visitor agency in moving through an art museum space?

Through a curatorial practice that I identify as performative, I address these

questions in a collaborative dialogue with museum professionals and artists through the event ‘How Do Institutions Choreograph Us?’ at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (2023).

The investigation is further developed through a ‘live scoring’ practice through the performance project *I do this every day: pass it on* (2022), and an experimental scoring of visitor movement, informed by professional knowledge in Visitor Research at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Moving beyond the showcasing of dance in museums, this research reframes the relationship between visitor and institution as choreographic: it proposes museum ‘scores’ as a framework, live scoring as a method, and the moving body as a site of institutional critique and resistance.

Introduction

Aims and Scope of the Research

This practice-led research aims to frame the art museum as a site of continuous performance and to research body movement within it. The project builds on the discourse on 'everyday movement' developed across various fields of study including literature, social sciences, philosophy and performance (M. Goffman, E.,1959; Bourdieu, P., 1977; De Certeau, 1984; Butler, 1988; Lefebvre, H., 1974). It is also grounded on the understanding of dance as a social practice, especially with reference to the concept of 'social choreography' in its interpretations in dance and performance theory (Hewitt, 2005; Cvejić, 2015).

The research also acknowledges the wider context of the 'choreographic turn' in curating, and its contribution in repositioning the role of dance in critical art discourse. The terms emerged in a UK context since the mid-2000s to define a growing institutional and scholarly interest in curating dance as part of visual arts programming since the mid-2000s, which raised complex questions regarding spatial politics and the choreography of visitor movement, transforming the passive viewer into an active agent navigating performance works in the gallery space[1].

[1] In the UK, this shift was markedly defined by Tate Modern's pioneering integration of dance programming within the iconic exhibition space of the Turbine Hall since 2003, later with the opening of The Tanks in 2012. Examples of this curatorial rationale are Boris Charmatz's *If Tate Modern was a Musée de la Danse* (2015), and Tino Seghal's *These Associations* (2012). An early marker in the UK was the Hayward Gallery's *Move: Choreographing You* (2010–11), curated by Stephanie Rosenthal. A pioneering example of this structural shift are Tino Sehgal's 'constructed situations' during a foundational series of solo exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) between 2005 and 2007, this methodology culminated at an unprecedented institutional scale with *These Associations* (2012).

Building on these premises, the research interrogates body movement within art institutions at an experiential and embodied level, explored from two perspectives:

- the movement of visitors in its relation to the institutional apparatus, and the strategies employed by institutions to gain knowledge of this movement

- the experience of the art worker operating within the institutional spaces of offices in its politics, curatorial and operational choices

The investigation is presented from my own perspective as a researcher who has been professionally active for the past 15 years both in the sector of museums and art galleries and as a contemporary dance practitioner and performance artist. Zooming in to my subjective experience, limited to the art galleries and museums in the UK and London specifically, this research produces performative interdisciplinary knowledge between the field of dance and performance, and curatorial and museological studies.

Research Questions

The project interrogates the question of agency of movement in relation to the institutional apparatus. While the initial primary aim was to research this question in relation to the movement of visitors of an art museum, the scope of the research expanded to reflect on wider institutional choreographies. Specifically, I began to interrogate my position and the performativity of my role as an artist-curator moving

to and from an institution, alongside with the collaborative relationships that made that movement possible.

Another key objective of the project is to investigate the ways in which agency is expressed in relation to institutional movement ‘scores’. At the public-facing level of an art museum, I identify ‘scores’ as the tangible ways the institution directs visitors’ movement, such as signs, maps, audio-guides, and interactions with public-facing staff. I also interpret as ‘scores’ the implicit or internalised codes of behaviour of museum visiting, including the attitudes and ideas that affect our perception of that institution which, in turn, affect our physical movement within it.

The notion of scores is central to performance studies, serving as a critical node that enables reflection through shared practices of both documenting and generating movement. Further, several performance studies’ authors have notably articulated a notion of choreography as a ‘system of command’ (Lepecki, 2006, 2016; Martin, 1998), within which scores are conceptualised as imperative or prescriptive ‘instructions’.

I refer to a critical discourse in the field of museological studies that emerged since the late 1980s and proliferated in the 1990s and early 2000s, and that challenged and contested the institutional power of museums (Duncan & Wallach, 1980; Bennett, 1995; Hall, 2002), contributing to a significant to a shift in professional practice towards a visitor-centred approach. Since the 1990s, museums and galleries, especially in the UK, began to consider the experiential, social and physical levels of the museum experience (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, 1994; Hein, 1998) and to

devise quantitative and qualitative methods to evaluate curatorial and learning strategies from the perspective of the visitor. In parallel, I draw on artists recognised as part of the discourse of 'institutional critique', whose work engages with the question of how institutional power operates on the body and how it may be resisted (for example, Group Material and Andrea Fraser, mentioned in Chapter 2).

Building on the conceptual framework of what I have identified as museum 'scores', I interrogate the idea of 'resistance'. I partly relate this problematic to the two Foucauldian interpretations mentioned above – one in the field of museology, where museums can be seen as repositories of power and institutions that discipline the body through internalised norms (Bennett, 1995); and the second in the field performance studies, where choreographic scores as prescriptive 'instructions' (Lepecki, 2006, 2016; Martin, 1998). From this reflection, I hypothesise the idea of scores as instructions within museum choreography, prescribing rhythms of walking, stopping, looking, and lingering and in relation to museums as gatekeepers of institutional power.

This hypothesis is further addressed by a consideration of the role of museums as agents participating in the current 'experience economy' (Bishop, 2013). This layer of interpretation is key, as it directly affects the visitor experience and, particularly, their movement. On the one hand, the traditional museum display is characterised by a linear narrative, progressive narrative (Duncan, Wallach, 1980), where the visitor movement is shaped as a 'processional glide' (Heathfield, in Wee, 2016) – a slow, gradual pace in an (often exhausting) movement forward. On the other hand, the contemporary museum participating in the experience economy also encourages a

modality of visiting of constant interaction, hyper-stimulation (Bishop, 2013), where the visitor is required to perform constant 'effort' (Kunst, 2015), which may also result in exhaustion.

Crip studies authors (McRuer, 2006; Kafer, 2013) have advanced interpretations that challenge the binary parameters of 'linear progression' and 'hyper-stimulation' through which critical museological discourse has interpreted and evaluated the physical and cognitive experience of museum visiting.

In light of the premises outlined above, the research questions for this project can be summarised as follows.

1) How can body movement be studied in relation to the ideas of agency and resistance to the institutional choreographies of art museums and its 'scores'?

2) How does the body of the art worker, as artist-curator inside an institution, negotiate agency within its institutional choreography?

3) How can the choreographic practice of scoring and movement notation be used to investigate visitor agency in moving through an art museum space?

Contribution to Knowledge

This thesis contributes to knowledge by reframing the relationship between choreography and museum curating. Where the choreographic turn in curating has

largely focused on the relationship between the artwork, or the artist, and the visitor, I place the attention on the relationship between the visitor and the institution, and I propose to read the museum's tangible and internalised 'scores' as the means through which that relationship is choreographed. In relation to critical museological discourse and institutional critique, the thesis extends its question of institutional power to the everyday movement of visitors and museum workers, and proposes the moving body, with its potential for resistance, as both a site and a method of critique. In doing so, it brings into dialogue two bodies of knowledge, dance and performance studies, and museological and curatorial studies, through the question of agency.

This contribution takes three forms. First, a conceptual framework of museum 'scores', which links the notion of choreography as a 'system of command' with the reading of museums as disciplinary institutions, and problematises it both through the role of museums in the 'experience economy' and normative readings of the visitor experience (Chapter 1; Research Question 1). Second, a methodological contribution: the practice of live scoring as a way of investigating visitor movement, which refuses the terms of visitor research as practised in museums, shows the limits of quantitative and qualitative methods in capturing movement and an avenue through which dance practice may inform Visitor Research (Chapter 3; Research Question 3). Third, a practice-based contribution in the form of performative knowledge, produced through the symposium work at the ICA, which examines how the artist-curator negotiates agency within the institution's 'back of the house' (Chapter 2; Research Question 2). As this knowledge was produced collaboratively, I locate it in my analysis of the process and of the conditions of curation, rather than in the individual contributions of the participants.

Structure of the Thesis

The **Methodology** section explains the multiple methods used in connection to the practice research approach conceived by pioneer scholars in this field including Haseman, Borgdorff and Nelson (Nelson, 2006, Haseman, 2011; Borgdorff, 2012). I proceed by defining the production of performative knowledge in relation to the concept of the curatorial (Lind, 2012; Von Bismark, 2012; O'Neill, 2007), to then discuss the implications of working collaboratively with participants from the public arena and with institutional partners.

In **Chapter 1**, I identify the museum as a site of continuous performance and set this framework of analysis in relation to the discourse on everyday movement choreography. I discuss the key concepts in museological-curatorial and in performance and dance discourse that inform my practice research presented at Chapters 2 and 3.

The chapter spans from the concept of social choreography (Hewitt, 2005; Cvejić, Vujanovic, 2015) as interpreted in dance and performance studies to readings of Pierre Bourdieu's studies in museology, with a particular focus on social conditioning in the act of museum visiting and the concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977, 1979). I follow with a discussion on 'the practice of everyday life' (De Certeau, 1984), the 'social production of space' (Lefebvre, 1974), introducing their relevance in the context of this PhD project.

In **Chapter 2,** I investigate the choreography of an institution from my subjective perspective of my experience of inhabiting and working at the 'back of the house' – as opposed to the experience of visiting the public-facing spaces of the museum. I discuss my work at the Institute for Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London in organising the symposium 'How Do Institutions Choreograph Us?' (2023).

I frame my PhD practice within the curatorial discourse of artist-as-curator and analyse the collaborative process and conditions of curation (Von Bismark, 2022), both with the host institution, the ICA, and each of the invited contributors, and their responses to the brief.

In **Chapter 3**, I present my practice of score-making, devised on the basis of my practice as a dance artist and my professional experience as an evaluator in the Visitor Research team at the Victoria and Albert Museum and at Tate. I first discuss my artistic practice of scoring in the context of an urban environment through the project I do this every *day: pass it on* (2022) and, in the second part of the chapter, in the context of the Victoria and Albert Museum in South Kensington. In the last part of the chapter, I introduce experiments in producing visual-graphic scores, or 'maps', at the V&A South Kensington, and highlight their value as artistic investigation in relation to a theoretical discourse on historical examples of mapping time and space. In connection to this discourse, I explain the design of the PhD website as a form of choreographic arrangement of space and time producing a design similar to a board game.