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### Title

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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7m39g49q>

### Journal

Cultural Sociology, 7(2)

### ISSN

1749-9755

### Authors

Dominguez Rubio, F  
Silva, EB

### Publication Date

2013-06-01

### DOI

10.1177/1749975512473287

Peer reviewed



Article

# Materials in the Field: Object-trajectories and Object-positions in the Field of Contemporary Art

Cultural Sociology  
7(2) 161–178  
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/1749975512473287  
cus.sagepub.com  


**Fernando Dominguez Rubio**

The Open University, UK

**Elizabeth B. Silva**

The Open University, UK

## Abstract

The paper explores the central role of artworks in the field of contemporary art. It is based on an ethnographic study of the conservation laboratory at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York and draws from three detailed case studies where the temporal and spatial trajectory of artworks led to processes of competition, collaboration, and repositioning among the agents involved in the acquisition, exhibition and conservation of these artworks. The study demonstrates the importance of artworks *qua* physical objects in the field of contemporary art, claiming attention to materiality in field theory and engaging with an object-oriented methodology in field analysis. Artworks are shown to intervene in field processes, both reproducing divisions and re-drawing boundaries within and between fields, and actualizing positions of individuals and institutions.

## Keywords

art conservation, artworks, Bourdieu, contemporary art, field analysis, materiality, media art, MoMA

## Introduction

In this paper we explore some ways in which artworks actively intervene *qua* physical artefacts in the divisions within the field of contemporary art and the relations between some of its key agents. We present artworks as more than inanimate material backdrops or inert vehicles of social meaning, organized, classified and placed in hierarchies

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### Corresponding author:

Elizabeth B Silva, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK.

Email: [elizabeth.silva@open.ac.uk](mailto:elizabeth.silva@open.ac.uk)

according to the logics emerging from the struggles of agents and institutions in the field. We claim that artworks occupy a key structuring position in the field of art, and are particularly relevant within the contemporary art field, actively shaping how the field is organized, the ways its boundaries are drawn, the exercising of judgements and the enacting of field practices.

We benefit in our analysis from the ‘material turn’ that has emerged over the last decades in the social sciences, in order to focus on the mediating role that different materials and things have in the construction and transformation of social worlds.<sup>1</sup> This turn has forcefully argued for a repositioning of objects in social theory to overcome the asymmetry that has attributed to humans all the agency in social life, neglecting the role that materials and objects play in it (Harvey et al., 2013; Latour, 1993). Within the sociology of art, this renewed interest in materiality and objects has fuelled a new orientation focused on two blind spots in traditional accounts of art: the blindness to the actual work that aesthetic factors perform in social life, and the blindness to the artwork itself (de la Fuente, 2007: 423). Attention to these blind spots has opened new avenues for empirical research exploring the role of artworks as active material components through which social worlds are constituted and known. Hence, rather than following the old precept of the sociology of art to study the social causes of art and to determine how artworks reflect or objectify a prior set of social relations, attention has turned to the study of the active role that art plays in the production of subjective identities and social practices (Benzecry, 2012; DeNora, 2004; Born, 2011; Hennion, 2003; Silva, 2013a), to how different cultural artefacts actively shape the dynamics of cultural production (Domínguez Rubio, 2012; Strandvad, 2012), and to how they mediate the knowledge a researcher gathers about the social world (Silva, 2013b).

We see this attention to materials as not only compatible with field analysis but as also *necessary* to produce a more complete picture of field dynamics. With this aim, we depart from accounts that describe fields as operating in abstract social spaces devoid of any materiality. Fields, we argue, are artefactually constituted; they develop and unfold within specific physical environments and through very specific materials. These materials actively shape how fields are constituted and how they operate, how struggles take place, how positions are defined, and how relations and boundaries acquire their reality and power.

While we acknowledge that Bourdieu’s field theory is multifaceted and contains some ambivalences (Savage and Silva, 2013), the dominant view describes fields as *social* spaces, structured around objective relations and propelled by the ongoing power-struggles of agents as they strive to occupy different positions and to mobilize different forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996). In this sense, fields appear as spaces of ‘organized striving’ that map out precise ‘topologies’ of the objective positions that different agents (individual and institutional) occupy across different social spaces. However, we want to insist here on the importance of materiality to the constitution of fields.

Some critiques, adjustments and revisions over the last years, concerning the Bourdieusian understanding of fields, inform our approach. For instance, Becker (Becker and Pessin, 2006) is suspicious of the ‘objective forces’ which Bourdieu attributes to positions; Bottero and Crossley (2011) argue that the role attributed to social ties and networks in Bourdieu’s ‘artistic field’ is inappropriately weak, while Lahire (1999) comments that Bourdieu’s sociology of fields is compounded, essentially, of producers, not of

productions. We engage with these criticisms, also noting that they have not addressed, however, Bourdieu's neglect of the material dimension of fields and the active role that physical objects can play in them (Prior, 2008). Although we note that Bourdieu would not be against the idea that social relations are materialized in objects (see Silva, 2010: ch. 1), we argue that he fails to explore the possibility of considering objects as genuine agents within the field. In so doing, Bourdieu develops an understanding of the field as a space where social relations are defined between people, and in which objects and physical space appear as vehicles or background in the struggles between human agents.<sup>2</sup> Hardly any attention is given to relations between humans and objects and between different objects, which leads Bourdieu to miss a fundamental insight into how materials affect field dynamics, relations and boundaries, their constitution and reproduction over time.

To take materials into the picture, we deploy an object-oriented approach that focuses on the temporal and spatial trajectories of artworks in the field of contemporary art. This departs from the usual understandings of trajectory in field theory, almost exclusively applied to *subject-trajectories*, i.e. the movement of individuals in and across social fields (Bourdieu, 1993; Martin, 2003). We address the equally important *object-trajectories* (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff, 1986), contending that, like any new subject entering a field, each object follows a particular trajectory until it is placed within a specific 'object-position'. We define these object-positions as the concrete socio-spatial locations occupied by physical artefacts within a given field, where they perform specific functions and roles, generating the articulation of particular relations within the field and the definition of boundaries demarcating the relative autonomy of one field vis-à-vis other fields. Within our approach, fields need to be understood as the dynamic result of the ongoing relations between different subject *and* object positions and trajectories, and that these relations are fundamental to understanding both how fields are instituted and evolve as well as how the subjects and material objects that compose fields are themselves defined and transformed in the process.

The empirical site for the exploration of these assumptions is the Museum of Modern Art of New York, MoMA. In the next section we outline the emergence of the field of contemporary art and the centrality of MoMA for its development. This opens up our presentation of three case studies. Since we are unable to provide an in-depth analysis of each empirical case in this article, our aim is to present these as vignettes that illustrate some of the sites in which art objects, their trajectories, and their positions are currently challenging and redefining established dynamics and boundaries within the field of contemporary art. The first case explores how the spatial trajectories of some types of artworks are giving way to a new set of institutional alliances that redefine the dynamics of *competition* in the field of contemporary art. The second case addresses how the trajectory of artworks over time requires new processes of *collaboration* that challenge existing boundaries of expertise and practices within the field of conservation. The third case focuses on how the inherent obsolescence of some forms of contemporary art calls into question the system of normative subjective and institutional positions that have come to define the field of contemporary art, forcing a *repositioning* in the field. We conclude by reflecting on how a focus on the art object enables us to unravel connections in the field and to discern the crucial role of the material in field dynamics, thus furthering field analysis.

## MoMA and the Emergence of the Field of Contemporary Art

The creation of MoMA in 1929 instituted and institutionalized the field of *contemporary* art as a novel field in art.<sup>3</sup> As with the creation of any new field, this was accompanied by the gradual development of a system of individual and institutional positions, novel forms of expertise, judgement and practices, as well as complex boundaries, which enabled the separation between the new institutional space of the museums ‘of the present’ from the museums ‘of the past’ (Altshuler, 2005; Kantor, 2003; Lorente, 1998, 2011). One of the main challenges of the newly created MoMA was the definitional struggle over the limits of ‘the contemporary’ and the defence of its legitimacy as an unprecedented and *sui generis* historical and institutional space.<sup>4</sup> For Barr, MoMA’s *raison d’être* was to nourish an experimental space where the art ‘of the present’ – the art made by artists who were alive or were recently deceased – could be exhibited within the museum space without having withstood the test of time. The radical idea of a museum ‘of the now’ appeared then as a contradiction, demanding the definition and legitimation of a novel institutional space which required the development of a new ‘exhibitionary complex’ (Bennett, 1988) organized around a system of galleries, art fairs, cultural centres and museums.

The 20th century witnessed the exponential growth of this exhibitionary complex with the multiplication of private and public collections of contemporary art and the gradual development of a global system devoted to the circulation, exchange and display of contemporary artworks (Halle and Robinson, 2010; Queminn, 2006). This enormous apparatus also required the creation of positions, practices and forms of knowledge and judgement that differed from those that had hitherto dominated the art world (Crane, 1987). Yet, crucially for our argument, the institutionalization of the field of contemporary art not only required a new system of subject and institutional positions, but also a new system of *object-positions* to provide the material substratum upon which the field could be developed. Put differently, the development of the contemporary required the mobilization of a critical body of artworks to provide the material evidence upon which to base the claim that ‘the contemporary’ was indeed distinctive and, therefore, needed to be understood as a relatively autonomous field vis-à-vis other fields, like classical art. Hence, to understand the dynamics of the field of contemporary art – how it is organized, how it operates, and how it evolves – one has to explore the trajectories of these artworks, how they come to occupy different object-positions in it, and how these object-positions shape the specific ways in which subject and institutional positions, as well as boundaries, are distributed and transformed over time. The three case studies offer particular instances in which the spatial and temporal trajectories of different artworks mediate in the creation of new dynamics of competition and collaboration, and in the redistribution of competencies and positions in this field.

### Spatial Trajectories and Institutional Alliances

Our first case study deals with the trajectories of objects in space, that is, with the ability of artworks to move in and across different physical spaces, and the effects this



**Figure 1.** *Days*, Bruce Nauman, 2009. One audio source consisting of seven stereo audio files, 14 speakers, two amplifiers and additional equipment. Dimensions variable © MoMA.

movement provokes on the field. We focus on Bruce Nauman's *Days*, an installation composed of custom-made extra-thin speakers distributed alongside two symmetrical colonnades (see Figure 1). Nauman produced *Days* for the Venice Biennale in 2009, winning the Golden Lion for the Best National Participation, one of the most prestigious awards in the art world. Benefiting from connections of its curators and the artist, MoMA moved swiftly to acquire this piece. However, the exorbitant price of the work<sup>5</sup> forced the museum to acquire *Days* together with the Emmanuel Hoffmann Foundation (EHF), headed by a MoMA trustee, and housed at the Schaulager Museum in Switzerland.

The acquisition of *Days* needs to be understood within the context of increasing competition for the acquisition of celebrated contemporary artworks. Over the last two decades the competition to acquire these artworks has fuelled a rapid process of marketization that has drastically redistributed individual and institutional power positions in the field. The ballooning prices resulting from this competition have created a new group of private collectors who have become some of the most powerful players in the field thanks to their financial assets. Although museums still occupy a key position, regarded as the true gatekeepers of 'aesthetic value', the rise of private collectors has displaced museums from the centre of the artistic market. Lacking the financial clout of powerful private collectors, museums, especially public-funded ones, find it increasingly difficult to perform this role as they often are outpriced in bids for major contemporary artworks and they are forced to rely on donations or to devise special strategies to incorporate major contemporary artworks into their collections. One of these strategies – precisely, the one MoMA pursued to acquire *Days* – is 'co-ownership', involving the creation of a partnership between two or more institutions to purchase an artwork and share its long-term insurance and maintenance costs. *Days* was the first Nauman MoMA was able to acquire in more than two decades, which prompted the celebration of co-ownership as a successful means to redress the overwhelming control of private collectors over the market of contemporary art.

An orthodox field analysis of the acquisition of *Days* would describe it as an exemplary case of the dynamics of competition through which two agents – MoMA and EHF/Schaulager – which have been relegated to peripheral positions in the market, strategize to regain their lost power in the field by joining forces. Yet, although true, such a reading would be incomplete, for it would not account for the key element that made this strategy possible in the first place: the artwork itself. The physical properties of artworks, like their ability to be reproduced and to move in space, shape the dynamics of the field by defining who is allowed to share them and what form that sharing will take. Indeed, if MoMA and the Schaulager were able to strategize and win over private collectors in the acquisition of *Days*, it was thanks to the physical features of this piece.

One of the idiosyncrasies of *Days* is that, like most media artworks (that is, artworks which depend on media devices for their display), it can be replicated while retaining its uniqueness as an original product of the artist's creative agency. This is a feature that sets media artworks apart from traditional sculptures or paintings, which cannot be physically reproduced without losing their singularity. Indeed, although it is possible to create an almost perfect material replica of a painting or sculpture, it is not possible to reproduce the link between material form and the artist's self and creative agency that makes the artwork distinctive and singular. In other words, although it is possible to produce a perfect replica of the *Demoiselles D'Avignon*, this replica could never attain the same status as the original, because it will never be regarded as a product of Picasso's creative agency. However, in the case of media artworks like *Days*, the relationship between original and copy is not one of opposition and exclusion but one of complementarity and extension. Unlike traditional artworks, media artworks can be replicated and exist in different material instantiations, while at the same time retaining their uniqueness and sameness. It is possible to have two or more instantiations of the *same* artwork. *Days*, for example, can be easily replicated through the acquisition of two sets of identical speakers and multiple copies of the audio files, and by following the artist's instructions as to how to display the artwork. It is this ability of being materially reproduced and replicated while retaining its uniqueness that enabled MoMA and the EHF/Schaulager to acquire this artwork jointly. Each institution paid half of the price, while obtaining from Nauman's studio two identical sets of speakers and two sets of audio files, as well as the instructions for installing and displaying the artwork. They then proceeded to store each set in their premises and took responsibility for its insurance and maintenance costs. Nauman authorized the settlement, imposing as a condition that the artwork could only be on display at one venue at a time in order to preserve the idea of the artwork as a singular and unique artefact.

The joint purchase of *Days* is part of a larger trend which is re-defining power positions and alliances in the field of contemporary art. The emergence of media-based art, like installations, video-art, performance or computer-art – art that enables reproduction while maintaining uniqueness – is making possible a new set of alliances between institutional actors that are reshaping the balance of power in the field by enabling museums to re-enter the competition to acquire new and valuable media artworks.<sup>6</sup> The success of this strategy of co-ownership has prompted some museums and galleries to extend this practice to more traditional artworks, such as sculptures and paintings.<sup>7</sup> But here again the physical nature of these artworks is important. The kind of alliances that can be

formed and the extent to which they can be effective ultimately depends on the physical properties of these artworks, like their portability, endurance and long-term maintenance costs. Unlike media artworks, traditional sculptures and paintings cannot be reproduced without compromising their uniqueness. Additionally, their portability is typically rather limited as it is both onerous and risky to keep these artworks moving around. The inherent risks of co-owning these traditional artworks explain why the strategy of co-ownership is taking place predominantly at the level of local-regional alliances and is circumscribed for the most part to the specific niche of media-based art.<sup>8</sup> The result is a new geography of institutional alliances around media artworks that is redefining the spatial configuration of the contemporary art field as well as power positions within it. Yet the influence of artworks on field dynamics does not stop at the moment of their acquisition. As the next section will show, artworks continue to mediate field dynamics once they are inside institutions.

## Temporal Trajectories and New Collaboration

While the previous case focused on how the spatial trajectories of artworks affect field dynamics, in this section we deal with their temporal dynamics, with how artworks move over time. We focus on *Floor Cake*, a piece that Claes Oldenburg produced in 1962 as part of a series of artworks while he was working on *The Store*, a shop he opened in his studio mimicking and parodying some ordinary products of consumerist society. One of the peculiarities of *Floor Cake* is its unusual material composition. Measuring five by nine feet, the piece consists of five layers of sewn-and-painted heavyweight canvases that Oldenburg and his then wife sewed together and filled with foam and ice cream boxes to simulate the filling of the cake (see Figure 2).

Due to its popularity, *Floor Cake* has been heavily exhibited in the US and Europe over the last decades. This frequent spatial movement, coupled with natural processes of decay, has led to significant deterioration of the artwork, which has lost part of its volume and original bright painted colours. This deterioration is our entry point to discuss



**Figure 2.** *Floor Cake*, Claes Oldenburg, 1962. Synthetic polymer paint and latex on canvas filled with foam rubber and cardboard boxes, 58 3/8" x 9' 6 1/4" x 58 3/8" © MoMA.



the effects that the temporal trajectories of artworks have on field dynamics, specifically on how they can shape division of labour and expertise and create new forms of collaboration in the field.

Although artworks are customarily thought of as stable objects, as more or less stable correlations of form and matter, they rarely, if ever, behave as such. In spite of the illusion of fixity and timelessness that typically surrounds them, artworks are never still. Even the most seemingly simple artwork in a museum, like traditional oil on canvas, is a rather complex artefact composed of an interlocking system of different layers constantly evolving and changing as they interact with each other and the surrounding environment. Rather than stable objects, artworks are better conceptualized as ongoing and open-ended *processes*. One of the key missions of the museum is, precisely, to stabilize these ever-evolving processes in order to transform them into stable 'objects' of formal delectation. This is accomplished through a vast infrastructural and technological apparatus that involves, among other things, the production of highly controlled micro-environments, different display techniques, as well as a constant process of care and preservation. The specific way in which artworks can be stabilized depends to a large extent on the material specificities of each artwork. Some artworks, like oil paintings, generally lend themselves to this process of stabilization and objectification, while others, such as *Floor Cake*, deteriorate quickly and are difficult to stabilize. It is the very instability of this work that prompted MoMA to initiate a restoration project to return the piece to its original condition. However, when *Floor Cake* arrived at MoMA's conservation lab in 2010, conservators faced an interesting dilemma emerging from the impossibility of fitting this artwork into the existing boundaries in the field of art conservation.

The field of conservation developed over the late 19th century and early 20th century upon the premise that every art form required a specific body of knowledge and different sets of techniques (Bewer, 2010; Stanley-Price et al., 1996). The proclivity of traditional artists to work within a single medium (e.g. sculpture or painting), together with their use of the so-called 'noble' art materials, like marble, oil, wood and bronze, enabled the routinization of conservation processes and knowledge, and the creation of a clear-cut division of labour within the field which resulted in a strict separation between different bodies of knowledge and expertise. This division produced, over time, well-defined institutional and professional circuits that crystallized in conservation schools where conservators are trained as 'sculpture conservators', 'painting conservators', 'prints conservators', depending on the kind of art forms they deal with. On their part, museums have built conservation departments alongside these institutional knowledge divisions, securing a smooth transition of expertise between academic and professional training.

The institutional structure of conservation was challenged over the 20th century with the rise of early vanguards, characterizing contemporary art as a series of unrelenting attempts to destabilize the canonical idea of the artwork as a singular and stable object (Buskirk, 2003), developing new art forms and introducing new materials. As part of their challenge to the institutional power of museums, contemporary artists have essayed art forms that transcend the object-based orientation of most classical and modern art – like conceptual art, performance or installation – and have broken away from traditional 'noble' art materials, incorporating into their practice an increasingly complex set of untraditional materials: from faeces and chocolate to industrial plastics, acrylics or

mass-produced technologies. The combination of these two factors – new art forms and new materials – has resulted in extremely precarious artworks that cannot be stabilized for a long period of time, both defying the museum's mandate to preserve their collections and destabilizing the established practices, knowledge and positions that conservators had built around more traditional artworks.

*Floor Cake* is a good illustration of this challenge. In less than 50 years, the artwork has undergone a process of significant change due to the obsolescence of its constituent materials. The polyurethane foam with which Oldenburg filled the piece is an inherently unstable material, which lost volume, becoming brittle and rigid. Similarly, the ice-cream cardboard boxes that Oldenburg placed inside the cake also degraded quickly. In addition, the acrylic latex paint Oldenburg employed on the canvas proved to be very unstable. The painted surface degraded, showing cracks and losing some of its colour. The result of these physical processes of decay is a rapidly deteriorating and highly unstable artwork that required intensive conservation treatment. Yet MoMA conservators not only faced a fast changing and degrading artwork, but, as we mentioned, one that defied established categories within the field of conservation. Although a sculpture at first sight, the cake is composed of painted heavyweight canvases. Hence, *stricto sensu*, *Floor Cake* is neither a painting nor a sculpture but a 'three-dimensional painting' or a 'painted sculpture'. The impossibility of categorizing this artwork did not merely create a definitional problem for conservators but a practical one. Although painting conservators had the knowledge to treat the painted surfaces of the work, they were unable to solve the problems associated with the physical stability of the work as a three-dimensional object. Similarly, sculpture conservators knew how to stabilize the artwork but did not know how such stabilization could affect the painted surfaces. *Floor Cake* could only be effectively treated by bypassing the internal professional boundaries that had separated painting and sculpture conservators in the lab. It needed a sculpture conservator to look at the structural properties of *Floor Cake* *qua* three-dimensional object – at the stabilization of the filling and the ice-cream boxes – and a painting conservator to look at the stabilization and repair of the painted surfaces. The preservation of *Floor Cake* thus required the creation of a novel space of collaboration between painting and sculpture conservators, which challenged long-standing field boundaries.

The conservation project of *Floor Cake* serves to illustrate that, as Becker (1982) has eloquently described, collaboration is as important as competition in the definition of subjective positions and the institutionalization of practices within a field. Importantly for our argument, it also reveals the role that artworks *qua* physical artefacts can play in the creation and institutionalization of these practices and relations. If conservators at MoMA started to cooperate across disciplinary and professional boundaries, it was not as a result of interpersonal dynamics (as per Becker's view), but because they were brought together by the ongoing physical transformation of *Floor Cake*. The rapid deterioration of this artwork called for the creation of a novel space of interdisciplinary collaboration which disrupted existing positions and boundaries between sculpture and painting conservators within MoMA's conservation lab.

*Floor Cake* is also relevant because it signals the importance of paying close attention to the temporal trajectories of artworks and their impact on field dynamics. Far from being static and unchanging 'objects', artworks are ever-evolving material processes

whose temporal trajectories require constant reorganization of subject-positions around them. In the case of *Floor Cake*, its maintenance required the reorganization of conservation boundaries within the lab as well as the implementation of new practices of collaboration. *Floor Cake* thus illustrates how relations within the field cannot be understood outside the temporal trajectories of the physical artefacts through which these dynamics take place and unfold over time. It would be simply impossible to understand the kind of transformation of positions taking place among conservators at MoMA without taking into account the specific physical properties of *Floor Cake*.

Importantly, the case of *Floor Cake* is far from unique. The growing number of contemporary artworks that are fragile and obsolescent is redefining individual positions and institutional boundaries within the field of conservation. By opening up the space for new dynamics of collaboration, these artworks implode the boundaries around which conservators had hitherto organized their relations with objects as well as vis-à-vis each other. In so doing, these artworks are changing how the game is played. They are bringing about a new relational space in which interdisciplinary rather than medium specialization becomes the internal organizing logic of the conservation field, and where the ability to collaborate comes to define one's own position and relative power within the field. Those conservators who can collaborate and work across conservation boundaries and varied artistic mediums are better positioned in the field than those traditionally trained in one single medium.

The wider effects of these new dynamics reach beyond conservation. The need to collaborate to acquire, display and maintain increasingly obsolescent and rapidly changing artworks is forcing contemporary art museums to create new interdisciplinary spaces and practices that are blurring the boundaries traditionally separating conservators, curators and artists and are fuelling new dynamics of 'position-taking' and struggles.<sup>9</sup> These dynamics are the focus of our next example.

## **Obsolescence, Co-production and Redefinition of the Role of the Museum**

Our third example explores how the inherent physical obsolescence of some forms of contemporary art calls into question the system of normative subjective and institutional positions that define the field of contemporary art. For this, we need to go back to 1976, when Joan Jonas, then a young artist starting her career, made a series of video-performances. One of these was *Mirage*, a work in which Jonas tirelessly painted and erased on a chalkboard different shapes, while various 6mm black and white videos were displayed in the background (see Figure 3).

After she became consecrated as one of the pioneers of video and performance art, Jonas revisited and updated *Mirage* twice, in 1994 and 2005, reinterpreting it as an installation which included films of her original 1976 performance, the original videos that were shown at the time, and new sculptural elements alluding to the themes of the videos and the performance.

In 2007 MoMA acquired *Mirage*. This represented for MoMA a daunting task, as it was unclear what exactly needed to be acquired in order truly to own this artwork. Traditionally, the acquisition of artworks has revolved around the purchase of a single



**Figure 3.** Original performance of *Mirage* in 1976 at the Anthology Film Archive

object (e.g. a canvas), or collection of different objects (e.g. a series of prints, or a sculpture group). In the case of installation and performance works, like *Mirage*, this process of acquisition is not always possible. To acquire *Mirage*, MoMA needed to purchase something that no longer existed. The original 1976 *Mirage* was, like most performances, an evanescent event, which was exhausted within its own fleeting temporality. *Mirage*, therefore, was irredeemably lost, only existing as a trace through the physical copies of the videos and through some of the original props Jonas had first used at the Anthology Film Archive. In its later iterations, Jonas had transformed *Mirage* into an ever-changing installation without a fixed form, which meant that the work did not cohere into a single artefact but existed in and through a changing collection of artefacts variously coalescing to generate different forms.

The inherent impermanence and variability of artworks like *Mirage* adds on to various more recent defiance of the institutional logic of the museum, erected, as we noted earlier, upon the attempt to preserve artworks as unique and stable 'objects'. To acquire an artwork like *Mirage*, museums first need to transform these artworks into ownable and preservable 'museum objects'. In practice, this typically means 'freezing' these artworks at one specific point in time, which normally coincides with the moment of acquisition. The freezing of these artworks is necessary to establish a stable and recognizable material reference upon which the museum can legitimate its discourses of authenticity, uniqueness and originality, as well as later operations of conservation and restoration. Only insofar as the museum can produce such stable physical reference can it sustain the claim that the artwork it owns is the authentic and original expression of the artist's intention, rather than a simple copy or replica. And it is only insofar as there is such stable physical reference that conservators can measure the deterioration of the piece and legitimate their interventions to restore it to its 'original' state. Importantly for our



**Figure 4.** *Mirage*, Joan Jonas, 1976/2005. Six videos (black and white, sound and silent), props, stages, photographs. Duration variable.

argument, the stabilization of these artworks has come to require a new set of relations amongst agents in the field.

The transformation of artworks like *Mirage* into legible and stable ‘museum objects’ is a rather complex process that requires collective effort. In this case, the curator in charge of the piece first needed to interview the artist to establish, through her memory, the original form of the work in 1976 and to discern what elements of its later iterations could be deemed inherent to the artwork, and which were secondary or ancillary. Once the boundaries of the artwork were fixed through this process, registrars had to transform this information into archival material, a material that became an inalienable property of the piece ensuring that future displays of *Mirage* would be authentic representations of the artist’s original intent. In addition, conservators and audiovisual technicians had to make sure that the physical instantiation of *Mirage* – the actual material artefacts through which it was displayed – accurately reflected the artist’s original intent. In the case of *Mirage*, this process was rather problematic. For one, the monitors on which *Mirage* was originally displayed in 1976 had, by 2007, become outdated and needed to be replaced by new ones, significantly altering the original aesthetics of the piece. Additionally, the original analogue videos were obsolete and almost impossible to reproduce in current display devices. Conservators and audiovisual technicians had to transfer the content of the analogue videos into adequate digital forms without altering the original content of the piece. This was particularly difficult since Jonas had specifically worked with the properties of analogue technology to produce some of the visual effects that had become part of her signature – like ‘vertical rolls’, a visual interference that she periodically inserted to interrupt the image on the screen – and which could not be replicated within digital environments. Hence, in order to represent as faithfully as possible Jonas’s original aesthetics, audiovisual technicians had to invent a way to mimic this effect digitally through a software simulation that created a black roll periodically sweeping the screen. The resulting *Mirage* consisted of a black room, sparsely populated with different sculptural elements and six screens loosely arranged in a circle showing digitized copies of the original 1976 videos, including one showing Jonas’s famous vertical rolls (Figure 4).

*Mirage* illustrates how the process through which a media artwork becomes a 'museum object' is a true process of co-production in which creative and productive agency is not monopolized by the artist but is distributed among different agents. Curators, registrars, conservators and audiovisual technicians were not simply in charge of presenting an artwork that existed beforehand, but actively shaped the final aesthetic of this artwork. Their practices, in this sense, were not simply reproductive or mechanical but were truly constitutive of what *Mirage* ultimately came to be. This case ties in with our previous example, where we saw how the increasingly complex and obsolescent nature of contemporary artworks demands the creation of interdisciplinary teams producing new dynamics of collaboration among players in this field.

Co-production, like in the case of *Mirage*, is becoming ubiquitous in contemporary art museums, especially as installation and performance have become standard formats of contemporary art. However, these co-production practices are denied and obscured in museums, which continue to exhibit these collectively produced pieces as though they were the direct results of the artist's single creative agency and labour. The denial and concealment of this collective process of co-production is, nonetheless, necessary to comply with the logics organizing the field of contemporary art. Museums need to conceal the collective work of co-production in order to legitimate their traditional position as neutral containers of the art and, in so doing, to legitimate their displays as objective and unmediated representations of original artworks. Within the current stakes in the field, disclosing to the public eye the process of co-production might be tantamount to accepting that the artworks on display are not the artists' originals but museums' productions. The concealing of co-production is also necessary for artists, who need to retain the monopoly over the artwork, which defines and legitimates their privileged position as the sole authors and creators of art, as well as the rightful copyright owners.

The denial and concealment of the practice of co-production creates an *illusio* (Bourdieu et al., 1993), serving to reaffirm the stakes of normative subjective and institutional positions currently defining the field of contemporary art. However, this form of *illusio* is increasingly difficult to sustain, as the entire system of normative subjective positions is held up by an increasingly unstable material basis. Even if museums can transform installation and performances like *Mirage* into exhibitible 'museum objects', the inherent material instability of these artworks makes it impossible to sustain them in those positions for very long. Most of these artworks rely on rapidly obsolescent technologies, which have to be periodically replaced and transferred into newer formats. For example, MoMA's 2007 *Mirage* exists as a digitized version of the original 1976 analogue. However, this contemporary iteration is unlikely to last, given the speed at which display and storage technologies are replaced by newer ones. The intrinsic obsolescence of the technologies means that every attempt to upgrade these artworks into a newer technology will be eventually superseded by the development of newer technologies. At the same time, failing to upgrade them would be tantamount to condemning these artworks to death, as the technologies upon which they rely are rapidly becoming irretrievable. The ongoing process of migration to which these artworks are subjected not only implies a constant change in their physical containers (e.g. their display technologies) but also a change in their artistic content. Each new technological format affords a rather specific grammar, which defines the range of possible aesthetic forms that can be produced with

them. This is, precisely, what happened in the migration of *Mirage* from an analogue environment – in which vertical roll was natively possible – to a digital environment, in which this vertical roll was only possible through a sophisticated *trompe l'oeil*.

Jonas's *Mirage* illustrates once again how the inherent obsolescence of contemporary artworks, like installations and performance, and the difficulty of placing them into stable 'object-positions', forces new dynamics of collaboration and co-production that challenge the traditional position of the museum within the field of contemporary art. Faced with these artworks, the task of the museum cannot be merely reduced to representing an already existing and more or less stable artwork, but also needs to include the co-production of the boundaries of the artwork: its material constituents, the ways in which it can be displayed, the degree to which materials can be changed, and how that change can take place. However, this new role creates fresh conflicts in the field of art, as the museum comes to compete with artists, critics, galleries and artists' estates, who all potentially claim ownership over the definition and interpretation of the artwork. The inherent obsolescence and variable nature of contemporary artworks like *Mirage* challenge the stakes that different institutional agents have played in the field, forcing them to redefine positions and inducing new dynamics of collaboration and competition amongst them.

## Conclusions

Our aim was to capture the productive duality of artworks as both agents in the field of art, operating within social forces, and as social forces in themselves, with the ability to exceed the immediate context of sociability and relations in which they are inserted, thus marking the field. The empirical examples drawn from MoMA show the role that different types of artworks, *qua* physical artefacts, have had in the institutional dynamics of the museum and within the larger field of contemporary art. Taken together, they show how the trajectories of these artworks as they move in space and over time require creative adaptations and negotiations, which ultimately involve shifting positions, relations and boundaries in the field.

The cases presented focus on how attention to the physical properties of artworks – their obsolescence, portability or flexibility – is essential to gain an empirical insight into the dynamics of the field of contemporary art. This, however, does *not* mean that the physical nature of these artworks explains *per se* the dynamics of change and permanence of this field. Our pursuit of the connections assembled around the physical properties of *Days*, *Floor Cake* and *Mirage* is, precisely, what enabled us to gain an invaluable insight into some of the key processes currently shaping the field of contemporary art, like the redefinition of the roles of contemporary art conservators, the emergence of new institutional alliances and power positions, and the growing challenge to uphold the traditional role of the museum as a neutral container of art.

The cases we explored in this paper show that material artefacts together with their physical properties and their trajectories are elements *internal* to the logic of the field rather than external or peripheral to it and that, consequently, field dynamics need to be understood as resulting from the interaction between subject *and* object position-takings and trajectories. Field analysis must incorporate a sociology of productions (Lahire,

1999), attending to the mapping of social ties and networks of collaboration (Becker, 1982; Bottero and Crossley, 2011), and anchored in a recognition that materials are key players in defining the stakes of the social game.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to extend thanks for the invaluable support of Glenn Wharton for the ethnographic study at MoMA Conservation Laboratory and to all members of the conservation lab. Thanks also to colleagues in the European SCUD network for comments at the May 2010 workshop, to the three referees, and to David Inglis and Mike Savage.

### Funding

Funding for this project has been provided by the European Research Council – Marie Curie Grant Agreement PEOF-GA-2009–254783.

### Notes

1. Instances of this material turn can be found in disciplines as diverse as anthropology (Gell, 1998; Miller, 1987, 2010), cognitive studies (Clark and Chalmers, 1998; Hutchins, 1995), geography (Anderson and Wylie, 2009; Whatmore, 2002), science studies (Galison, 1997; Latour and Woolgar, 1979; Haraway, 1997) and philosophy (Harman, 2011)
2. As Savage (2011) notes, this formalist approach to fields was prominent in Bourdieu's early formulations. However, later on Bourdieu (Bourdieu et al., 1999: 123; Bourdieu, 2000: 134; 2005: 40–1) considered the relationship between the formal space of the field and physical space, arguing that the latter could play a role in defining field positions and relations. Yet the role of physical space and artefacts remains largely under-theorized in field theory.
3. Although MoMA is considered the first museum of contemporary art, there were precedents, like the Musée des Artistes Vivantes, which opened in Paris in 1818, the Phillips Collection, founded in 1921 in Washington, DC, and the Barnes Foundation, created in Pennsylvania in 1922 (Lorente, 1998).
4. Of course the boundaries separating 'the contemporary' from 'the modern' are still highly contested (see Altshuler, 2005). At the time MoMA was funded, both terms were largely seen as coterminous, since most modern art (i.e. art produced since the 1850s) was still 'contemporary' (i.e. still 'art of the present' or the very recent past). However, Alfred Barr, MoMA's first director, preferred the term 'modern' over 'contemporary', insisting that the former was 'valuable because semantically it suggests the progressive, original and challenging, rather than the safe and academic which would naturally be included in the supine neutrality of the term "contemporary"' (Kantor, 2003: 366). Over time, however, the notions of 'the contemporary' and 'the modern' have diverged: the modern still refers to art since the 1850s, but contemporary now refers to art since the Second World War.
5. Although the price paid for this artwork is not publicly known, recent Nauman artworks have been sold for around US\$5 million, with some of his early pieces fetching US\$9.9 million.
6. One of the earliest examples of joint purchases was Mathew Barney's *Cremaster 2* between the Walker Art Center and the SFMoMA in 2000. Since then, most major museums have gradually incorporated this strategy into their normal acquisition practices. Tate and the Centre George Pompidou have jointly acquired some of Nauman's seminal video-artworks, and more recently Christian Marclay's *The Clock*, which they jointly purchased with the Israel Museum.



7. Examples include acquisitions of Rachel Whiteread's sculpture *Untitled (Domestic)* by the Carnegie Museum of Art and the Albright-Knox Gallery; Chris Burden's sculpture *Hell Gate* by MOCA and LACMA; and El Anatsui's sculpture *Fading Roll* by LACMA and UCLA.
8. There have been some exceptions to this rule of local-regional alliances – for example, the joint acquisition of Félix González-Torres's *Untitled (Double Portrait)* by the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo, NY, and Tate Modern in London. It is not surprising, again, that this joint acquisition was made possible by the very nature of this artwork, which consists of a stack of printed paper which can be endlessly reproduced in both locations.
9. Some examples of these interdisciplinary initiatives are the creation of the Artist Documentation Program at the Whitney (<http://whitney.org/Conservation/Interviews>); the Variable Media Initiative at the Guggenheim (<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/conservation/conservation-projects/variable-media>); the Matters in Media Art project sponsored by the TATE, MoMA and SFMoMA (<http://www.tate.org.uk/about/projects/matters-media-art>); and the EU-funded project Inside Installations (<http://www.inside-installations.org/home/index.php>).

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### Author biographies

Fernando Domínguez Rubio is a Marie Curie Post-Doctoral Fellow in the Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC) at The Open University. He was a Fellow at the New York University during the ethnographic work for this project. He is co-editor of *The Politics of Knowledge* (Routledge 2012). Recent papers include 'The material production of the Spiral Jetty: A study of culture in the making' (*Cultural Sociology* 6(2)) and 'Technifying the public and publicizing infrastructures: Imagining a new urban political ecology through General Vara del Rey Square' (*International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, forthcoming).

Elizabeth B. Silva is Professor of Sociology at the Open University. Recent publications include a special issue of *Poetics on Cultural Capital: Histories, Limits and Prospects* (co-edited December 2011), *Technology, Family, Culture: Influences on Home Life* (Palgrave 2010), *Cultural Analysis and Bourdieu's Legacy* (co-edited Routledge 2010), *Culture, Class, Distinction* (co-authored Routledge 2009) and various journal articles on Bourdieu, cultural capital, gender, visual art and methods. She was UK coordinator of the European Network for the Studies of Cultural Distinction and Social Differentiation (SCUD).