

When a Bus Met a Museum. To Follow Artists, Curators and Workers in Art Installation

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When a bus met a museum: following artists, curators and workers in art installation

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Introduction

As a visitor you might enter a museum of contemporary art to see an exhibition on a topic that has attracted your attention. Until that moment what has been visible to you, an amateur and enthusiast for contemporary art exhibits, is the media coverage of the topic. Once inside the museum you grab the leaflet which presents the pieces of art and allow this modest document, filled with written inscriptions and schematic plans, to guide you around the show. At the end of the visit, after seeing the art installations, impressed by the exhibition, you buy the catalogue to fill your lazy Sundays with artistic pleasure, or you quit the building furiously, slamming the heavy museum door.

In this essay, I intend to offer an alternative to viewing the museum and the exhibition through the visitor's expectations. Instead, I shall follow all those actors whom the viewer usually does not meet in the museum: the artists, the curators, the technicians and the workers. The visitor knows they exist and that they have worked hard to stage all these art installations for the public, but he or she has never seen them working, discussing and acting together in the artistic process.

This essay is an invitation to the viewer to follow these actors and to perform a slow and unusual visit to the exhibition *Häuser*, held in *Musée d'art Moderne de la Ville de Paris* in 1999.¹ In this context, art objects will be seen in the process of their doing.² A specific case will be discussed: the installation of a Volkswagen bus, model 1977, in the museum,³ and its transformation into a contemporary art installation named *Mückenbus*.⁴ This example is particularly interesting, because the bus passes through the museum entrance door, back and forth, as does a visitor, and because a whole group of actors is assembled and mobilized to help insert the bus and to adjust its position in the exhibition hall. I will describe how artists, curators, technicians and workers adapt space, tools and materials to the artistic idea; what happens to the bus when it meets the museum, and consider some of the ways in which such installation operations transform the museum world in the process. Before analyzing the bus's tribulations, however, I will trace briefly some key research tendencies on museums that help us to consider this particular case.

The New Museology (Vergo 1989) does not treat the museum as an institution that is simply concerned, in a neutral way, with classification, collection and conservation activities. The museum is, according to this perspective, a tool available to a society to find and to demarcate its identity; its role is to visualize cultures. Thus, the museum is reduced to a 'facade' of social differences and becomes a representation of dominant ideological interests (Macdonald 1998; Macdonald and Fyfe 1996). Exhibition displays may even be seen as instruments of repression that have the effect of reproducing social inequalities. Following the sociology of symbolic domination we might say that this perspective draws our attention to the museum as an institutional form. What it often does not consider, however, is the installation practices involved in making a museum and their materiality. It treats the museum as a projected reflection of a moving outside.⁵ However, the museum inside – the art installation process, the participation of various actors, the particular trials that transform objects into artworks – is not fully investigated within this new museological approach.⁶

Anthropologists of material culture are, in contrast, more concerned with the specificities of internal museum activities (Stocking 1985; Pearce and Kavanagh 1991; Pearce 1989). Their main interest is in how to understand the internal coherence of different collections and the work done in achieving that, and in how to transform them into a plausible assemblage recording life in a specific time and space. In addition, anthropologists of material culture in

museums analyze both objects' transformations when passing from one culture to another and the formal interpretation of artefacts that is related to that process. They discuss the strategies of selection and display for objects, and the history of the collections and the museum as cultural phenomena. However in this approach too the daily process of installing museum objects and negotiating their display in concrete situations is not often described.

According to the first group of theories, i.e. institution-focused theories, the museum space is considered as a symbolic space; the display is a microcosmic representation of national existence or political differences. The museum is seen as a map of nations and cultures. Although the second group of theories – material culture studies – tackle the internal principles of the arrangements of specific collections, the latter remains closely related to an understanding of external contextual differences. Thus, the approaches of both institutional theories and material culture studies presume that the museum's objective is to reflect the dynamic external reality. By external I mean the social, political and cultural worlds with which the museum interacts. Both perspectives share the assumption that the exterior is separated from interior; nevertheless, the two groups of theories map the museum according to different usages: the first deals with its instrumental use, the second, with its internal principles. Whatever the specificity of the mapping concerned, the museum is considered as a visual embodiment of external, past or present social reality.

To look at the museum only from outside, is not sufficient if we want to explore the dynamics of art production. To look at the museum only by following the internal principles of arrangement for objects, is insufficient as a way of tackling the contemporary art installation. Thus, I suggest taking a position that straddles the border of the interior and the exterior of the museum. I shall examine the museum by accompanying a bus in the process of its becoming art and by following the modalities of this object's transformations. Thus, instead of an outside panoramic view of the museum, as investigated by the institutional theories, I shall offer instead a 'myopic' outline of the installation practices. By contrast with the emphasis given by material culture studies to the objects' arrangements according to principles of time or space principles I shall emphasize description of the specific constraints of their installation in situation.

These two approaches have analyzed exhibition effects as they are received within aesthetic, social, and political discourses. In contrast, I seek to explore the everyday art installation practices along with actors' discussions on objects. An analysis of the variety of actors' reactions and relations to objects, as well as the material transformations of the installation site will be acknowledged. The description will follow the peculiar ways of manipulating objects, technical choices and local adjustments, spatial infrastructure and specific objects' 'carriers'. The exhibition conditions, constraints, dangers and risks, related to specific objects' and museum capacities, will be also examined.⁷ Thus, instead of treating the museum as a 'window on-society' (façade) or as an asylum for artefacts, I intend to explore the dynamic process of negotiations around different material rearrangements. I follow, in effect, contemporary art in the process of being made as art.

Institutional theories and material culture studies have rarely addressed the fact that the museum before the opening ceremony of the show, is a strange messy world composed of heterogeneous actors with a variable ontology. I seek to describe this world, and to explore the daily life of an exhibition's preparation, and its effects on both the routine and the more unusual aspects of a museum. 'Museum' is here understood as a quasi-technical network involved in art fabrication work: it is both an installation site and an installation setting.

My intention is not to provide a re-definition of 'museum', nor to produce a theoretical account of its changing nature. The study of installation practices allows us to step aside from the dilemma of treating the museum either as a process⁸ or as a structure.⁹ What I want to do is to tell a continuous story and to render visible how a multitude of tiny infinitesimal operations bring the museum into existence.

Contemporary art installation provides a quasi-technical situation for experimenting with objects. By experimentation I mean that all actors are deployed through the process of installation; the procedures of their profusion and stabilization can be made visible by ethnographical observation. By doing so, the art museum can be seen and understood in the same manner in which science and technology studies has approached the scientific

laboratory (Latour and Woolgar 1979, Knorr-Cetina, 1999). Following the actors through the object's tribulations, one can expose the materialization of all these successive installation operations, and show the appearance of a whole collective¹⁰ acting in the space. As science studies puts it, the idea is not located in the scientist's mind, it is situated instead in the 'hands' of a heterogeneous group of actors. The collective aspect of artistic production has been investigated also by the recent history of art.¹¹ Instead of being situated in a single artistic mind, in the imagination of a genius, the artistic process is instead seen as distributed within this visible collective. Likewise I propose to follow this collective and describe the small successive operations of preparing and adjusting objects in art installation according to 'multiple constraints'.¹² The meanderings of a single case will be explored, thus, presenting the specific rhythm of art installation, decomposed into its small elements and actions.

The Bus Enters the Museum

One morning in 1999 I arrived at the museum and found out that the entrance door was missing, and two big trucks were parked nearby. During the whole month I had been an intern in the museum (a position that allowed me to observe the installation process from inside), and I had never before seen the museum door detached. Instead of the door I found a gap, instead of the entrance – an emptiness. Nevertheless, the space made available was still too small to let a bus, waiting outside the museum, inside; so the second door was also detached. A few workers were commissioned to help with the installation of the bus in the museum. This chaotic state and the collective agitation lasted throughout the day, the artist and the curators followed the technical procedures and it was an important event both for the museum and for the company of workers. A large metallic scaffold was erected on the staircase in order to elevate and install the bus in the Dufy hall.¹³ During this time the artist was in attendance observing the process of installing the platform and moving the bus through the museum space; he proudly observed: 'it's the first time that a bus enters the museum!'

Once inside the museum, the bus was tied with ropes and elevated onto the scaffolding and prepared for passage through the 25 stairs leading to the Dufy hall. Gathered around it, workers, curators, technicians and artists gave advice, took decisions, and made exclamations. The museum door was still open: everybody could still enter the museum; the workers and their machines spent more time in the museum than the artists; many additional objects were brought from outside to take part in the installation. One can observe their 'affluence'. By this term I mean the abundance and the diversity of all agents entering the artistic production. They were compelled by the concrete installation situations to take part, as well as by the process of stabilization and adaptation to a new place. In this way the external milieu comes to function as interiority: the inside and the outside become external to each other through the installation of *Mückenbus* in *Musée d'art Moderne de la Ville de Paris*.

After a few more efforts of the lifting machinery, the bus was installed on the large scaffolding. Once placed on it, the bus was slowly pushed towards the Dufy hall where it had to be installed for the period of the *Häuser* exhibition. But the troubles associated with the bus did not end when it entered the exhibition hall. Once inside the hall, another set of trials began. Due to its very large dimensions and heavy weight (1300kg.) the bus was difficult to move into its position in the hall. It is an 'elephant-like' object, as the workers joked:

Technician: *What have you done with the bus?*

Technical manager: *I have called the curator and she told me 'we never do that, it takes 6 hours to do it'. We have already drained the fuel, and removed the battery, but the motor is still there.*

Thus, the permanent actors (curators, workers, technicians) insist on the need to drain the fuel, and to remove the battery and other internal parts of the bus for safety reasons; the artist does not agree with these requirements of the museum. To resolve the controversy a set of calculations is done to distribute the weight of the bus within the Dufy hall. After the calculations have been done, the bus appears to be too heavy to be installed as it is, without any changes. The artist agrees with the permanent actors: the weight has to be decreased. The technical

manager calls the workers and they detach the battery and drain the fuel. Thus the bus is deprived of its internal parts and its heaviness is reduced. This small adjustment is done as a specific adaptation, a slow, collective and assumed process involving all of the actors concerned with the bus's excessive weight. Whatever the actors do, they are not able to remove the whole of the bus's weight: they can slightly change it, displace it, redistribute it, rearrange it, but they can never deprive the bus of the possibility of imposing its heaviness on the actors and the museum. No subject's agreement, no verbal negotiation process is strong enough to remove completely the mass of 1300kg. Provoked by object's heaviness, scattered and gathered again in the controversy, actors and their relations are stabilized because of the specific requirement of the object being installed: the bus is heavy and this imposes itself on the museum. The calculations are the specific tool the actors use to provide proof, share and show each other the impossibility of keeping the bus without changes. The controversy is resolved by the rediscovery of the un-removable portion of the bus's weight together with the more mutable part of it.

Then, another minor dispute emerges, because the artist wants to place the bus directly on the museum floor of the Dufy hall. However, it's risky to locate the heavy bus in the museum space:

Me: *Are you happy with the position of the bus?*

Artist: *No, we have to change it. (He steps on the bus and tries to adjust the antenna, then turns to the technical manager): I want to change it.*

Technical manager: *Oh, you are like a child, like a small boy, 'mama, can I have this, I want to have that.'*

Artist: *But the bus no longer has a battery. That means that it is less heavy and we can remove the wooden construction, the whole wooden platform can be removed.*

Technical manager: *No, because we are in an empty space here. That's why we have added four wooden parts to redistribute the weight on the surface.*

Technical manager: *We cannot keep a bus in a museum like this, without taking any precautions. The public is not stupid! We might fall down on Matisse! The bus will find itself with Matisse and Dufy at the same time. We are in an empty space here. The floor tiling is very weak.*

The Matisse hall is located under the Dufy hall. If the bus is placed directly on the tiled floor there may be an accident. If the floor breaks, it may cause chaos in the two distinct exhibition spaces, the bus and the artworks, Dufy and Matisse. The eventual accident may endanger the painting collections, the museum and the public. Thus, both the museum entity and the visitors' safety depend on the kilograms of the bus's weight and their distribution. Threatened by the possibility of an accident, the artist gives up again: the bus has to be installed on a specific wooden platform.

Following the process of installation, one can see that the unexpected, the surprising, the events come from the interior: the bus weight, the Matisse-Dufy space accident, the danger of the internal parts of the bus. The exterior factors such as visitors and additional objects are considered as more predictable; the exterior is the site of the habitual and determined action and routine. One can see a curious inversion here of inside and outside. The small controversy is resolved after the danger of accident has been recognised and shared by many actors, and because of the mobilization of a particular property of the tiled floor as a secondary object – its fragility and vulnerability. The artist keeps negotiating around the installation of a 'real' bus. Once the bus's weight is reduced, its installation appears to him easier and he insists on placing it straight on the floor. The outcome of the actors' discussions involved in the stabilization of the chaotic material world around *Mückenbus* is the intervention of a new actor

in the debate, a new object capacity: the fragility of the floor. Whatever the actors do, they cannot remove or displace the museum floor that separates Matisse from Dufy. The artist's demands and negotiations with permanent actors are not powerful enough to change radically the properties of the floor. Worried by the possibility of accident, relations between actors are disrupted and are stabilized because of the specific requirement of this secondary object. The controversy is resolved by the rediscovery of the immutable fragility of the floor. Sharing the space of a potential accident, actors manage to distribute heaviness between floors, collections, secondary and artistic installation objects.

They achieve this by constructing a wooden platform, mediating between the bus weight and the museum floor. A major controversy is provoked among them concerning its dimensions.

Curator: *Let's talk about the platform.*

Technical manager: *Oh, it is already done.*

Artist: *What (very surprised)? It is not possible to have a bigger platform?*

Technical manager: *No, it's already done. But at the same time if it was bigger, we could have had problems installing it.*

Artist: *We can add these wooden parts to make it visually bigger?*

Technical manager: *Yes, no problem.*

For the artist it is important to create the impression that the bus can still be driven. He wants to present a 'real' bus to the public; that is why he insists on the visual enlargement of the platform. The small platform gives the impression that the bus is placed on a footing; a larger platform surface might create the impression that the bus is still moving. The technical solution of enlarging the platform is good for the museum because the weight is redistributed in a better way. However the permanent actors refuse to build another platform and decide to attach two small wooden parts to the platform that has already been constructed. The presence of the already constructed wooden platform closes the discussions.

Another controversy starts, however, because the artist does not want the repair to be visible. These additional small parts show that the bus is immobilized and reinforce even more the impression of its static nature. By disguising the repair signs, the artist wants to destroy the traces of the bus's immobilization. It may help to maintain the appearance that the bus is in action.

Technician: Are you going to hide this? (he points to the small visible wooden parts added to the platform)

Artist: Yes, I want absolutely to hide this. We need a wooden construction to walk on; a construction creating the impression that the visitor can walk on it and approach the bus, especially if the bus door is open.

Technician: OK.

Artist: *Another possibility is to construct another whole platform (he looks at the technical manager)*

Technician: *We need to have it on Monday? No, it's impossible. There is no sense to say 'yes', if we cannot do it.*

The actors spend a lot of time and waste a lot of energy discussing the small detail of the traces of the platform repair. These almost invisible tiny traces on the wooden platform hold the key to the installation process. The controversy about the small difference triggers two radically

different situations. If the traces are visible, one can see an immobilized bus, deprived of fuel and battery, a startling piece of art; if the tiny traces are invisible, the bus appears as a 'real' moving bus, and the street is seen to have entered the museum. The infinitely small difference in the object reveals the huge distance between two opposite ideas concerning the object—the moving bus and the 'museumified' bus, the street in the museum and the street as museum object. The subtle distinction between a whole wooden platform and a repaired platform might also lead the visitor to dissimilar perceptions of art. The actors know that the exhibition depends on these small differences, and that is why they are discussed so much. The slender differences of the traces can render visible the difference between the Volkswagen bus and the art installation *Mückenbus*, between street and museum, agency and 'patience' (as in agent and patient).¹⁴

Another small difference is discussed by the permanent actors and the artist, and provokes them into animated debate. The museum director and the curators absolutely insist that the bus be separated from the visitors, and be presented from a distance. Here is a brief conversation among technicians and curators before the artist is informed about this.

Curator: *The museum director doesn't want the people to enter the Dufy hall, and the artist still has not been informed about this.*

Technician: *You have to tell him, oh! Because he has to try the bus's position to make it centred, closer to the entrance, and to make possible for the people to see it. He wanted the people to be able to enter and to see the bus, to be able to open it, etc. That is why he wanted to install it in the hall Dufy. You have to tell him, he has to be aware.*

The artist insists on the opportunity of allowing the public to enter the Dufy hall, to approach the bus, to touch it (to see that it's 'real'), to be able to open the door and to see its interior, and to interact with it. After all, that is one of the main reasons why it was important for him to hide the traces of the platform repair, and now he seeks to position the bus in the middle of the exhibition hall. The interventions of the permanent actors modify the artistic project. They consider the possible interactions of the public with *Mückenbus* as dangerous because of its weight and the fragility of the museum environment. Thus, a small barrier is installed with the aim of separating and isolating the bus from the public. The artist considers the latter as a big deviation from the artistic project, because the barrier impedes the visitor in encountering a real drivable bus in the museum. Then, he tries to negotiate a different disposition of the bus in a way to render it more visible and 'real' for the visitor.

The worker speaking to the artist: *Do you like it this way? Oh, you have to tell us! (He points to the straight position of the bus.)*

Artist: *The bus has to look as if parked. The parked aspect is very important. Who is going to help the workers to adjust it and to install the headlights?*

Technical manager: *We have to do it now. I need 3 days more to finish all the operations. I don't know how we are going to do it.*

Artist: *Oh, it is always like this, but at the end everything will be done.*

Technical manager: *I'm particularly anxious about the technical details and the assemblage of the different pieces.*

The artist, standing in front of the bus, stares at it and says: *look at it! The bus has its own eyes; it is looking at you, isn't it!*

Technical manager: *If I was at your place, I would leave the bus in this position. (She means the actual position of the bus.) And the headlights? We have to*

install them tomorrow. It takes time.

Artist: *Oh, in this case why don't we install them today? (The artist takes a place in the middle of the Dufy hall and tries to position the 'eyes' of the bus.) He says: no, I would like to push it to the right.*

The worker says to another worker: *Felix, you have to push once more using the lever to have the headlights in front of me. (Thus, the bus was moved to the right.)*

The artist tries to position the bus as 'parked', and to show that it is just a temporary break in its agency expressed in terms of its mobility. Equipped with different instruments the permanent actors follow the artist and his efforts to position the bus's 'eyes'. Two possibilities for moving the bus are discussed. The first is to shift it to the centre in a straight position, so that the public can see it and discover it as a classified museum object. The second is to move it so that it appears as a momentarily parked bus, inclined to the right, its headlights staring at the public, so the bus is able to see the visitors. The small difference between the straight and the right positioning of the bus reveals the discrepancy between an acting and immobilized bus, or ordinary art object; an installation looking at the public as agent within the museum space or a space with a public looking at the installed art-object. Here, one can see again that the tiny variation between two distinct positions of the bus can open a broader difference between museum and street, bus agency and patience, as well as the passivity and activity of the public.

As the bus passes from one state to another, from that of movement to the appearance of being parked, every change supposes different degrees of agency. This is something that is performed by slight modifications in the artistic project. In the process of displacing the bus, the actors do not perform a simple work on the object itself, instead they are involved in manipulating the conditions of action itself. A small collective is formed in the situation or moment of positioning the bus. It differs from the 'artworld'¹⁵ or the museum institution. The collective is composed of bus, wooden platform, workers, technicians, their tools and mutual jokes, their small controversies and negotiations. It is composed of technical managers and curators, their conversations, notebooks, doubts and security precautions. And it is composed of apprentices and their jokes. The collective installs art objects, but it is also the first to present, pass and propagate the installation effects. When the artist orders the displacement of the bus from the left to the right and all the way back again, he displaces this collective in a momentary and reversible way. The bus is in the process of *becoming art*.

Through the analysis of the steps of the installation of the bus, one can see that the museum is not a stable milieu, where actors' activities are predictable (inscribed in fixed roles and statuses). Instead of the unity of an 'organic' essential museum group, there is a temporarily constituted hybrid collective, a functional group compelled by the installation tasks to act. One can see numerous unpredictable permutations of opposite functions: the worker takes the place of the artist, the curators follow the security requirements, the artist intervenes on the bus as a technician, etc. Thus, the internal can easily take the place of the external; internal and external appear again as functions, not as opposite structures. Instead of deducing 'naturally' the roles of artists, curators and technicians from the museum institution, I began by analyzing their actions in installation to induce the museum. The latter is not given *per se*, it is composed, rather, by continuous controversies closed by temporary adjustments and new objects' requirements, triggered and stabilized time and again.

After the adjustment of the bus's position another important operation is enacted – the cleaning of the bus. In this situation one can see the inside/outside opposition revealed by means of a joke:

Technical manager: *the bus has to be cleaned.*

Technician: *Ohhhh, are we supposed to take it back into the street?*

Technical manager: *We have to put the headlights. So, you have to clean the bus the artist will come, and we will see. But the bus is very dirty; we cannot put the headlights like this.*

The technician laughs at the meticulous and painful work of entering the bus into the museum. During two weeks a large number of workers, instruments and constructions were mobilized for the introduction of the bus. The technicians have worked to construct the huge metallic scaffolding, to build the small wooden platform and to adjust its position in the Dufy hall. Now it has to be cleaned and that is the last operation before the opening ceremony; at this moment a set of jokes concerning the reversibility of the art transformation is enacted. They refer to the back and forth movements between inside and outside and point to the specific aspects of the museum as situated on the exterior-interior continuum.

Before describing the final operation of cleaning the bus let us turn back to some previously discussed operations. To understand what happened in the art installation I have not started from a predetermined museum framework, from a structure existing *per se*. Instead, I began by analyzing the small controversies among the actors that partially revealed different aspects of the museum. In the case of the battery removal, the museum appeared as possessing fire security requirements; because of the confined space, the fuel and the battery might endanger both the visitors and the museum. Thus security measures have to be taken. In the controversy over the distribution of the bus's weight, the museum's architecture was revealed; it appeared as a sequence of separated and tiny isolated places. The weight threatening the floor and the Matisse and Dufy collections was a threat to the museum's integrity. The technician's joke revealed the difficult and time consuming procedures of staging an ordinary object in an art exhibition; the museum emerged as an agent mobilizing and cooperating with diverse actors for the realization of the artistic project. It is by analyzing these controversies and the actions that are performed in uncertainty that one can see the museum appearing. These are the stable figures, revealed in the situation, that hold the museum in place; the controversies, in effect, perform or bring the museum into existence.

Let us follow the final step of the bus's transformation into an art installation. An apprentice, Manu, is charged with the important task of removing the dirt from the bus. In the process of 'care giving' he tries to drive the bus, starts singing a song, and the cleaning process turns into a small party for the apprentices and the technicians. Look at Manu as he cleans the bus; the cloth is in his hands and he holds the steering wheel. One might wonder what he is actually doing. Is he trying to clean the bus? The cloth that he holds in his hands suggests the latter. Is he trying to drive the bus? That is what the position of his hands implies. Thus, the small gesture of holding the bus's steering wheel with a cloth contains both the operations of cleaning and driving. The small difference between two close gestures points to the discrepancy of two distinct situations. It triggers either the cleaning or the driving procedures, the bus patency or agency. The situations can change according to the microscopic variation of the almost blind, hesitating gestures of Manu in the process of bus care giving.

In the darkness of the Dufy hall, in front of the painting *La Fée Électricité*, nothing suggests that something unusual has happened: the apprentices and the technicians, equipped with instruments and detergents, interact with the bus and try to clean it. Their actions are not determined by the museum as regulated by requirements and precautions. In contrast, the momentary rapid actions of apprentices and technicians in the process of object maintenance bring into existence the exhibition and the museum. Actors are not distinguishable by their tasks, but by what they do to accomplish them. In this way, the quick actions performed in the moment, the smallest interval between them, are connected with the possibility to suddenly overturn the situation. In the analysis of the previous operations I have shown that the controversies on the small objects' differences refer to radically distinct situations that lead to the emergence of different visions of the artistic project. Now one can see that the infinitely small difference in the care giving gestures points also to a huge differentiation. The small variation in the action designates the impulsive aspect of those installation operations that bring into existence different aspects of the museum. If the hesitating gesture points to the cleaning, the museum appears as a site where ordinary objects are gradually transformed, by care giving and maintenance, into artworks. If the gesture refers to driving, the museum

emerges as a place where the reversibility of ordinary objects and artworks is possible.

The different interpretations of cleaning/driving procedures launched by the actors are afterwards related to the identification of the final result: a Volkswagen bus or an art installation *Mückenbus*? Let us follow a brief conversation at the end of the day:

Manu (*the apprentice*): *Oh, I'm exhausted!*

Curator: *What have you done during the day?*

Manu: *I've cleaned a bus.*

Curator: *What??? You mean an artwork, don't you?*

In the preceding operations, the artist has tried several times to install a bus passing for a drivable object rather than an immobilized artwork. One can see in the cleaning process that all kinds of actors are implicated in the artistic transformation of the bus. Follow Manu as he cleans the bus: he sits on the front seat of the bus, holds the steering wheel and tries to drive it, starts singing a song. The other apprentices and technicians laugh at him and at the artistic idea, they join the small party and participate in the maintenance procedures. The bus is passing for a moving bus. Follow Manu as he shares his fatigue with the curator at the end of the day: the bus is passing for an artwork.¹⁶

The process of care giving is not a simple one of active subjects providing care for a passive object - energetic apprentices cleaning the inert bus. The regime of care giving consists instead of gathering a new collective around the object in installation: cloths, apprentices, jokes, technicians, detergents, and songs. These small operations of maintenance do not transform suddenly the dirty bus into a clean one, the driveable bus into an immobilized one. In the process of care giving the bus is gradually transformed into an art installation, the bus is passing into *Mückenbus*. The bus exists as becoming art: it is both an installation and a 1977 Volkswagen model, moving and immobilized, parked and driveable. Follow Manu as he cleans the bus in the exhibition hall, follow Manu as he claims his fatigue in the corridor, and you will be able to observe the becoming art of the bus.¹⁷

During the installation process the ordinary bus is transformed into the art installation *Mückenbus*. As an implicit texture of relevant operational possibilities, it provides many passing moments for the bus. In every small operation the bus performs random movements from one state to the other, repeating in this way its major transformation – from a driveable bus in the street into an art installation in the museum. Every operation is fulfilled with different alternations of interior and exterior, realized time and again. To become *Mückenbus*, the bus has to manage successfully numerous situations of risk and uncertainty. Curators, technicians and artists are also involved in the manipulation of practical circumstances in the various situations of art installation. They are constantly providing accounts of the installation process, thus producing their own 'indigenous' rules in situation and their own attitudes to objects. Thus, by following the actors and their 'management devices' for mastering the practical circumstances, for thinking about, discussing and calculating an object's transformations, you will see their specific ways of making the transformation of an ordinary object into artwork accountable (Hetherington 2000; Hetherington 2003). This peculiar, slow and continuous, repetitive and dynamic process of accounting the art becoming has been systematically neglected by the sociology of art and museological studies.¹⁸

Following the bus's tribulations, one can see that the installation process stands between routine and uncertainty. Its path is not guided entirely by a set of established rules. It is regulated instead by momentary and situated forms of improvisation. Actors are constantly redoing the museum in the installation. However its daily making is not infinitely mutable: a few stable figures of the museum have been revealed throughout the operation. This leads me to consider the museum not just as an external frame that is housing different art installations. The museum is what occurs in the operations, in the controversies and the hesitating gestures. It is what emerges through the encounter of a situation and a specific action that follows; it is what comes to pass among the actors in the process of doing the

exhibition. Instead of existing *per se*, it is something to be scrutinized, investigated, and searched for. Almost as soon as its form is stabilized, it needs to be re-made and stabilized again. It is remade not in the course of continuous subjective interactions, but according to new objects' requirements (weight, heaviness, space fragility, etc.) that allow the installation process to be reshaped and to continue developing along its characteristic trajectory.

How to Follow Artists, Curators and Workers in Art Installation

To analyze the small adjustments of the bus in the museum space, the ethnographic study of the stages of preparation of this contemporary art exhibition was needed. When depicting the microscopic level of art production, the grain of the analysis tended also to be microscopic. It revealed, layer by layer, the installation process. The more the analysis revealed the detail of technical operation performed on the bus, the more unpredictable elements concerning the museum emerged. That is why delving into tiny material details was necessary to follow the exhibition's dynamics. The style of my paper has tried to follow the slow emergence of art objects in installation, the repetitions reproduced some sequences of recurring operations, uncertain gestures, or technical choices. To embrace the diversity of the art-object's transformations I followed simultaneously the actors' discourses and the non-discursive actions: movements, grasps, gestures, reactions, etc. The latter have emerged together with the discursive acts and I have referred to their implicit presuppositions. It was not possible to separate the cleaning procedures from the specific apprentice's gestures, the back and forth displacements of the bus from the jokes of the technician, etc. Gestures, mimicry and laughter also produced information about the art installation. To follow them I have used different investigation techniques, photographic tests, and ethnographic observations. In this way I analyzed both the installation process and the way it was interwoven with and materially transformed by events as they occurred. I extracted some specific variables of internal expression in the actors' discourses to examine their impact on the ordering of the museum world.

As an intern I was also situated between the exterior and interior, between the 'esoteric' being of an art installation and the 'exoteric' being of the museum. My research in the museum aimed at making visible that which is normally ignored by the sociology of art: actors talk in the artistic process. To make them visible, I imitated the logic by which artistic phenomena manifest their specificities. I was intensifying the disorder instead of simplifying it. Thus, I was following the network instead of standing at a distance. I was intervening in actors' practices and taking part in the complexity. This is in contrast to a sociological approach that tends to schematize and simplify the diversity of the artistic process by classifying the small actions and effects in general categories, neglecting their *collectable* character. Instead, my involvement in the process helped me to amplify even more the diversity of the artistic phenomena and to reveal the importance of small actions and variations. By doing so, both new knowledge and mediations were produced in the artistic display.

Standing at an extreme distance from the objects' performances as contemporary art material, the sociology of art generally seeks to explain the artistic process by external factors only; it neglects the dynamics of objects and the trails that transform them into artworks. Although objects' transformations have been the focus of recent researches in the sociology of mediation (Hennion 1993), the history of art (Gamboni 1997),¹⁹ studies on the scientific museum (Macdonald and Silverstone 1992; Durant 1992),²⁰ and the history of installation art (Reiss 1999; Suderburg 2000), objects in art have not been followed by a daily anthropological survey that is involved in studying the process of installation. The unstable state of art – when it is difficult to decide whether or not the emerging configuration of objects is an art installation or a technical construction – has not been fully investigated up to now.

The study of such unstable states is unusual for the sociology of art. However it has already been explored in the anthropology of science and technology and I have taken my lead from that work.²¹ That is why in order to describe the process of art fabrication before its final stabilization the anthropology of technology²² was enrolled. I have used its methods and have shown the simultaneous birth of art installation and installers within the process. The reason why I have studied the art installation in the making and I have followed the bus's daily

transformations and actors' controversies, is to try and reveal this unstable state of art. To analyze the bus's displacements on the platform, the cleaning procedures and the small temporary events in the Dufy hall, I tried to show the numerous series of infinitely small repetitions of elements and movements, deployed in the uncertainty of art production. This approach allowed defining objects not only by their components (material or symbolic) but by the peculiar ways they are opened and closed, proliferated and black-boxed, multiplied and rarefied. It opens up, therefore, another possibility for the sociological investigation: instead of performing 'upward' movement towards the structures of museum institutions, societies, and cultures, or descending downward towards an infinitely mutable process, art in the making can be followed by depicting the course of its installation.

Conclusion: How the bus met the museum

I followed the steps of the Mückenbus installation with an eye to the small differences and to revealing different situations. I have argued that these differences hold the key to the museum: look at the small traces of the wooden platform and you will see the art museum. The controversies over slender differences and small gestures are the daily routine of actors' interactions. Following these controversies, I have depicted the installation operations and movements, similar, recurring, fragmented and precise. By doing so, I revealed the complexity of the art installation process, located in the details, and I have showed the specific moments of stabilization. Thus, both the collective production of art in the museum, and collectable slow accumulation of microscopic actions in installation were revealed.

Think of the museum as a laboratory and you will see the complexity, because art installation takes all the actors involved on an adventure of remaking art. Both humans and non-humans are reconstituted and involved in this game; they are broken down into small, repetitive and infinitesimal elements within the process. They are much more differentiated and much richer in their continuous variations than the museum itself. The repetition of these operations sometimes makes the installation equal to the museum. Art installation is not defined by a set of intrinsic figures as stated in the catalogue. It appears instead in the local trails in the 'laboratory' of the museum, in performances and dangers. The museum is not defined as an essence, as structure and rules. It is composed, instead, by a set of risks and fears, objects' manifestations, space fragilities, security requirements, interdictions, and precautions. It is visible instead in the ordinary operations, everyday attitudes and gestures; the artistic work is related to the manual work of different collectivities of actors.

The museum has been seen either as objective structures or as set of subjective interactions because sociologists have never really studied artists, technicians, curators and workers together in the process of art making. I have argued that what holds the museum together is not in the structure, the walls or the rules; neither is it to be found in the continuous interactions, overwhelming the institutional frames. The objects' profusions hold the museum together. They occur in situation – always as elements from the experienced and non-stabilized world. What this study has tried to show is that it is impossible to isolate interaction from structure, exterior from interior, street from museum. Following art installation in action, one can see how the museum comes into being through the small daily operations; the exhibition is composed of numerous unpredictable events like those I have described. The point is an ontological as well as an epistemological one. These events, revealed as something happening in time and space, make the museum. Related to the variety of local, contingent and precarious effects and to the material transformations of the museum, they are what occurs and what passes among the actors in process of installation. They remain invisible for the visitors as compared to the official public effects.

When an artist enters the museum to install a bus, one might initially presume that an unpredictable bus will be staged in a stable and predictable museum. Following the case of *Mückenbus*, I argue, that both the 'artwork' and the museum were installed in this process. To introduce the bus into the museum is not to transform the museum into a street, or the street into a museum object; it is to permit the microscopic permutations of exterior and interior to endure. There is a direct relationship between the scope of external resources and mobilized actors and the internal work in the museum. The more the museum is opened up and its doors

removed to house new weird actors, then the more the fabricated art installations are made vivid; they emerge in a collective chaotic hubbub rather than in quiet artistic solitude. Follow *Mückenbus* and you will see that there are no artists working *inside* the museum and technicians repairing the bus *outside* the museum. Exterior and interior are tangled and interfere continuously with each other throughout the course of art installation.

With respect to the artistic transformations of a bus I have been concerned with the question of how, over the daily course of their actual controversies and alliances humans and non-humans produce the museum. The museum is composed of all these small materially heterogeneous events that occur over the course of art installation. Straddling the border of exterior and interior, *Musée d'art moderne* and *Mückenbus* have emerged together. Instead of telling the story of the bus and the street, from one side, and the art installation and the museum from the other, I have exposed the single and continuous story of the encounter of a bus and a museum in the process of becoming art.

Notes

¹ It was the first exhibition of two German artists Carsten Höller and Rosemarie Trockel in this museum. The exhibition aimed at constructing common places for the co-existence of humans and non-humans. Thus, different types of houses for animals and humans were built, as contemporary art installations, aiming at establishing new forms of relations between them. That is where the name of the exhibition *Häuser* comes from. According to the museum presentation 'the artistic work focuses on the problem of understanding the relations men have with the world of animals'. Presenting the economical, ecological and sanitary principles that regulate humans and animals relations, Carsten Höller and Rosemarie Trockel redefine new life spaces by maintaining also the functional aspect. They provoke the visitors into questioning their own identity and nature' (see *Häuser* 1999).

² I shall follow art-in-action, as science in action has been studied. Instead of looking for the intrinsic characteristics of an art installation, I intend describing the variety of transformations that occur in the process of installation (see Latour 1987).

³ I treat the installation art as specific form of contemporary art. By installation I mean the process of displaying the objects in the museum. The art installation is considered here as an autonomous assemblage of objects, conceived for a temporary period, and distinguished by its physical domination over the space. It uses the specific potential of objects to exert action and to engage the visitors' perceptions (see Benjamin 1993; Davies 1997)

⁴ The installation *Mückenbus* is supposed to house both humans and mosquitos. It informs the public about the existence of a specific 'scientific' theory about them. *Mückenbus* has been already exhibited at *Deutsches Museum* of Bonn in 1996 and at *Manifesta I* in Rotterdam in 1996. *Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris* is supposed to become its third exhibition site. It came to the museum from Heisenberg, and is supposed to return back to its owner after the exhibition

⁵ This is a concern shared by the communication theories. Instead of considering the museum as reflection, they understand it as a media producing its own text; the exhibition is a symbolic event that possesses specific communication strategies. Both text and messages are directed towards the changing outside. Thus the museum is interpreted as a quasi-neutral anaesthetized textual framework, rather than as governed by ideological, economic, and politic considerations (see Davallon 1999).

⁶ Few studies deal with the specificity of museum settings and expose the history of different exhibition displays and design strategies. Instead of focusing predominantly on the history of individual artworks, the history of modern art considers also the aspect of installation design as aesthetic medium and historical category (see Staniszewski 1998).

⁷ See the analysis of the installation of an exhibition of ethnographic objects, Doering and Hirschauer 1997.

⁸ Following Becker, the art institution can be treated as cooperative network of actors' interactions, focused on the dynamic of a set of inter-individual relationships and their material and cognitive dimensions (see Becker 1988).

⁹ See the analyses of Bourdieu 1992 and Moulin 1992.

¹⁰ I designate with the term 'collective' the humans, the objects installed and their mutual disputes, negotiations, controversies and agreements. Rather than appointing a whole unity, the term designates a procedure of collecting human and non-human associations in the artistic production. See the usage of 'collective' in the analysis of political ecology (Latour 1999).

¹¹ As Alpers states, instead of being influenced by essential solitude, the paintings of Rembrandt are marked by febrile activity in its studio, the way of organization of the artistic work, the participation of students and patrons (see Alpers 1991).

¹² As material obstacles that shape and delimit action in installation (see Galison 1997).

¹³ The Dufy hall is a large semi-circular hall where the painting by Raoul Dufy, *La Fée Électricité*, is installed. This extremely large painting, 35m long, has belonged to the permanent collection of the museum since 1951.

¹⁴ On the debates on agency and patiency see Gell 1998; Callon and Law 1995.

¹⁵ Following Becker the 'art world' is composed of social actors that cooperate in the art production, diffusion and consumption; their actions are coordinated according to a certain number of conventional procedures and schemes incorporated in the routine practices. Their regular activities shape a network of cooperative chains; however the objects, with their requirements, are not involved in the network. In contrast, the term 'collective' includes the objects, instead of reducing art production network to subjective interactions only (Becker 1988; Latour 1999).

¹⁶ Following Garfinkel, the term of 'passing' describes the work of transformation of an ordinary object into an artwork (See Garfinkel 1967).

¹⁷ I have contrasted elsewhere the becoming art with the act of status elevation of ordinary objects into art installation (Yaneva 2003). The institutional theories, followed by the contemporary art debate, analyze this process according to the logic of attribution: the object has to be chosen and designated by an artist as 'artwork' in the art institution (Dickie 1974; Danto 1964; Danto 1989). In contrast to these theories of attribution I have suggested an objective analysis of the becoming art of the ordinary object. By objective I mean, that the art character is not defined as such by the subjects, neither by a designation statement over objects, it appears rather as a way of objects' profusion in situation of collective agitation. Following the steps of a contemporary art exhibition, I showed that object is transformed into a piece of art through a slow process of slender permutations rather than by a sudden status promotion. According to this study, the object exists as becoming art; the difference between art objects and ordinary objects is a difference of tempo, not a difference of kind. (See Yaneva 2001).

¹⁸ Institutional theories state that the ordinary object can acquire the status of 'artwork' within the artistic institution. The most important factor for the status elevation of the ordinary object is the artistic gesture, signing and christening the object as 'artwork.' (See Dickie 1997). Following the institutional theories, the debate of contemporary art in France, attempted to

explain the crisis with the rigidity of the institutions, inappropriate to the lively style of the contemporary art forms (see *L'art contemporain en débat, 1991-1998, dossiers thématiques de presse*, Paris: BPI-Centre Georges Pompidou; Michaud 1991).

¹⁹ The study of Gamboni re-establishes the objects' importance and reconstructs the capacities of objects to exert action in a situation of evaluation. Analyzing different exhibition settings, he reconstructs the reactions of the public to the artworks, the space of perception and the object's performances. Both the problem of objects' agency and objects' destruction, which are neglected in the history of contemporary art, are treated by the author on various contemporary art cases.

²⁰ These studies investigate the role of objects in different exhibition settings in science museum. They reveal objects' capacity to provoke controversies on materials and displays.

²¹ See the Latour's analysis of heterogeneous entities in science and their variable ontology, shaped in a completely unstable state of the world (Latour 1991).

²² Instead of focusing on the social shaping of objects the anthropology of technology states that objects are also able to produce specific modes of social organization; that the network of production and diffusion of a technical innovation are co-constructed together (See Akrich 1991).

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