ESSAYS ON THE ART MUSEUM EXPERIENCE:
a cultural sociology perspective

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Presentation

What is the purpose of Art? To give us the brief, dazzling illusion of the camellia, carving from time an emotional aperture that cannot be reduced to animal logic.

(Muriel Barbery, *The Elegance of the Hedgehog,* 2013)

I understand art as a way of life. It represents my work, my leisure, my family. It is expression, feeling, emotion — above all, emotion. This capacity of art to generate sensations has seduced me as much as, or even more than, the artistic object itself. The attraction exercised by a work of art is something magical, almost mystical, often inexplicable. For this reason, and despite my profile as a graduate in art history, I decided that my thesis would focus, not on the historical dimension of art, but on the emotional dimension of its consumption. Thus, the main motivation for this research was the possibility of analysing the experiences of art museum visitors within the art consumption and reception field. The cross-disciplinary approach has enabled a vision of the museum experience as the warp and weft of many different interwoven threads. The aim is to contribute a holistic view of the

museum experience that considers the various contextual elements that may influence and possibly shape an individual's experience.

Essays on the Art Museum Experience: a Cultural Sociology Perspective is structured around two research works — reproduced in Chapters 2 and 3 — on the experience of viewing art in museums, the first concerned with the emotional dimension and the second with the social dimension. An introduction — Chapter 1 — situates the two works in a theoretical and methodological framework and contextualizes the links between them. Chapter 4 is a discussion of the main results and of the most important theoretical and methodological implications for research into the museum experience. Finally, Chapter 5 draws some conclusions regarding the most notable contributions of this research to the existing body of knowledge. Included as an appendix is the interview protocol used in the fieldwork.

The first article, titled *The unforgettable aesthetic experience: the relationship between the originality of artworks and local culture* (DOI: 10.1016/j.poetic.2012.05.003), was published in 2012 in *Poetics Journal of Empirical Research on Culture, the Media and the Arts,* impact factor 1.414 and ranked by Journal Citation Reports in the top quartile of sociology journals (position 30/139). Over two years these research results were presented at different debating and reflection forums and at national and international conferences, including: OcioGune 2008: Leisure Research and Reflection Forum (Bilbao, Spain), with our contribution also published in the corresponding proceedings; the 8th International Congress of the International Association on

Public and Nonprofit Marketing (Valencia, Spain, 2009); the 9th Conference of the European Sociological Association (Lisbon, Portugal, 2009); the 21st National Marketing Congress (Bilbao, Spain, 2009); and the 16th International Conference of the Association for Cultural Economics International (Copenhagen, Denmark, 2010). Participation in these activities greatly enriched our work with new insights and perspectives.

The second article, titled *Art museum visitors: interaction strategies for sharing experiences* (DOI: 10.1080/09647775.2014.919175), was published in *Museum Management and Curatorship,* rated a B-grade arts journal by CARHUS (an index developed by the Autonomous Government of Catalonia's universities and research body AGAUR).

An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2nd Ibero-American Qualitative Research Conference (Granada, Spain, 2011) — and was also published in its proceedings — and at the 10th Conference of the European Sociological Association (Geneva, Switzerland, 2011). A preliminary version was presented at the 11th Conference of the European Sociological Association, where it received the PhD Student Best Article Award from the Sociology of the Arts Research Network of the same association (Turin, Italy, 2013).

Both articles have endeavoured to devise a theoretical explanation for the museum art viewing experience (specifically, the unforgettable aesthetic experience in the first article and the social dimension in the second article), building on qualitative data obtained during fieldwork. A limitation of this research is the generalization of findings regarding the specific experiences of a sample of visitors in a given context. In order to extrapolate our results to larger populations, however, we will need to investigate other contexts and even other countries. This limitation, therefore, serves as the launching pad for future research to further explore the museum experience.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The production and consumption of art and culture from the humanities and social sciences perspectives

Just as answering the controversial question "What is art?" remains a real challenge, even for those who study art, knowing how to interpret art is a difficult task that gives rise to much interdisciplinary debate. The complex nature of art and its relationship with humans makes it difficult to define, analyse and interpret art. Faced with the fact there is no firm consensus regarding the characteristics of art, we suggest the existence of a multiplicity of socially shared conceptions.

Likewise, there is more than one approach to the experience of viewing art, each focusing their attention on distinct aspects. The starting premise for the social sciences is different from that of humanities disciplines such as art history, aesthetics and criticism, all of which share an internal vision regarding the implicit aesthetic qualities of artworks. The humanities focus on artistic production in terms of formal analyses of how artworks are created and on specific elements

such as image content, artistic techniques and the influence of other styles and works. They are concerned with the singularity of art as a unique object or form of expression given meaning by a creator accorded the status of a unique genius. In this case, as we will see later, art has intrinsic mystery — an "aura" in the words of Benjamin (1955).

The social sciences are concerned with contextualizing artistic creation by studying the social factors influencing the production, reception and consumption of artistic endeavours. Art, therefore, is understood less in terms of its aesthetic features, uniqueness and mysticism than in terms of its association with the social context in which it is produced and consumed. Sociologists examine the social nature of artworks created by artists who — far from being lone geniuses — belong to a cooperative network of individuals structured by different social institutions (Becker, 1982). Since art is, moreover, socially experienced — we could say consumed — by its viewers, sociologists also study reception processes and contexts.

Despite the apparent antagonism between theses two viewpoints, their complementary study offers great benefits. Vera Zolberg (2002) proposed reconciling the social and aesthetic visions of art, noting that the idea was not to force the two perspectives into some fictitious harmony that would involve rejecting contributions from each field but to focus on their interdependence. Scientific research, after all, is widely considered to be enriched by interdisciplinary studies.

The sociology of art responds to a theoretical and methodological approach that complies with this more comprehensive vision, which links two fields — sociology and art, deriving from the social sciences and the humanities, respectively — that are quite different in both nature and in study traditions. Although these differences have meant some difficulties of reconciliation, the interdisciplinary focus has greatly broadened the scope of research and so represents a major step forward. Whereas sociological studies provide insights into social relationships and their consequences, studies of art provide greater theoretical and perceptual understanding of the material nature of artworks and their production contexts and the historical evolution of art styles over time. Art studies focus on analysing the individual creative act, reconstructing the social conditions in which an artwork is produced and, above all, examining the aesthetic principles underlying production and the evolution of style. Sociological studies, in contrast, analyse art's influences on society and the social conditions for both production and consumption. From this angle art is viewed, like society, as an active element, with each influencing the other.

The sociology of art emphasizes the social dimension of the artistic product in terms of the context in which art is produced — in other words, the relationship between art and society. The goal of studies in this area is to explore the interrelationship of economic, political and cultural aspects of the social reality of art. Analysing society and art on equal terms as elements in a two-way relationship ultimately helps us understand the influence of society on art and art on society.

The sociology of art is, therefore, concerned with the social conditions of art production, diffusion, reception and consumption.

Vera Zolberg (2002), in evaluating the international situation of sociology and art studies in recent decades, notes how art and culture studies are branching out into new research areas. Although the arts were not originally included in sociology studies, nowadays the sociology of art and culture has become an important discipline in the USA. Evidence of its growing importance is the fact that the culture division of the prestigious American Sociological Association has some 13,000 members. As regards Europe, Zolberg maintains that until recently, with the exception of France, few sociologists studied the relationship between art and society. However there is no denying the recent flowering of a European sociology of art and culture, strongly driven by associations like the European Sociological Association (ESA), founded in 1992 and currently composed of some 2,000 members. In 1999, furthermore, highly regarded ESA members — Victoria Alexander, Tia de Nora, Anna Lisa Tota, Susanne Janssen and Tasos Zembylas, to name just a few — set up a specialist research section called the Sociology of the Arts Research Network. In Spain, the arts came to be included in Spanish sociological research with the founding, in 1989, of the Spanish Association of Culture and the Arts (AECA), whose first meeting — in Barcelona in 1991 — was attended by international researchers coming from disciplines as varied as sociology, art history and musicology.

Our research belongs in the area of the sociology of art and culture, where Wuthnow and Witten (1988) distinguish two research categories: research that

considers culture as an inherent feature of social life, that is, as a kind of stable base or tacit knowledge structure that grounds social relations; and research that views culture as an explicitly social construction and therefore dependent on specific agents. More recently, Alexander and Smith (2001) labelled these two approaches "cultural sociology" and the "sociology of culture", respectively. Both approaches assign culture a key role in society, depict the same kind of landscape and use conceptually similar terminology. Structurally they are different, however, in their perspectives on the relationship between art and society, most especially in the direction of the influence: cultural sociology studies the influence of art on society, whereas the sociology of culture focuses on the influence of society on art.

Looking first at the sociology of culture, this perspective views culture as a form of explicitly produced symbolic good. Culture is not an independent variable but rather depends on participation in the reproduction of social relations. The sociology of culture therefore focuses on the study of contexts, substructures, bases and morphologies — "real" objects and "hard" variables, to cite Alexander (2000). The direct consequence of this viewpoint can be observed in the relationship between art and society, specifically in the influence of society on art and most especially in terms of the social stratification of production and consumption, not accounted for by intrinsic meanings of cultural expressions but by elements in the social structure. Adopting this viewpoint from the specific field of culture production, Howard Becker, in *Art Worlds* (1982), defends the collective nature of artworks and the social conventions that govern them — in other words, art as influenced by social structures. Becker refers to the concept of "art worlds"

to refer to the many networks and collaborative systems in which art is produced and consumed. Positioning works in this collective space represents a shift from the notion of the isolated artist to recognition of the efforts of a network. Art is the product of a social process that — following observable historic trends — involves collaboration between agents belonging to different social institutions. This diverse group of people includes, according to Becker (1982), people whose social position enables value to be attached to objects. How art is defined thus becomes arbitrary, as the definition is more linked to social consensus than to intrinsic aesthetic qualities.

In terms of analysing the social construction of ideas and aesthetic values, Bourdieu (1979), Bourdieu et al. (1985), DiMaggio (1996) and Peterson (1992) – all of whom studied the consumption of artistic and cultural products in social contexts — postulate that cultural expressions and tastes are the outcome of specific social structures. Bourdieu (1979), in particular, suggests that the relationship between artworks and their social context is structural and, furthermore, that social forces act indirectly on art through what he called the "artistic field" — an organized social structure that acts as a filter, as it were, modifying outcomes according to particular conditions of place and time. For Bourdieu, culture, as projected through *habitus*, is a dependent variable.

Cultural sociology, on the other hand, views culture as an independent variable, separate from its social structure but mediating social reality. In analysing the meaning production process, the focus is on the aesthetic object and the social self. Artworks are viewed as objects that produce and communicate social meaning and

that directly influence the actions and knowledge of individuals (Acord and DeNora, 2008). Cultural sociology, therefore, centres its attention on the influence exercised by art and culture on society.

For Alexander and Smith (2001), cultural sociology should not be confined to studying contexts. Rather, the singularity of their "strong programme" lies in the ability to interpret and rebuild social texts (written and unwritten codes, narratives and meaningful actions) in order to produce "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1981) of how social meaning is produced and communicated. Geertz views culture as a stratified hierarchy of socially established structures of meaning — a semiotic reference to the web of meanings which we, as individuals, slowly create and immersed ourselves in. For Geertz, "thick descriptions" are not about explaining and creating meaning from just behaviour but also from context. Phenomena are explained through interpretation. Cultural sociology, which also aims to make discoveries through hermeneutics, seeks to analyse the contexts that motivate social action by recognizing the "causal efficacy of sentiment, belief and emotion in social life" (Alexander, 2000). In this way, all action is placed on a meaningful plane which has to be interpreted. Alexander (2008a,b), taking a stand against the materialism of modern thought, coined the term "iconic consciousness" to explain how we experience the "aesthetic surface" of objects accorded a social value. According to this author, "contact with this aesthetic surface, whether by sight, smell, taste, touch, provides a sensual experience that transmits meaning" (Alexander, 2008a: 782). The material form or surface of an object acts like a magnet that absorbs the individual's feelings. This materiality allows transition to

the social meaning of the object and to the corresponding experience. It is materiality which makes us aware of how we are connected to objects. This shift from surface to depth represents immersion in the materiality of the social life of the aesthetic object. To be conscious of this iconography is to understand without knowing — in other words, to understand through feelings, direct contact and the evidence of the senses more than of the mind. Access to the aesthetic experience may be limited because it requires artistic training, yet Alexander highlights the contrasting nature of the superficial experience of aesthetic objects. It is the meaningful experience offered by an artwork, and not just its form, which provokes emotion in the viewer.

Of the many possible cultural production contexts, this thesis focuses specifically on art museums and, in particular, on visitors to art museums.

The first article — titled *The unforgettable aesthetic experience: the relationship between the originality of artworks and local culture* (López-Sintas et al., 2012) and falling squarely in the cultural sociology field — examines the impact of culture on people's emotions. More specifically, we explore the role of culture in the aesthetic dimension of the art museum experience. Our broad goal is to expand theoretical knowledge of how people behave when they consume culture — in particular, art displayed in museums. In doing so, we focus on reception and consumption rather than production. A second, more applied, article, titled *Art museum visitors: interaction strategies for sharing experiences* (López-Sintas et al., 2014), makes a more pragmatic contribution to art museum development and management by exploring the social dimension of the museum experience from the theoretical

framework of symbolic interactionism. More specifically, we study art museum experiences from a holistic temporal perspective that covers the periods before, during and after the visit.

1.2. The unforgettable aesthetic experience: the relationship between the originality of artworks and local culture

In this first article we describe the experience of viewing artworks in museums, explaining, in particular, what we term the "unforgettable aesthetic experience". Our theory, based on evidence obtained from visitor narratives, demonstrates the conditions necessary for an individual to live a highly emotional experience. Our description contributes knowledge regarding why these experiences vary, first, between visitors to art museums and, second, even in the same individual when they experience artworks in a sociocultural context different to their own.

The starting point for our study is the work of Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990). Adopting a psychological perspective, these authors describe the aesthetic experience in terms of four dimensions: (1) the perceptual dimension, referring to formal structural elements of an artwork such as harmony, colour, texture and composition; (2) the emotional dimension, reflecting the positive or negative emotional impact of the artwork on the individual; (3) the intellectual dimension, alluding to the cultural, historic and biographical connotations of the artwork; and (4) the communicative dimension, reflecting the expressive possibilities of the artwork.

In their study of the experience of viewing art by art sector professionals, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) started with the theory of optimal experience, based on an individual's intellectual abilities being equal to the difficulty of an activity. The results were surprising: although the aesthetic experience was very similar for all the respondents in terms of structure, interpretations of the stimuli received varied greatly. Also contrary to expectations, the art experts did not mention only the intellectual dimension (related to their level of artistic experience) but also the other three dimensions; the emotional dimension was particularly significant — in some cases, even more so than the intellectual dimension. It can be deduced, therefore, that the intellectual dimension is a necessary but insufficient condition for an intense aesthetic experience. Given this evidence that the intellectual dimension was not predominant, we asked ourselves whether non-experts could also live highly emotional experiences were any of the other three dimensions to come into play.

Complementing cultural sociology with this psychological perspective, we studied the emotional reactions prompted in individuals viewing artworks displayed in museums. Alexander (2008a,b) maintains that individuals experience the social meaning of artworks as they contemplate them (possibly in different ways), sensing their meaning on an emotional level. Since the meaning of artworks is socioculturally constructed, this meaning will vary according to social and individual contexts (Acord and DeNora, 2008; Geertz, 1981; Griswold, 1987). Benjamin (1955) — who considers socially conceived meanings to be sufficiently powerful to create an aura that acts as a bridge between the artist and the viewer

— coined the concepts of "cult value" and "exhibition value". Cult value is understood as an extrinsic quality of the artwork, socially built up over time, that refers to its uniqueness as created in a particular moment by a particular artist. In order to interpret the cult value of an original artwork, the individual must possess the appropriate cultural code to be able to reconstruct the artwork's social value. Exhibition value refers to the work's ability to express meanings that are socially shared. Both original artworks and copies have exhibition value, but this value is particularly important for copies, given their much wider circulation.

Our objective was to describe and explain individuals' experiences when viewing artworks in museums so as to arrive at an understanding of the local conditions for an intense aesthetic experience. The study, designed for an interpretative framework, was based on 21 in-depth interviews, transcribed verbatim and analysed using qualitative data analysis software. Respondents, selected from among regular art museum visitors, were chosen for their diversity in terms of individual characteristics. The final sample consisted of five art professionals and sixteen individuals with no formal art training.

As an outcome of this research we describe what we call the unforgettable aesthetic experience, characterized by its high emotional charge and its duration in time. For an unforgettable aesthetic experience to occur, two conditions need to converge in the individual: (1) they must be aware that they are viewing an original artwork; and (2) they must have some knowledge of the artwork's social value (in other words, they must possess adequate contextual cultural capital). We define contextual cultural capital (CCC) as the set of socially interiorized cultural

attitudes, preferences and behaviours used as interpretative principles that guide the interpretation of artworks. CCC consists of both formal and informal knowledge acquired in particular sociocultural contexts.

When the individual has the necessary CCC to interpret the cult value of an original artwork, they can participate in the aesthetic ritual of paying homage to a socially valued artist. This awareness that the artwork is original is a prerequisite for feeling the emotion, which acts as a contextual bridge between the viewer and the artist. It is only when these two conditions converged that our respondents reported having unforgettable aesthetic experiences that were both emotionally intense and lasting. Nevertheless, our respondents frustratingly found that these experiences could not be repeated to produce the same effect.

When an individual lacks the necessary CCC to interpret an artwork, however, they focus on its perceptual properties and exhibition value (Benjamin, 1955). We observed how our respondents, in this case, did not really care if they saw the original or a copy, as long as the formal qualities were the same. The emotion felt on viewing the work derived from the exhibition value and was therefore less intense.

It is important to point out that our results do not refer to two kinds of viewers (those with and those without adequate CCC) but rather to the contextual nature of whatever CCC the viewers possess. We found examples of individuals who had unforgettable aesthetic experiences in one context but more fleeting sensations in a sociocultural context different from their own (non-European in our case) or on viewing a copy in their own sociocultural context. An individual bereft of the frame

of reference that their context usually furnishes may feel they lack the cultural tools that enable them to value the cult dimensions of an artwork. This demonstrates how an individual's cultural capital is based on local knowledge, produced in a community with shared meanings and values. The experiences of a viewer of art will logically be influenced by this contextual knowledge.

1.3. Art museum visitors: interaction strategies for sharing experiences

In this second article we examine the social dimension of art museum visitor experiences. In order to comprehensively describe the chronological structure of this social dimension, we studied the museum experience holistically, that is, we included the periods before, during and after the museum visit. We could thus determine whether — in order to be able to fully explain the museum experience — these three contexts should be viewed in isolation or as interrelated spaces to be studied in conjunction.

Our decision to adopt a holistic format originated in the fact that this perspective is lacking in most previous research into the museum experience. The literature has traditionally prioritized study of the museum visit itself (the time spent there) — thereby assuming that the museum itself is the only possible context for a museum experience. Although authors like Draper (1984) and Falk and Dierking (1992) have proposed analysing the three stages of the experience as a whole, existing empirical studies only refer to the experience within the museum and no studies specifically analyse the social dimension. We asked ourselves what social

interactions could potentially unfold before and after visiting an art museum so as to analyse the experience in a broader sense.

The literature dealing with the social dimension of the museum experience tends to contrast the individual experience of unaccompanied visitors with the social experience of accompanied visitors (Debenedetti 2001, 2003, 2010; McManus 1994; Packer and Ballantyne 2005; Silverman 1995). In the unaccompanied visit the individual relates to the exhibition in a more personal and intellectual way and enjoys private moments of tranquillity and reflection. In the accompanied visit, in contrast, the visitor shares a social occasion.

The antithetical perspective views the social dimension of the museum experience as limited to (1) individuals who go to an exhibition accompanied; and (2) the spatial-temporal context of the museum. In the first case it is assumed that visitors who go unaccompanied to museums do not interact with others — whether strangers present in the museum or members of their own social circle before or after the visit. As for the second case, the periods before and after the museum experience are dismissed as independent from each other and from the visit. These assumptions lead to possible distortions in interpretations. Studying the experience in the above-described terms assumes two universal visitor categories, namely, unaccompanied visitors and accompanied visitors, featured by the individual experience and the social experience, respectively.

For the reasons given, we felt it necessary to study the art museum experience in its entirety. Our goal was, therefore, to describe this experience in terms of the periods before, during and after the actual visit and to determine whether and how

the individual and social dimensions of the experience could unfold in different spatial-temporal contexts.

Our study is framed in a constructivist interpretative paradigm in accordance with the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1966, 1982). We thus understand that the art museum experience is built from meanings interpreted by the individual according to their cultural code and as they interact symbolically with both objects and other individuals before, during and after the museum visit. The data were collected from 21 in-depth interviews conducted with art museum visitors who informed us about past experiences that we subsequently analysed in terms of the three time periods of interest. The criteria for selecting individual respondents was that they had to have visited at least one art museum in the previous year and that the sample overall would be diverse in terms of age, sex, artistic knowledge, occupation and visit frequency. We transcribed the interviews verbatim and analysed them using qualitative data analysis software (MaxQDA).

Interpretation of the art museum experience suggests that accompanied visitors and unaccompanied visitors are not universal categories; rather, individual social interaction strategies depend on personal biographies. Understanding these biographies uncovers information on the experiences of the individuals, not only as regards museums and art in general, but also as regards the social circle with which they share these experiences.

Our results show that individuals with more art expertise describe the museum experience in terms of the periods before, during and after. Whereas sharing the

experience was common to all the individuals, the moment of sharing depended on the visit strategy, which, in turn, depended on how easy it was to find a suitable companion. For the interaction to be satisfactory, this suitable companion had to be intellectually and emotionally similar. An individual thus went to the museum accompanied if the companion was considered suitable; otherwise they went unaccompanied, displacing the sharing of the experience with their social circle to the periods before and after the visit. The social dimension is thus reflected in all three temporal stages of the experience, independently of the strategy chosen for visiting the museum. In fact, many respondents who visited museums accompanied limited interactions during the visit because they actually preferred to discuss the exhibition in the before and after periods — thereby prolonging the experience in time and beyond the walls of the museum. Thus, bearing in mind the three periods in which the experience takes place, we can say that it is both individual and social. The chronology affecting these dimensions will depend on the adopted strategy (e.g., the visit itself will be more individual or social depending on whether the person is unaccompanied or accompanied) but the social dimension will always extend over time to before and after the visit.

For individuals with less experience of the art world, the museum experience typically begins, and may even end, in the museum itself; in other words, for these individuals there is no prior stage and the experience loses importance after the visit. The interaction strategy is always to visit accompanied, as their experience centres on the visit itself and their objective is to share it. These individuals also need a suitable companion but, if they do not find one, they simply do not bother

visiting the museum. In this case the suitable or ideal companion is defined either as an individual with similar artistic abilities with whom to relate on the same level or an expert individual who can decipher the interpretative code of the artworks. Thus, since the social dimension for these individuals is concentrated in the time spent in the museum, their experience is not prolonged over time.

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2

2. ARTICLE 1:

The unforgettable aesthetic experience:

The relationship between the originality

of artworks and local culture

2.1. Abstract

We explored the aesthetic experience of viewing artworks in art museums, specifically examining the content and conditions of high-intensity aesthetic experiences and assessing whether these varied between consumers of artworks. In an interpretive research framework, we conducted 21 in-depth interviews with Spanish individuals who are regular visitors of museums. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed with the help of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. We found that viewers who reported having lived an intense unforgettable aesthetic experience—characterized by high

emotional intensity and durability over time—shared two common conditions in their experience with artworks: (1) they were aware that the artwork viewed was original and (2) they had the necessary contextual cultural capital to interpret its social value. The presence of these two conditions produced an intense and unforgettable aesthetic experience.

2.2. Introduction

Smith and Wolf —in the 1996 *Poetics* special issue on museum research edited by DiMaggio—remarked a contradiction between observed visitor behaviour at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and reported survey findings, suggesting that the typical visitor passed over half a dozen works with brief glances, spent 15 seconds on a Goya, 20 seconds on a Velazquez and maybe half a minute on an El Greco; very few works got a full minute of viewing, and observations of five minutes were rare (Smith and Wolf, 1996, p. 236). Nonetheless, Smith and Wolf believed that although visitors did not know how it occurred, they sometimes underwent an intense temporal and spatial experience.

A few years earlier, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) found that the emotional dimension of the aesthetic experience was highly salient among a sample of art expert informants and was even the primary mode of experiencing the arts for some of them. The researchers suggested that the cognitive-intellectual component may be a necessary if insufficient pre-condition to feel an intense aesthetic experience. This raises the following question: if the cognitive dimension is not the predominant one, what is the nature of the aesthetic experience?

Our aim was to answer this question by describing how the content and impact of the aesthetic experiences of art museum visitors varied according to the aesthetic object and in different conditions. We therefore studied consumer experiences with artworks and framed them as follows: (i) substantively, by studying aesthetic experiences with artworks exhibited in museums—doing so from within the cultural sociology paradigm (Acord and DeNora, 2008; Alexander and Smith, 2001; Griswold, 1987a,b; Gumbrecht, 2006; Hennion, 2001; Woodward, 2001); and (ii) methodologically, by studying the aesthetic experience in the interpretive tradition (Lincoln and Guba, 1994; Patton, 2002).

Our findings contribute to the body of knowledge covering the aesthetic experience with artworks exhibited in museums in different ways. We find that—to live an unforgettable aesthetic experience (as we have named it) characterized by great intensity and durability over time— two conditions appear to converge in the viewer's experience: firstly, awareness that the artwork is not a copy but the original; secondly, the possession of certain cultural knowledge of the social value of the artwork. This second feature we will refer to as the "contextual cultural capital" (CCC) of the individual. Only viewers who described these two conditions reported living an intense and unforgettable aesthetic experience.

Adding to previous studies (Alexander, 2008ab; Bourdieu, 1979; Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 1990), we suggest that cultural capital is a necessary but insufficient condition for an unforgettable aesthetic experience. Individuals seemingly need to be aware of being in front of the original for their CCC to converge with the artistic object, thereby producing an unforgettable aesthetic experience. On the other

hand, as proposed by Baxandall (1972) and reported by Griswold (1987b), the interpretive code with which individuals view their visual experience (or read a literary work, in the case of Griswold's research) is local and is produced in the cultural community in which individuals live. However, when in a non-Western cultural community, individuals with an adequate CCC in the Western cultural community reported aesthetic experiences very similar to individuals with an inadequate CCC in the Western cultural community: that is, they lacked the cultural knowledge necessary to be able to interpret the value of an artwork and feel an intense aesthetic experience. This finding reinforces the idea that in order to feel the emotion (Alexander, 2008a,b) of an intense unforgettable aesthetic experience, the cognitive dimension of the content of the aesthetic experience (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 1990) is a necessary but insufficient condition; missing is the original object/person artwork necessary to feel the intense emotion.

Our interpretation distinguishes the unforgettable aesthetic experience from the flow experience described by Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990). Even though the effect of the unforgettable aesthetic experience is similar to that of the flow experience, it differs in terms of the conditions needed to experience it. The optimal experience ("flow") requires the individual to have adequate skills to manage successfully the challenge, whereas the unforgettable aesthetic experience requires the individual to have enough CCC to interpret the cult value of an original artwork—and even individuals who are not art experts may be able to do this,

provided they have the necessary CCC to interact with the artwork and so live an unforgettable aesthetic experience.

2.3. Literature review: the aesthetic experience

The aesthetic experience produced in art museums has been investigated from different perspectives. Initially, it was studied as an aesthetics issue in the field of philosophy, in accordance with the traditional taste theories of Kant and Hume and contemporary aesthetics (Danto, 2003; Dewey, 1980; Matravers, 2003; Petts, 2000). It was then studied as a social fact (Bourdieu, 1979; Bourdieu et al., 1985) and, more recently, as a psychological experience (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 1990) or social aesthetic experience (Alexander, 2008a,b).

2.3.1. The psychological approach to the aesthetic experience with artworks

Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) propose the term "optimal experience" (or "state of flow") to define the best possible aesthetic experience felt by some art consumers. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1988), the optimal experience requires a balance between the actions carried out by the individual and the skills needed to complete the action. The challenge posed by an activity must be within the possibilities of an individual's skills and abilities—as otherwise, these scholars suggest, the activity will prove boring when an individual is overly skilled or stressed by his/her abilities being less than required. With time, and in order to continue experiencing the flow sensation, the individual must augment the challenge as well as his/her skills to carry out the activity.

Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) propose four dimensions to describe the aesthetic experience lived by the viewer of an artwork: (1) the perceptual dimension, referring to the formal structure of the work and reflecting such aspects as harmony, colour, texture and balance in the composition; (2) the emotional dimension, which reflects impact on the individual in terms of positive or negative emotions; (3) the cognitive dimension, referring to all the cultural, historical and even biographical connotations of a work; and (4) the communicative dimension, reflecting the expressive possibilities offered by the experience.

In accordance with the theory of the optimal experience, and assuming that knowledge of artworks—understood to arise from an accumulative and multidimensional learning process (Bourdieu, 1979; Lamont and Lareau, 1988)—is of paramount importance in order to feel a state of flow, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) sampled individuals who were similar (in terms of suitable cultural capital) to the experts they interviewed (employed by art institutions). They found that, although the nature or composition of the aesthetic experience was very similar in almost all their interviewees—irrespective of their degree of artistic specialization—the stimuli that launched the aesthetic experience were very different in each individual. Informants did not allude to a merely cognitive property when describing their optimal experience; rather, each individual indiscriminately referred to one or another dimension of the aesthetic experience, whether perceptive, emotional or communicative. The authors concluded that art

experts are probably not the only individuals capable of having an optimal experience when viewing art.

2.3.2. The social approach to the aesthetic experience with artworks

Unlike the psychology of the aesthetic experience, the sociological study of art and culture has emphasized the social and cultural dimensions of producing, consuming and viewing art (Acord and DeNora, 2008). The approaches that have dominated research, according to Wuthnow and Witten (1988), can be grouped into two: the "explicit culture" and the "implicit culture". In Alexander and Smith's (2001) terminology, these correspond to the sociology of culture and cultural sociology, respectively.

When studying the relationship between fine and popular art forms and society, research conducted in the explicit culture approach have emphasized the social stratification of art production and consumption: (1) Becker's work, *Art Worlds* (1982), has made clear the collective nature of artworks and the role played by conventions shaping artworks; (2) the contributions made by Bourdieu (1979), Bourdieu et al. (1985), DiMaggio (1996), and Peterson and associates (Peterson, 1992; Peterson and Kern, 1996; Peterson and Simkus, 1992) have all positioned consumption within a socially organized context; and (3) the works of DeNora (1995) and Peterson (1997) have described the social construction of celebrity and authenticity. This stream of research holds in common the notion that cultural expressions and tastes are the result of concrete social structures.

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The implicit culture approach, on the other hand, assumes that physical artworks anchor more tacit cultural practices that influence action and cognition in a direct, immediate and unconscious sense (Acord and DeNora, 2008). The focus of this cultural turn is on the aesthetic objects and the social self—making study of the meaning production process possible and producing a shift towards inside culture (Halle, 1993) in the tradition of the seminal work of Douglas and Isherwood (1979), who argued that the social role of things is to generate cultural meanings (see Appadurai, 1986).

According to Alexander and Smith (2001), the endeavour, then, is to interpret and reconstruct social texts in order to produce thick descriptions of the way artworks, for instance, produce and communicate social meanings and even influence action and cognition. Research has focused, therefore, on the meanings of objects, both domestic (Alexander, 2008a; Halle, 1993; Woodward, 2001) and artistic (Griswold, 1987a,b; Hennion, 2001; McCormick, 2006, 2009). The purpose of art, Alexander (2008a, p. 786) suggests, "is to make the aesthetic dimension explicit, to bring it into our conscious minds so that we experience it knowingly and reflect upon it."

Thus, Alexander (2008a,b) has proposed the iconic consciousness theory to explain the process by which an aesthetically shaped materiality signifies social value. The contact with an aesthetic object, he proposes, provides a sensual experience that transmits meaning (Alexander, 2008a, p. 782). To be iconically conscious is to understand without knowing that one knows—knowing by experience, not cognition, as Bollas (1987) has suggested —that is, to understand by feeling and by the evidence of the senses rather than of the mind. In fact, as

reported above, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) found that their expert informants did not allude to a merely cognitive property when talking about aesthetic experiences, but rather (and quite variedly) to perceptive, emotional and communicative dimensions.

Griswold (1987b)—conducting research into the literary interpretations of George Lamming's works in the USA, Great Britain and the West Indies—found that cultural works interacted with a variety of social presuppositions in the production of meanings. In other words, different meanings were produced based on the social group's presuppositions (culture); for instance, for one group a novel was about race but, for another, it was about identity. Moreover, powerful literary works produced a great variety of responses and emphases, but the lesser-valued Lamming's works produced more homogenous meanings. Griswold's findings are a good example of Geertz's (1981[1973]) proposition that attributing artworks with cultural significance is always a local matter.

We can infer, then, that the meaning of artworks will vary according to social contexts (see also Acord and DeNora, 2008; Appadurai, 1986; Zolberg, 1984). These sociocultural meanings—extrinsic to the properties of an artwork, but constructed in a concrete cultural community—have been said to create an aura (Benjamin, 1955) that acts as a bridge between the creator and the viewer. Additionally, Benjamin argues (1) that the original is a unique artwork created at a specific moment of time by a specific person (or various times/persons, as the case may be), and (2) that the original expresses a certain capacity for exhibiting shared meanings. Benjamin referred to these properties as the "cult value" and "exhibition

value", respectively, of an artwork. In contrast, copies of artworks share with the originals only their exhibition value. The cult value of original cultural expressions, Benjamin argues, is socially produced (see also Heinich, 2010; Peterson, 2005); it is not an inherent quality but one built over time in a social context. Heinich (2010) referred to these artworks as "objects-person". To interpret the cult value of artworks, individuals need a cultural code to reconstruct the social value of artworks for the community; to infer the exhibition value, however, individuals only need to share the meanings embedded in artworks (Benjamin, 1955).

2.3.3 The aesthetic experience of viewing artworks: a summary

The aesthetic experience of viewing artworks, Gumbrecht (2006) has suggested, produces a pleasure that is independent of the purposes and functions pursued in our everyday worlds. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) have called it an optimal experience, Alexander (2008a,b) has called it a conscious iconic experience, and Griswold (1987b) has shown that its meanings are locally produced. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) emphasized the effects of an aesthetic experience in terms of content and inner transformations. Alexander (2008a,b) underlined the content of the aesthetic experience—i.e., the feelings, impressions and images produced by our consciousness and the production of meaning triggered by objects. Griswold (1987b), meanwhile, focused on the conditions of the consumption experience, i.e., the relationship between literary objects and individuals in a particular social context in the production of meaning. The effects, content, conditions and objects of the aesthetic experience form the

elements proposed by Gumbrecht (2006, p. 305) as describing the aesthetic experience.

Thus, turning the research emphasis towards the meanings of the aesthetic experience requires that studies have to be able to produce thick descriptions of the aesthetic effects and content of objects, whether ordinary ones or artworks, as in an ethnographic setting (Alexander and Smith, 2001; Benzecry, 2009; Halle, 1993). Nevertheless, as Alexander and Smith (2001) have proposed, we need to go a step forward from description to causal specificity. That means that we need to explore the local conditions in which artworks influence the effect and content of individuals' aesthetic experiences.

2.4. Methodology

2.4.1. Research question

We were interested in describing and explaining the experiences of individuals viewing artworks exhibited in museums, so as to understand the local conditions under which the intensity of the aesthetic experience takes place. Our goal was to produce an interpretation of individuals' experiences of seeing artworks in museums during their life course that would allow us to elucidate an explanation for visitor experiences and examine features—whether common or otherwise to art experts and lay people. We broadly framed our research in the constructivist/interpretive tradition (Lincoln and Guba, 1994; Patton, 2002; Schwandt, 1994). First-person reporting based on long interviews was the main method through which data were collected (Creswell, 1998). Interpretive

knowledge was based on deriving general meanings and understanding relationships implicit in the original individual description of experience (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995).

2.4.2. Informant selection

We looked for informants who visited art museums regularly (a minimum of two visits per year, according to data from the Spanish Ministry of Culture; LPPM, 2010) and who were heterogeneous in terms of individual properties (cultural knowledge, relationship to the arts, etc.) and also in terms of the artworks seen in museums. This heterogeneity was necessary in order to be able to describe the nature of the aesthetic experience and explore whether it was homogeneous or whether its effect and content varied according to certain conditions. Given that language transmits information and describes reality (Goulding, 2005), these interviews provided the necessary substantial descriptions and interpretations of their experiences. We started with snowball sampling (Patton, 2002), but thereafter, informants were selected following these sampling criteria: all informants had to have visited art museums twice in the previous year; informants had to be heterogeneous in sex, age (34 years and younger versus 35 years and older), institutional capital (secondary versus university education) and social class (lower-middle versus upper-middle class); and sampling would stop when the analytical categories were saturated (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

2.4.3. Informants

We personally interviewed 21 informants. In order to compare the experiences of art experts with those of viewers with no formal art education, 5 interviewees were professionals working in cultural institutions, while the other 16 interviewees did not have any specific education in art and were not involved with art institutions; the 16 did, however, have varying degrees of accumulated experience in viewing artworks. These 16 informants were equally distributed in terms of sex, age, institutional education and social class. Social status was inferred from education, income and occupation (for a similar procedure, see Benzecry, 2009). The minority presence of art experts was due to the fact that analytical categories were quickly saturated because of the similarity of the reported experiences.

The 21 personal interviews, which lasted between 60 and 105 minutes, were digitally recorded. In six cases, it was necessary to collect additional data related to theoretical concepts that emerged during the analysis of interviews. These six informants were contacted again by telephone rather than in person, due to respondent availability problems, to provide further data needed to saturate concepts (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and to build an interpretation. Interviews were conducted, over a period of just over a year (from early 2008 to early 2009), in different contexts (interviewee's or interviewer's home or office or coffee shops), exclusively in the province of Barcelona (Spain), and concurrently but in waves. Informants were guaranteed confidentiality and informed of the aims of the

research and of their right to interrupt the recording if they wished. All interviews were transcribed verbatim with the help of voice recognition software.

Prior to conducting the interviews, we established a protocol (with a total of about 40 open-ended questions) that was flexible enough to be adapted to the emergent themes raised by the interviewees. The protocol covered the current and previous social context of the interviewee, most especially the dimensions of the aesthetic experience and the hedonistic consumption of art. Therefore, questions took into account the perceptual, emotional, cognitive and communicative dimensions of the aesthetic experience. One part of our protocol explored high-intensity aesthetic experiences. We encouraged our informants to identify, to reflect on and to build a full description of the more intense conscious experience they had enjoyed in their visits to museums.

2.4.4. Analysis

Applying thematic analysis to the corpus of data, the entire procedure comprised five main steps: (1) identifying segments of texts relevant to understanding the aesthetic experience; (2) interpreting selected text segments; (3) clustering segments into common categories or meaning units (CCC, originality, reported aesthetic experience, the unforgettable aesthetic experience, etc); (4) developing a description of the experience (understanding) and its structural dimensions; and (5) comparing experiences and constructing an explanation of the aesthetic experience by linking structural dimensions. The procedure described in Kelle (1995) was used to conduct the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis.

Finally, MaxQDA (Kuckartz, 2007) CAQDAS software was used to manage and analyze the data.

2.5. Results

Our analysis suggests that the effect and content of the aesthetic experience of viewing artworks depend on the CCC needed to interpret them and on the awareness of the originality of the artworks. CCC emerged from the analysis as an empirical category (it was not imposed from the literature review) necessary in order to organize the comparison and interpretation of the reported aesthetic experiences. Emerging as a condition for individuals was to be able to interpret the cult value of artworks and describe the cognitive and emotive dimensions of the aesthetic experience. Additionally, the "contextual" adjective was necessary in the usual notion of cultural capital to make sense of the role played by original artworks (another condition for experiencing intense emotion) in the intensity of the aesthetic experience, Interestingly, we found that individuals describing unforgettable intense aesthetic experiences also described *forgettable* aesthetic experiences once they switched from their familiar Western cultural social system to an unfamiliar non-Western cultural system (e.g., Cuba), but also when viewing a copy in the Western cultural system. This evidence suggests (1) that these individuals' cultural knowledge is not universal but is specific to their Western community, and (2) that CCC was not the only condition necessary to feel an intense emotional aesthetic experience. The originality of the artwork appeared as an intensifying category that combined with the CCC. Contextual cultural capital, thus, seems necessary in order to be able to interpret and feel suitably intense

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emotions during the ritual of viewing highly valued artefacts. However, it is not a sufficient condition, as individuals also need to be aware that they are viewing an original artwork; that is, both artwork originality and individual awareness are necessary. Artistic artefacts, therefore, turn out to be so important that it is not possible to participate in the ritual of paying homage to the creator without them (as happens in religious rituals).

In the following sections, we describe our informants' aesthetic experiences with artworks taking into account the conditions in which their aesthetic experiences occur and the content and ultimate effects of these experiences. First, we will show how individuals' descriptions varied according to their CCC. We will then present informants' testimonies of how awareness of viewing an original rather than a copy interacts with CCC to produce an intense aesthetic experience. Finally, we will show how the effect of the aesthetic experience varied according to individual CCC.

2.5.1. The aesthetic experience and contextual cultural capital

CCC is interpreted as a set of legitimate cultural attitudes, preferences and behaviours concerning expressions of art—which individuals internalize during their socialization process. CCC is embodied cultural capital and can be both formal knowledge acquired in academic institutions (through art studies) and informal knowledge accumulated through reading, previous visits to museums, etc. After comparing the aesthetic experiences of our interviewees, we categorized regular art museum visitors as having adequate or inadequate CCC to interpret the cult value of artworks (by agreement between all the researchers). The notions of "adequate" or "inadequate" CCC merely refers to whether or not individuals

described the cognitive dimension of the aesthetic experience necessary to feel an intense experience (for instance, in terms of the detail provided and the depth of descriptions of viewed artworks and of the experience in general, the anecdotes included in the responses, and the popularity of the artworks and artists referenced). We also checked whether there were differences in art museum visit frequency and the number of artworks referenced. We categorized viewers as having adequate CCC when they exhibited a higher frequency of visits, talked about more artworks and gave richer descriptions of artworks and aesthetic experiences compared to viewers interpreted as having inadequate CCC to decode the cultural value of artworks.

In referring to the content of their experience with artworks, visitors with adequate CCC talked about the social value of artists and their art, while the other group of visitors only referred to what the artworks meant to them; we call these the "cult value" and "exhibition value" of artworks, respectively (using Benjamin's [1955] words). The cult value refers to the fact that consumers with adequate CCC view museums as cathedrals where homage is paid to the artist and his/her art; hence, for them, what has social value is "in" whereas what has no social value is "out" of the museum. Artists whose art is exhibited in museums are legitimized by local culture as important creators. The exhibition value refers to the fact that viewers categorized as having inadequate CCC refer to what the artwork expresses in terms of composition, colour, light, etc., but never to the value of the artist.

2.5.1.1. Cult value: individuals with adequate contextual cultural capital

In accordance with the experiences reported by this group of interviewees, visiting museums was an aesthetic ritual of paying homage to a socially valued artist. As our informants remarked, individuals need to know the artworks that they are viewing in order to be able to pay homage to a socially valued artist. So they examine artworks, recognize the value that society attributes to them and, consequently, enjoy being able to stand in front of them and see them for real.

We observed that viewers who had previous knowledge of an artwork and who had seen it reproduced in books or photographs wanted to see it "for real" —so as to see whether it corresponded to their mental image of it. They organized visits to see works to which they could give cult value. Juan Manuel, a retired engineer, said: "...I prefer to see things I know, to see what I know from photographs for real...". Víctor, an art expert who works in an art institution, remarked: "...I go to see things that I already know and have a deep understanding of...".

Both these informants are frequent museum visitors. A student of humanities, Claudia, was adamant in arguing that she wanted to see the artworks she knew because she had studied them. Her knowledge of the artwork being greater, comparatively, she gave a higher value to it and its creator and expressed a desire to see such works in exhibitions:

> ...[I want to] recognize artworks that I have worked on or studied or
> whatever, recognize a work so I can say, oh, this is the work of such-

and-such an author, which I really wanted to see, I mean, recognize something like that. (Claudia, p. 125)

The words of these three interviewees point to the fact that certain works—namely, those for which prior knowledge is available—were a goal for informed visitors. In other words, these viewers attributed a cult value to the artwork they knew that, in turn, led them to want to contemplate it. Conversely, we found that if the viewer did not report knowledge about a creator and his/her work, the artwork did not have a cult value for him/her and, consequently, it would not retain the interest of the viewer. Ester, a chemist, stressed the importance of knowing the artist as a necessary condition for an interest in paintings:

...an exhibition without knowing a little, without knowing the artist and his/her background... the painting alone does not interest me, to be honest, I do not care to see it... I'm interested in everything. (Ester, p. 128)

She compared visiting museums to visiting art galleries, highlighting the fact that she did not have the necessary knowledge to award cult value to a painter exhibiting in an art gallery, nor did she know what to feel or what emotions to enact. In museums, in contrast, she said that she understood the ritual and knew how to value the artworks. Although she might like the artworks exhibited in art galleries, she could not come up with the knowledge needed to interpret them and feel intense emotions. Works exhibited in art galleries corresponded, mostly, to

unknown and contemporary artists, so, for Ester, the paintings in an art gallery did not have a cult value:

> …In a gallery, perhaps the painters, in general, are less well known and perhaps I am not informed enough to understand or judge or see this painting, right? Whereas with the known works, first, I am already informed, I know the progression, well, to be honest, more or less, not to a professional level but good, and I already have information so what I see I understand better, right? And then I go and see it in an art gallery, I may like it, why not, and I can say, ah, you know, he reminds me of such-and-such a painter, but it does not bring me anything else and then… I like a bit more having a little more to learn, perhaps that's why I do not like art galleries so much… (Ester, p. 177)

Artworks exhibited in art museums are similar to artefacts in religious rituals ocurring in cathedrals: they are used to pay homage to an artist or religion, as the case may be. Consumers visit art museums to see the sacred artefacts produced by creators familiar to them. Gabriel, an economist and regular visitor to art museums, recalled his astonishment at the idea of a urinal as an artwork (referring to *Fontaine* by Marcel Duchamp) but then awarded it cult value because it was signed by an artist and exhibited in a museum. If the museum agreed to display a urinal, even though it might be a dissonant artwork (in the words of Danto [2003, p. 11]), then this meant that it was art and should be valued as such by the viewer:

> …At the Georges Pompidou you can see a urinal and paintings by Velázquez, right? But this is shocking, right? That there are urinals

displayed in the Pompidou! But... well, I would be unable to place a urinal in a museum yet there are people who have achieved it, so, that leaves us with two alternatives, to be critical or to say "you are very clever, because we others could not do it"... *Las Meninas* and a urinal are both in a museum, right?! (Gabriel, p. 67)

The visitor valued and sought contemplation of the artwork especially when it was an important work whose creator was recognized universally. Viewing the artwork was a rite that signalled to others that the viewer was participating in the ritual of paying homage to the creator and the moral values epitomized by the work. Ester was clear in her thoughts about the cult value of paintings valued as part of a culture:

...Especially if it is an important artwork, meaning, of course, one of those mythical ones that you've longed for all your life, one that is important, and you say, hey, I've seen that painting, right?. (Ester, p. 278)

2.5.1.2. Exhibition value: individuals with inadequate contextual cultural capital

When we analyzed the aesthetic experiences of this group of interviewees, we did not detect any reference to the cult value of artworks. Rather, respondents talked about what we call the perceptual dimension of the artworks, mainly their visual and perceptive properties. Within this empirical category, we placed two types of incidents in order to make sense of the accounts of individuals' aesthetic experiences: (1) incidents reported by individuals categorized as having

inadequate CCC in their own community (Western Europe) and (2) individuals with adequate CCC in the Western European community but apparently with inadequate CCC regarding the unfamiliar artworks produced and shown in another sociocultural context.

In both cases, interviewees were not able to find a link to the painter through observation of the paintings. Individuals were not able to build a bridge to the artist and, consequently, they could not enact intense feelings when viewing the artwork. As a result, the painting did not have cult value for them—nor was it a sacred artefact, even though they could share the meanings that the artist expressed in the painting. Whereas individuals with adequate CCC were interested in contemplating known artworks, with homage playing an essential part in the aesthetic experience, individuals whose descriptions are reported in this section did not have the necessary knowledge to either identify the paintings or understand their cult value in terms of the emotions necessarily called on to enjoy art.

For viewers in this group, it did not matter whether the artworks had been produced by a well-known artist and were being exhibited in outstanding museums in their own cultural community or whether they were by a less well-known contemporary artist and exhibited in galleries. The visitors did not, apparently, have enough knowledge about the creators to distinguish between paintings that did not have any cult value for them. Thus, we did not find data related to previous knowledge of artworks. However, these interviewees talked about the perceptual dimension of the artworks viewed in their visits to museums.

They looked at the visual properties of the artworks and spoke of colour, light, composition, technique, etc. —all properties that did not make it necessary to know the work beforehand. These visitors did not base their visits on the cult value of the works, as this was unknown to them, but judged them according to the perceptual dimension they exhibited.

> ...Because I like the kind of colour, I like that blurred image, that image that suggests many things depending on the time of the day, the light, I don't know, I just like it. (Xema, p. 21)

The perceptual dimension, therefore, was highly recurrent among respondents when they talked about the paintings seen in their visits to art museums. Albert, a politician, and Joaquim, a medical student, expressed their lack of knowledge of the artworks they viewed. Albert spoke of his admiration for Tàpies' paintings. Despite admitting his ignorance, he gave reasons for liking the works, mostly alluding to them in terms of size, technique, brushstrokes and visual impact:

> ...Why he did this size and not another, the precise painting technique used, the brushstrokes and such things that I think we have to see... I really like Tàpies, who can make a cross in the middle of a white background, I do not know why, the plasticity, the visual impact, he says nothing in that painting... In my ignorance, I understand it as an impact, and there are impacts that mark you more and others that mark you less. (Albert, p. 96)

Joaquim added further data about the importance of the perceptual dimension of artworks when he spoke of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. Although he was talking about his favourite painting, he could not remember the artist's name. This is an example of an interviewee unable to award cult value to the art but rather referring to its perceptual dimension:

> ...It's my favourite painting... it transmits great strength, I think the face is dramatic, very dramatic, and it happens, I mean, it happens in a place where there could not be any drama because you see the bridge and the red sky and behind there are two people walking, the situation is not at all dramatic, yet, in contrast, the situation of the central figure of the picture is, in fact, dramatic, I really don't know, I haven't studied the work, absolutely not, what I say when I think of the work, what I think is happening, surely there must be a story behind it... (Joaquim, p. 155)

When we refer to CCC, we emphasize that cultural capital is local knowledge produced by a community that shares certain meanings regarding the value of artworks. This means that interviewees with locally adequate cultural capital lose their frame of reference when the context is changed. Incidents reported by interviewees showed that differences in CCC mattered; only individuals with adequate CCC valued the cult dimensions of an artwork. As we saw in Section 2.5.1.1, Juan Manuel, with adequate CCC in Western Europe, was unable to enjoy the cult value of paintings displayed in Cuban museums:

> ...Just a while ago I was in Cuba, in Havana there was a museum that they were saying was very good... very good... Cuban publicity said this,

there were pictures representing all the trends, but as I did not know

any of them, from the outset I wasn't in the least tempted. (Juan Manuel,

p. 74)

He acknowledged that, although local visitors valued the artistic productions exhibited in the museum, he felt unable to experience the enjoyable emotions produced in his regular visits to European museums. He highlighted the importance of knowing the works he was going to see. Paintings from another culture could not act as the sacred artefacts that would build a bridge between the artist and the viewer. The artwork did not signify anything when it did not possess the cult value of a well-known artwork in the viewer's own culture. Since Juan Manuel did not know the creator of the artworks in the Cuban museum, he did not enjoy viewing them and, being unable to interpret their cult value, he had little interest in them.

2.5.2. Relationship between contextual cultural capital and originality, and the impact on the aesthetic experience

It was remarkable to find that awareness of whether the actual viewing of an original artwork or a copy influenced the intensity of individual aesthetic experiences. We detected two distinct kinds of experiences: (1) individuals categorized as having adequate CCC who knew the artwork and its creator and wanted to see the original works (cult value) and (2) individuals categorized as having inadequate CCC who did not know the creator and who were indifferent as to whether they saw the original or a copy.

2.5.2.1. Positive relationship between originality and contextual cultural capital

As mentioned previously, visitors categorized as having adequate CCC wanted to see familiar artworks as an aesthetic homage-paying ritual to a socially valued artist. Such visitors added a further prerequisite: works must be originals in order to play the role of a bridge between viewer and artist. A copy would not trigger the emotions to feel an intense aesthetic experience:

> Maybe it's dumb but it is the same as going to Florence to see *David* by Michelangelo, outside and, you know, it'll be very nice but it's not natural, it's not the real one… yes, it's a perfect copy but I want to see the real one and it is not that I can differentiate, I am not going to say that this is a falsification, well, it's a copy, right, I don't have the knowledge to do that, but I want to see the real thing. (Juan Manuel, p. 171-172)

Juan Manuel clearly points to cult value as part of the act of seeing an original artwork, acknowledging that even though he could not differentiate between the original and a copy, he had to see the original, because only the original could act as a sacred artefact to connect viewer and creator. The copy was not an adequate artefact for an act of homage, as it had not been touched by the creator. The copy lacked cult value and was, in fact, an offence to the sacred ritual, even if the viewer was not capable of distinguishing the original from a copy.

Ester also raised the issue that artworks socially considered to be good could not be replaced by a greater quantity of artworks socially considered as not so good or

copies. Referring to artworks by Picasso, she said that a couple of these produced a more intense aesthetic experience than a larger quantity of copies of his art or art produced by an artist of lesser social value:

> ...Although I would have left it, even though I would have had two, I mean to say, I would prefer two [paintings] by him [Picasso] than 16 prints, know what I mean? Copies, I mean. It's more real, right? (Ester, p. 280)

Looking at the experiences reported by this group of informants, we found that these felt an intense emotional aesthetic experience when contemplating an original work. These informants also assured us that original artworks produced stronger emotions than copies. In regard to their experiences with original artworks, Juan Manuel spoke of "euphoria" and Claudia of "fascination" and "emotion", all feelings with a high emotional charge:

> ...Seeing things that I have always liked and that I see live, as originals, well, sometimes... sometimes I feel euphoria. I feel drugged. (Juan Manuel, p. 253)

> ...I felt the fascination that you feel for something that you like very much, you know? And the truth is that you feel... well, it's like this, the emotion of seeing things that you hope to see and that you like. (Claudia, p. 77)

Copies are unable to thrill viewers like the original, even if the physical qualities are identical and the viewer is unable to distinguish one from the other. Three

museum visitors, Juan Manuel, Ferran (an art history academic) and Marc (the former director of an art museum) talked about different feelings when viewing a copy compared to the original. Juan Manuel said that a copy did not impress him at all in comparison with the intense aesthetic experience of seeing the original. Ferran also talked of a lack of emotion in response to viewing a copy and Marc spoke of intensely negative feelings of disappointment:

> ...Seeing the Rosetta Stone, I went back three or four times to see it, I could not believe it. Then I saw a reproduction in Cairo. In Cairo they have a reproduction in the entrance hall but I couldn't feel the same, because it's a reproduction, the real one is in London and I was really impressed, in Cairo the reproduction could not leave the same impression. (Juan Manuel, p. 221)

> We are talking about a copy made then... in this case I would have no feelings or anything, with the original, this would be impossible. (Ferran, p. 97)

> ...there would be an element of disillusionment with this, you know? Nobody could take away the previous excitement but well, certainly the importance... the interest would diminish, yes, naturally, there would be a degree of disappointment, some disappointment, yes. (Marc, p. 89)

For this group of viewers, the original work generated an intense positive emotion, whereas the copy produced disillusionment, disappointment and a rather painful dampening of spirits that, in turn, diminished the quality of the aesthetic

experience. The respondents explained why their experiences were different and why their emotions varied in intensity depending on whether they saw the original or a copy: only the original work, physically handled by the artist, could link the viewer with the artist and his/her context. Claudia pointed to the role of the original artwork as a signifier of the creator and as the proper artefact needed to pay homage to him/her. Imagining the painter in front of the original, she admitted full "subjectivity" (her own word) in the experience. The copy that had not been handled by the painter lacked the sacredness necessary for the ritual of homage. Viewing the copy, Claudia felt disappointed at being unable to imagine that bridge that connected her with the artist:

> ...There's an issue of subjectivity here, isn't there? When you see an artwork you also imagine the painter, you visualize him/her painting the artwork and that also gives it value, right? And if you know it's a copy, that disappoints you a little, because in the work you expect to see all the effort it took to physically paint that artwork, right? And also you imagine the painter, sculptor or artist, whoever, preparing that artwork and in a certain way, yes, to think that the work is a copy, although the work is the same and is identical, yes, it's disappointing, well, at least for me, yes, I would find it a little disappointing. (Claudia, p. 182)

Gabriel also indicated his need to see the original, as the object that the painter had touched with his/her own hands and had seen with his/her own eyes. An artwork is a signifier of the artist and, as a relic, the original has a cult value that a copy lacks. Understanding the work as a testimony of the value of a creator and the

context of production and consumption, Víctor extolled the value of the original in all the experiences it accumulates in its essence:

> …I need to picture myself in front of a work that the author painted and that the author saw finished with his eyes, right? Not in front of one that someone else reproduced… I need to see the copy that the painter finished with his hands, that he saw with his eyes. (Gabriel, p. 174)

> …The original for me is the experience lived rather than the sense of the original, you know? The lived experience that exists behind it. (Víctor, p. 93)

2.5.2.2. Absence of a relationship between originality and contextual cultural capital

Interviewees' experiences reported in this section show that viewing the original or a copy was the same. Two informants with inadequate CCC—Jaume, a finance expert, and Julio, a sociology student—revealed this immutability of their experiences:

> …I think that yes, that I would feel the same, if the work were 90% or so exact, you'd feel what you feel. (Jaume, p. 148)

> …No, the fact that it impresses you or stops impacting you or you like it or stop liking it… no, it has nothing to do with whether you are in front of the original or the copy, I mean, if you are in front of a botched job and it thrills you, it thrills you whether the botched job is an original

botched job or a copy of the botched job, I mean, it's the same, I believe

that, at least for me, I do not believe that I was affected, in this sense,

emotionally or mentally. (Julio, p. 338)

They did not care whether they saw an original or a copy because the emotion came from the exhibition value shared by originals and copies (the perceptual and communicative dimensions of the aesthetic experience). What really mattered was that both works were visually identical or only had physical differences imperceptible to the human eye. We noticed that the informants did not make any reference to the creator. There was, thus, no indication of the existence of the cult value awarded to certain artworks.

We also found that the viewer sometimes specifically referred to the lack of cult value. Joaquim, for example, obviating the figure of the artist, explained that he was satisfied with an artwork when he liked it aesthetically. Moreover—in contrast to Claudia, a viewer with adequate CCC who pointed to complete subjectivity in her aesthetic experience (see Section 2.5.1.2)— Joaquim stressed his intention "to see the artwork objectively" (his own words). In this sense, he did not see the work as a sacred artefact that could perform a bridging role between him and the artist, because the artist was not as important as the work itself:

...I think that's prejudice, if somebody tells you that it's a copy, that's

prejudice, but you can also go and try to see the artwork objectively and

well... I go to see an artwork and I hope that I'll like it, and leaving aside

the person who made it, if I like it, I'm satisfied, but if somebody tells

you that it's a copy... I don't know, I'd think it was very well done

[laughter]… Copies are very similar to reality, right? And if in reality they transmit so much, a copy probably would transmit nearly the same. (Joaquim, p. 185-189)

Lorena, a political journalist, also clearly separated the cult value and exhibition value of works in comparing museums and art galleries. As she did not have enough knowledge of artworks and artists to be able to give them a cult value, she was not especially interested in contemplating art in a museum (with more consecrated artists) or in an art gallery (with contemporary and less well-known artists). In both cases, it was likely that she did not know the work or its creator and so was unable to build a bridge that could link her with the creator. For Lorena, the aesthetic experience had the same level of intensity irrespective of whether she was in front of an original or a copy and irrespective of whether the work was displayed in a museum or an art gallery. The artwork was not a signifier of the artist (cult value) but an expression of what she felt (exhibition value), as happened with the viewers in this group:

…I also try to see art in galleries, I don't only admire art by great artists in museums but also sometimes the art of the street, the art you can find at fairs… I always take the concept of falsification or forgery or copy with a grain of salt because I understand that above all there must be this dialogue of me liking it or not liking it, what it transmits or fails to transmit, over and above the fact that it's real or not… (Lorena, p. 178)

As we have seen, for this group of viewers, the experience of seeing an original and a copy was the same and the feelings experienced in both situations were also the same. In contrast with the other category of viewers, they showed low intensity feelings on seeing originals and copies. Lucía, a data analyst, and Carlota, an economist, described their aesthetic experiences by saying that although they enjoyed them (they were "cool" or "great"), they were not highly impressed. For these visitors, the feelings of well-being were low in intensity, and there were practically no moments of disappointment or deception on seeing a copy of the original:

> ...the feeling is that I like it and sometimes when I go I think that I have to be more active, look at more things, often know much more than what you are viewing, but it ends up as being unfulfilled promises to myself. (Lucía, p. 112)

> ...I'd been to a temporary exhibition of European artists that I liked, it was also a guided tour and it was cool and the painters were so good, cool, and a little known or not, but they sounded, you know, good, I don't know, it was great... (Carlota, p. 181)

If we could experimentally measure the emotional intensity of the aesthetic experience, it would be the outcome of the originality of the artwork positively interacting with the individual level of CCC. Thus, the difference in the emotional intensity of the aesthetic experience would be much higher between individuals with adequate CCC when viewing an original than when viewing a copy. This difference in emotional intensity in response to an original is the interaction

between the originality of an artwork and the CCC of a viewer, resulting in a high-intensity aesthetic experience.

Our inference resides in two kinds of data: (1) when individuals categorized as having adequate CCC became conscious that they were seeing non-original artworks, they reported a feeling of deception; and (2) when individuals categorized as having adequate CCC in one particular cultural community switched to another unfamiliar cultural community, they reported experiences similar to those individuals with inadequate CCC in their own cultural community. The individuals researched used imaginative and creative resources to construct mental images, which they consumed for the intrinsic pleasure they provided (individuals with adequate CCC). Furthermore, individuals aware that they were not viewing the original artworks reported not being able to construct pleasurable mental images (links with the creator). In conclusion, individuals with adequate CCC reported aesthetic experiences that also were of higher intensity than ordinary aesthetic experiences.

2.5.3. The unforgettable aesthetic experience

When the relationship between the art object (its originality) and CCC generated intense emotions, only then did the viewer report having lived what we call an unforgettable aesthetic experience, i.e., an aesthetic experience of such emotional intensity that it is remembered for many years. The theoretical categories affecting the production of an unforgettable aesthetic experience are depicted in Figure 1; original artworks interact with the viewer's CCC to produce an aesthetic experience of such emotional intensity that the experience becomes unforgettable.
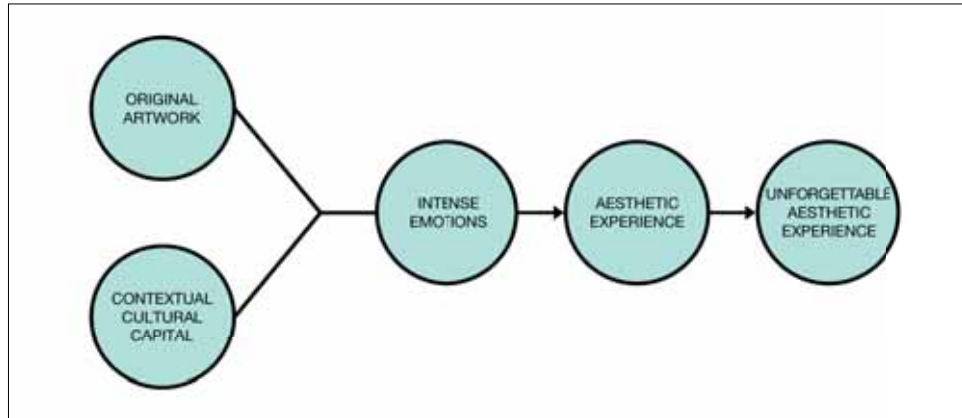
Figure 1. The unforgettable aesthetic experience.

The data show that aesthetic experiences that met both conditions—CCC and originality—were remembered vividly after many years—for which reason we consider them to be unforgettable aesthetic experiences. Juan Manuel, for instance, was very impressed by Rembrandt's *Night Watch* when he visited the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and Ester vividly remembered the day she saw the *Venus of the Mirror* by Velázquez. In both cases, the interviewees retained highly positive memories of these experiences and highlighted the significance to them:

> …It impressed me to hell, well, I already knew that it was going to impress me but *Night Watch* by Rembrandt impressed me much more than I thought… It's a painting I've always liked but I did not expect it to be so spectacular… it astonished me. It perhaps left one of the biggest impressions of my recent visits to a museum. (Juan Manuel, p. 116-118)

...Until I saw *Venus of the Mirror* by Velázquez, twenty times, yes I

surely went twenty times, and I got to see it, eh?... it was the happiest

day of my life, I really mean it... (Ester, p. 163-165)

In contrast, when neither condition was met, visitors had no examples of unforgettable aesthetic experiences. Even in cases where the viewers had made a visit that they liked, their experiences did not impact so much on the emotions and were mostly forgotten. As Joaquim indicates, the experience, even if pleasant, was ephemeral:

...You know I don't remember? Although it has happened many times, I

guess it's an experience that I have at the time and think, I like this

artwork a lot, a lot, I would love to have it in the dining room at home,

but now, three months or two years since I've seen it, I cannot

remember it, or even remember whose it is. I mean, it's an experience

that I have when I'm in front of it and that's it. (Joaquim, p. 163)

Reviewing the unforgettable aesthetic experiences of some of our interviewees, it was interesting to note two types of emotions with an especially high level of intensity that frequently featured these situations.

2.5.3.1. Distortion of the sense of time

The first emotion was the perception of a distorted sense of time described as a dreamlike state. For some viewers, when the experience was highly positive, "time seems suspended", to use Bollas' (1987, p. 32) words. Descriptions of such

sensations were given by our informants Gabriel and Flora, the latter an art historian with a long career in art institutions:

> ...A total delight [in the Museum d'Orsay], for the beauty there, vast, spectacular, incredible, everything that you want, you can be there, well, I don't know, I was there seven or nine hours, I can't remember, but I know that I entered at 11 o'clock and left about 5 or 6 o'clock that evening more or less, and I sat on the ground because I decided that I could not bear it all, incredible, yes, it was the best day ever. Yes, the amount of beauty you see there is spectacular. (Gabriel, p. 97)

> ...You connect with a particular piece, that is, there are some works that you are in front of and you would stay as long as you need because you connect with them, there is never a specific reason, you connect, and you like it and it makes you feel. (Flora, p. 79)

2.5.3.2. Transcendence of ego

The second intense emotion was a sensation of transcendence of the ego, defined as being similar to a religious experience or, as Gabriel said, to a revelation. The emotion felt was defined by Víctor as an elevation of both mind and spirit. Authors have labelled this experience as reverential (Graburn, 1980), as an experience of delight (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994) and as an experience of a spiritual nature (Passebois, 2002):

> ...My mother told me, you have to visit the Museum d'Orsay, and says, even more than the Louvre, and I went to visit, and wow, this was like, I

don't know, St. Paul on the road… I don't know… on the road to Tarsus

and he has a revelation, well, it was the same for me, I think I was seven

or eight hours in the museum and, incredible, looking at everything

twice, reading everything… the Museum d'Orsay was like a revelation.

(Gabriel, p. 33)

…[I felt] elevated, elevated, right? Levitated. (Víctor, p. 81)

Finally, we considered repetition of the unforgettable aesthetic experience some

time later. Some interviewees said that the artwork that so impressed them the

first time did not induce the same level of emotional intensity when the experience

was repeated. When, for the first time and in a certain context, an individual lived

the experience of viewing an original and established a link with the creator, an

aesthetic experience was generated that would be remembered with intensity

even after many years. Nevertheless, with the passing of the years, the memory

seems to idealize greatly the lived experience, and this directly affects the intensity

of the repeated experience. Even though the viewer had idealized the artwork

(represented in books or photographs), the fact of seeing the original for the first

time and being able to enact the ritual of homage to the creator produced emotions

of such great intensity that the consumer did not become frustrated when

comparing the idealized work with the original work. When the original aesthetic

experience was repeated, however, it did not produce emotions of the same

intensity. Juan Manuel stated that his repeated aesthetic experiences decreased in

intensity as he repeated them. Gabriel, who also felt diminished emotions,

attributed this to the fact that the novelty had gone:

...In this case I had some memories which I'd idealized. I've been to d'Orsay three times. The first time I liked it a lot, the second, mmm... so I wanted to again see the Impressionists that had impressed me earlier. And yes, I say, I liked it, but the last time I left feeling a little disappointed, it was not as spectacular as I remembered... Even Gauguin, *The White Horse*, and other paintings that I remembered as having the force of colour, I found to be dull, dead, I don't know, I was disappointed. (Juan Manuel, p. 145-149)

...No, no, it is impossible for it to be the same [experience], I mean, it'd be very difficult. First, because the novelty is always important, right? When you don't know what's in there and you see what they have there, the treasures, spectacular artworks of incredible beauty... then, later visits are made after having seen many more exhibitions, right? Then you say, OK, the third is just for the sake of seeing it. (Gabriel, p. 103)

2.6. Discussion and conclusion

We have attempted to contribute to the advancement of knowledge of the aesthetic experience with artworks displayed in museums in several ways. We have shown that both the effect and the content of the aesthetic experience with artworks (Gumbrecht, 2006) exhibited in museums vary according to two conditions: (1) the awareness of being in front of an original artwork and (2) the contextual cultural capital necessary to interpret the cult value of an artwork in a local cultural context so as to be aware of and enact intense emotions. This finding contributes to the

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development of Alexander's (2008a,b) theory of the iconic experience with artworks exhibited in museums, which suggests that the content and the effect of the aesthetic experience can vary according to individuals and artworks. Like the iconic consciousness, the unforgettable aesthetic experience occurs when an artwork signifies cult value for the viewer in a given cultural community; it is about experience and understanding by feeling and by the evidence of the senses rather than of the mind (Alexander, 2008a, p. 782). Nevertheless, like Griswold (1987b), we have found that the content of the aesthetic experience varies among individuals. In Griswold's contribution, the meaning of the literary works studied varied according to the reader's social context. In ours, the content of the aesthetic experience with artworks varies according to the individual's CCC. The intensity of the aesthetic experience also varies in terms of content: an intense unforgettable aesthetic experience was associated with cult value content, whereas an ordinary aesthetic experience was associated with the exhibition value of artworks.

Our interpretation of the data suggests that the content of the intense aesthetic experience is emotional. Even though all interviewees described the perceptual dimension of artworks (exhibition value) —as in Alexander's iconic experience (2008a), and McCormick's (2006) social performance perspective—only individuals with adequate CCC could interpret and decipher the contextual cultural values. These results explain and extend Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson's (1990) unexpected findings about the dominant role played by the emotional component in aesthetic experiences. We can now interpret the role of CCC. In enjoying artworks, it is not only CCC that matters but also the originality of the artwork;

both are joint necessary conditions to feel an intense aesthetic experience. Due to the fact that art professionals, as well as cultivated ordinary people, felt intense unforgettable aesthetic experiences, we could say that what matters is the embodied CCC rather than the objectified and institutionalized CCC (Bourdieu, 1987[1979]). The former refers to legitimate cultural attitudes and frameworks of interpretation, appreciation and behaviour, whereas the latter refers to degrees and diplomas that certify the value of embodied cultural capital (see Lamont and Lareau, 1988).

Furthermore, our interpretation suggests that the emotional component of an intense aesthetic experience is produced by the viewer's feelings on paying homage to a socially valued artist by viewing his/her original artwork. Consequently, not only art experts were able to feel an unforgettable aesthetic experience; any viewer of artworks with adequate CCC and conscious that he/she is seeing original works have reported feeling it. Unlike Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990), who researched the aesthetic experience of a group of art experts, we studied the aesthetic experience of a more heterogeneous sample that included both art experts and individuals with no professional relationship with the art world. Our study, thus, following the proposal of Alexander and Smith (2001), tries to go a step further in explaining the prevalence of the emotional content in an intense aesthetic experience: art viewers have reported feeling an intense aesthetic experience when they awarded cult value to a known artist and his/her art (both the CCC and originality condition were met). It also suggests that cultural capital is contextual (about the dispute regarding CCC, see Lamont and

Fournier, 1992) and local (Geertz, 1981 [1973]), and that the aesthetic experience of viewing artworks in museums differs from viewing artworks in art galleries; individuals in the latter context do not have knowledge of the artist and of his/her artworks and so cannot develop enjoyable and intense feelings.

In contrast with Chen (2009), our findings suggest that what differentiates the viewing experience of a painting exhibited in a museum or in an art gallery (or at home, if the artwork is purchased) is not possession (objectified cultural capital), but whether the artwork is an original artwork with cult value in the consumer's sociocultural context and whether the consumer is able to interpret its social meaning. Artworks have the object-person property described by Heinich (2010). Although original artworks are exhibited in both museums and art galleries, what differentiates the two artistic spaces is the cultural value of the artwork (see also Heinich, 1996). Since paintings hung in museums are socially valued expressions of culture, individuals can develop the CCC needed to interpret them. In contrast, viewers are uncertain regarding what to feel when seeing contemporary artworks exhibited in art galleries because these lack cult value.

 This interpretation suggests that the original painting plays the role of signifier for an artist and his/her epoch that allows the viewer to build a bridge with him/her—as Alexander suggests regarding the iconic experience. The viewer has to be able to decode this signifier to imagine a connection with the creator. The image of the artist and his/her environment is taken from the consumer's CCC, whereas the artistic object is the source of the emotion. These two antecedents of the aesthetic experience—the original artwork and the necessary CCC to decode it

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and produce the images that connect the consumer with the artist—are a necessary condition for the production of an unforgettable aesthetic experience.

The intensity and content of the unforgettable aesthetic experience is a salient fact in our research. Although our informants said that they felt incapable of distinguishing between an original and a copy, if they knew they were observing a copy they would feel cheated, as the pleasure source—the original artwork—would be missing. Even though the consumer might have the CCC necessary to produce the images related to the pleasure source and so spark the intense emotions, the pleasure source is missing; a copy, as Benjamin (1955) suggests, results in a decay in the aura of the original work. For this reason, the unforgettable aesthetic experience relies on original artworks exhibited in museums—the cathedrals of cultural expression. Originals are an object of veneration and the expression of an idol, and they represent a unique channel for paying homage to the creator. In this sense, the originality of an artwork builds a bridge between the viewer and the artist; the original deserves to be honoured since it derives from the divine and sacred idol and his/her context. This is the cult value of the original artwork.

Furthermore, our interpretation of informants' stories—unlike Ritzer's (1999) disenchanted world— suggests that the consummation of the desire to see the artworks of acknowledged masters is not necessarily a disillusioning experience for the modern art consumer. Rather, art consumers with the CCC needed to decode and interpret the sociocultural value of original artworks have reported an intense emotion on viewing the art; this emotion, furthermore, is remembered

pleasantly year after year. What our findings suggest to be frustrating or disillusioning is repeated experiences with the same original artworks. The combination of accumulated artistic experiences and daydreaming regarding unforgettable aesthetic experiences appears to render subsequent experiences with the same artefacts frustrating.

Finally, what we call the "unforgettable aesthetic experience" is different from Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson's (1990) optimal or flow experience. Although an intense effect is produced by both experiences, the content and conditions differ. An optimal experience requires the individual to have the skills necessary to manage successfully the challenge; in other words, the cognitive dimension is preponderant. An unforgettable aesthetic experience, in contrast, requires an individual to have the CCC to appreciate, interpret and behave accordingly in paying homage to an original work. Thus, even though an individual may not have artistic institutional capital, he/she may have developed the CCC necessary to be able to obtain pleasure from the aesthetic experience of viewing original artworks exhibited in museums (the emotional dimension). Furthermore, unlike the optimal experience, the unforgettable aesthetic experience appears to be frustrating and a source of disillusionment when repeated.

2.7. Acknowledgements

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3

3. ARTICLE 2:

Art museum visitors: interaction strategies for sharing experiences

3.1. Abstract

Prior research into the museum experience has prioritised the study of the visit itself, opposing the individual experience of visitors who attend alone to the social experience of those who attend accompanied. In this research, however, we study the social dimension of the art museum experience holistically, that is, before, during, and after the visit. We gathered data from 21 in-depth interviews, transcribed verbatim and analysed with the aid of CAQDAS tools. Our interpretation suggests that visits to museums alone or accompanied are not universal categories but reflect the strategies of individuals, a finding that has several theoretical and practical implications. In consequence, social and individual experiences do not cancel each other out, but may occur simultaneously

during the visit or at different times and places depending on the visitors' biographies, visit strategies and social restrictions.

Keywords: Art museum experience; museum visitors; social interaction.

3.2. Introduction

3.2.1. The art museum experience

Much scientific research into museum visitors has been based on descriptive studies of visitors' sociodemographic characteristics, revealing that certain social groups—sociocultural classes privileged in terms of education, occupation, and income—are overrepresented among art museum visitors (Bourdieu, 1979; DiMaggio, 1996; DiMaggio, Useem and Brown, 1978). Visiting art museums, suggests Bourdieu (1979), responds as much to an interest in showcasing a privileged position as to internalizing a class habit. In other words, the activity of visiting museums is socially structured.

Dissatisfied with merely describing individuals who visit art museums, however, many researchers have switched to the study of individual experiences, exploring the psychographic characteristics of individuals from a psychological perspective so as to pinpoint their motives for visiting art museums (Graburn, 1980; Hood, 1983; McManus, 1994). Hood (1993, 1994) subsequently combined both these approaches in an analysis that included demographic data and visitor motives, with visitors classified as either frequent or occasional. A notable result of her research is that occasional visitors compared to frequent visitors attach greater

importance to the social interaction that may develop in the museum, considered a social environment for leisure activities. Nevertheless, although researchers have proposed different classifications of visitors' motives (Debenedetti, 2003; Falk and Dierking, 1992, 2000; Hood, 1983, 1994), these classifications still fit within Graburn's (1980) formulation, namely, that people visit museums for reverential, social, and recreational or educational reasons (or for these reasons combined).

Other researchers have focused on the educational dimension of the museum visiting experience (Falk and Dierking, 2000; Kelly, 2007; Leinhardt, Crowley and Knutson, 2002; Sterry and Beaumont, 2006), analysing how expectations and motives influence individual behaviour and the subsequent learning experience (Falk, Moussouri and Coulson, 1998; Falk and Storksdieck, 2010; McManus, 1987, 1994; Packer and Ballantyne, 2002) and describing interactions with other group members while viewing exhibits. In particular, the study by Falk, Moussouri and Coulson (1998) shows that the individual motivations for the visit all have an impact on how, what, and how much the individual learns at the museum. The most frequently studied social learning contexts are family and school groups (Dierking, 1989; Ellenbogen, 2002; Falk and Dierking, 1992; Griffin, 1998; Hood, 1993), with studies suggesting that the family museum experience is a social experience, and, furthermore, that social interaction plays a crucial role in this experience (Falk and Dierking, 1992).

Departing from previous approaches, in our research we specifically analyse the social dimension of the museum experience. Previous research into the social dimension—which assumes the museum to be the only context for a museum

experience (McManus, 1987)—has sought to identify and compare the sociodemographic and motivational conditions for individuals visiting a museum alone or accompanied (Debenedetti, 2001, 2003, 2010; McManus, 1994; Packer and Ballantyne, 2005; Silverman, 1995). These studies describe museum experiences in terms of an individual experience in opposition to a social experience, depending on whether the visitor attended the museum unaccompanied or accompanied, respectively.

The unaccompanied visit is considered to be an intimate, introspective and personal experience. The visitor interacts with the exhibits on an individual level, engages with information at a deeper cognitive level and seeks private moments of self-reflection and personal freedom that will result in tranquillity, cultural enrichment and a special, deep relationship with the exhibited works. The accompanied individual, according to these authors, understands the visit to be a shared social experience, occurring on the margins of everyday life and responsibilities, in which individuals are entertained and mutually enriched, and in which they transfer knowledge—given the possibility of co-constructing the meaning of the art works—and even a sense of security.

Debenedetti (2010) suggests that the social context of a visit is constituted by companions if visiting accompanied, but also by other people present in the museum (visitors and staff), representing the intimate and expanded social contexts, respectively. Research by vom Lehn (2006) and vom Lehn, Heath and Hindmarsh (2001), based on observing and analysing interactions in the extended social context, suggest that visitors produce and coordinate their actions in

exchanges with others who share the same space, whether strangers or otherwise. Bitgood (1993) considers that the presence of other individuals is a social influence that shapes behaviours.

The individual and social experiences are interpreted as either contrasting experiences (Debenedetti, 2003) or complementary experiences (Draper, 1984). Debenedetti (2003) suggests that visitors apply strategies to the management of the social-individual duality of the experience (the public-private experience) when visiting in company or alone (an irreconcilable dichotomy). Draper (1984) suggests, however, that both social and individual experiences co-occur in the museum visit, in that the presence of companions intensifies and extends the museum experience, with the social component ensuring that the experience takes place at a deeper level. Draper (1984), furthermore, suggests that the social dimension of the visit goes beyond the actual time spent in the museum, both for the individual visiting alone and in company.

Draper's framework adopts a holistic perspective on the museum experience, taking into account what happens before, during, and after the visit. Nonetheless, Draper does not study the social dimension in these three phases but focuses on the visit itself, mainly studying individual motives and learning (measured on exiting the museum). The same applies to the research by Falk and Dierking (1992), who also propose a holistic framework for their interactive experience model, suggesting that the museum visit is a physically, intellectually and emotionally rich social experience that begins when the individual considers going to the museum, and extends to the memory of the visit recalled days, weeks, or

years later. However in their study, the social dimension is, once again, restricted to the period of the actual visit.

Falk (2009) later focuses on the identity characteristics of museum visitors. This author, recognising again that the actual time spent in the museum comprises only a small fraction of the time needed to understand the experience, suggests a contextual turn that places visitors' experiences within a holistic and long-term framework of individual life circumstances, relationships and trajectories. Dawson and Jensen (2011) also support the use of a more contextually sensitive model; nonetheless, while acknowledging Falk's proposal, they criticise the fact that the focus is on the institution rather than visitors' lives.

Other researchers have studied visitors' memories (Anderson, 2003; Anderson, Storksdieck and Spock, 2007; Falk and Dierking, 1997; McManus, 1993; Packer and Ballantyne, 2005). Among the results most relevant to our research, Falk and Dierking (1992) and Anderson (2003) suggest that the social context of a visit is the main aspect remembered in later years. Falk and Dierking (1997) further stated that what visitors remember after a year or more is mostly contextual, related to biographies or personal agendas for the visit. Packer and Ballantyne (2005), meanwhile, suggest that there are no differences between narratives regarding the memories of visitors attending museums alone or accompanied.

3.2.2. Limitations of previous research

Research has mainly focused on the social dimension during time spent in museums by visitors attending alone or accompanied, thereby placing in

opposition an individual experience for the former, and a social experience for the latter, while inferring that both conflict. The rooted antithesis is due, in our view, to two implicit premises: (1) the social dimension of the museum experience is reserved for individuals who are accompanied; and (2) the museum experience only occurs within the walls of the museum during the visit.

The first premise assumes both that social interaction takes place exclusively between individuals who attend the museum accompanied, and that unaccompanied visitors do not interact or share their museum experience with anybody else. These propositions imply the following: (1) before or after visiting the museum, individuals do not interact with other individuals in their social circle with whom they can share the experience, though not the visit itself; (2) individuals do not interact with other visitors (strangers) present in the museum and following a similar itinerary (contrary to the studies of vom Lehn, 2006 and vom Lehn, Heath and Hindmarsh, 2001); and (3) individuals do not interact internally in silent conversations with themselves (obviating the studies of Bruder and Ucok, 2000 and Falk and Dierking, 1992) or hold symbolic conversations with the works and their authors (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 1990).

The second premise restricts the museum experience to the actual visit, delimiting the space-time framework of the experience to the period spent inside the museum. In leaving aside the 'before' and the 'after' and focusing only on the 'during', research has assumed that space-time contexts are independent of the museum visiting experience. If we focus only on what happens during the visit, the research suggests that the social experience predominates for the accompanied

visitor, and that the individual experience predominates for the unaccompanied visitor.

Moreover, by limiting the study of the social dimension to what happens within the museum, research is segmenting visitors according to *universal* categories, depending on whether they attend the museum alone or accompanied. These categories therefore draw a distinction between two groups whose sociodemographic properties and motives characterise the individuals in each group. Researchers thus exclude the possibility that visits alone or in company are temporal categories, and that individuals may attend alone or accompanied depending on particular circumstances.

3.2.3. How to solve the limitations of previous research

The research design should permit verification of whether the social and individual dimensions of the museum experience correspond only to during the visit or, on the contrary, whether they also affect the pre-visit and post-visit periods. We thus need to (1) holistically consider the museum experience before, during, and after the visit (if the social and individual dimensions are interrelated, and the museum experience extends to before and after the visit, then interpretations based on research that treats dimensions and contexts of the experience as independent are likely to be biased); and (2) examine the narratives of past experiences, as otherwise it is not possible to know if the experience also extends to before and after the visit. Note that ethnographic observations of what happens inside museums, aimed at studying the museum experience of individuals (Bruder and Ucok, 2000), are limited in this regard.

3.3. Methodology

3.3.1. Research aim

We describe the art museum experience for visitors holistically, that is, before, during and after the visit. This holistic approach will enable us to determine whether the spaces and moments in time in which an experience occurs are independent, whether the social and individual dimensions of an experience take place in different space-time contexts, and under what conditions the experience takes place.

3.3.2. Epistemology and theoretical framework

We framed our research in the constructivist paradigm (Crotty, 1998; Lincoln and Guba, 1994), which suggests that there is no universal truth or meaning in social phenomena awaiting discovery (Geertz, 1973 [1981]; Schwandt, 1994). Rather, human beings construct meaning for social phenomena—like the museum experience—and try to make sense of them through a process of interaction with people and objects in the context in which the social phenomenon occurs (Crotty, 1998).

Of the different theories framed in the constructivist/interpretive paradigm (Crotty, 1998; Lincoln and Guba, 1994; Schwandt, 1994), our study is framed from the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1966, 1982; Charon, 2001). Symbolic interactionism proposes that individuals interact with objects and other individuals according to meanings produced in previous interactions and according to the cultural codes of individuals (Blumer, 1966,

1982). Thus, the museum experience is built, as reported by Blumer (1966: 539), according to the meanings that the exhibition holds for the individual, produced as the individual interacts symbolically with other individuals and objects before, during and after the visit and then interpreted according to his/her cultural code.

3.3.3. Data collection

An interview protocol (see Appendix) was developed that was flexible enough to adapt to the themes emerging from the narratives and from the analysis. This protocol covered the social and individual dimensions of the museum experience before, during and after the visit, and also took account of the sociocultural backgrounds of the interviewees. The interviews were conducted in Spanish or Catalan, lasted between 60 and 105 minutes, and they were digitally recorded. The interviews were carried out simultaneously with the analysis over a period of approximately one year (early 2008 to early 2009), and in different contexts (home of the interviewee or interviewer, cafés or offices) in the province of Barcelona (Spain). Respondents were guaranteed their anonymity, and were informed of the purpose of research and of their right to terminate the recording if they wished. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim with the help of speech recognition software.

We started by selecting individuals who had visited at least one art museum in the previous year (according to the 'Encuesta de hábitos y prácticas culturales en España 2010-11-Síntesis de resultados' [Spanish 2010-2011 Survey of Cultural Practices and Habits] of the Ministerio de Cultura [2011], only three in ten Spaniards visited a museum or art gallery at least once a year). We then used the

snowballing strategy (Patton, 2002) to access additional informants, that is, a participant 'recruited' another informant who had also visited an art museum; theoretical sampling thus guided the screening of additional informants. Our final sample consisted of 21 informants heterogeneous in terms of age, gender, occupation, frequency and artistic knowledge (see Table 1). Museum visit frequency was noted as fewer than three visits or as three or more visits per year—the cut-off point that Hood (1994) used to differentiate between occasional and assiduous visitors.

3.3.4. Analysis

The data analysis commenced with open coding that allowed us to create initial categories describing the experiences of our interviewees. By means of constant comparison between the incidents in a category, we generated theoretical properties for analytical categories that led to axial coding (Strauss, 1987). This process enabled us to develop main analytical categories as follows: visitor biographies, visitor interaction strategies and museum experience content.

We then examined each category to identify conditions and contexts to explain the observed variations in biographies, strategies and content. Via constant comparison, we gradually refined the analytical categories and were also able to establish relationships between properties and dimensions. Thus, for example, the category of 'suitable companion' emerged to link biographies with strategies.

We continued selectively coding to refine the analytical categories and integrate the descriptions of the interviewees' experiences. In this phase, having determined

the central research category to be the 'social dimension of the museum experience', we launched a process of abstraction to organize analytical categories around this concept. The selection of informants and the coding of their narratives terminated when the new informants provided no additional information that could change the interpretations.

We then implemented a process of double interpretation: interviewees interpreted their own experience through their narratives, and researchers interpreted interviewees' narratives taking into account all available data (the narratives of other informants, interviewee behaviour if observed and recorded, theories and knowledge about contexts). The double interpretation represented instances of the way individuals share their experiences of visiting museums (Crotty, 1998). Our findings can, therefore, be generalised according to the logic of social representativeness defined by the theoretical sampling criteria, and not according to statistical logic. Theoretical generalisability is a function of the regularities of a particular phenomenon and the social context that produces it (Gobo, 2004: 451-453).

The analysis was performed with the help of MaxQDA software for computer-aided qualitative data analysis (Kuckartz, 2007). We followed the analytical procedure for coding and forming categories described by Kelle (1995) when using data analysis software. The MaxQDA system based on memoranda and visual software tools was especially useful for our analysis; the former facilitated the construction and management of our repository of common descriptions of experiences which

provided the segments of texts linked to categories, and the latter allowed us to visualise relationships between the emerging theoretical concepts.

3.4. Results

Holistic interpretation of the museum experiences of our informants suggests that, unaccompanied or accompanied art museum visits are not universal categories but strategies. To describe the museum experience and explain how interaction strategies relate to individual backgrounds, we made use of *biography* as an analytical category for the informants. This category links the different interaction strategies and enables us to explain the differences encountered in the museum experience content.

3.4.1. Biographies

The descriptions of experiences revealed how some of our informants had extensive experience of visiting art museums. These informants visited museums regularly (every month, approximately) and described the visits as a 'habit', that is, as a recurrent activity in their daily lives. They acknowledged themselves, to quote Víctor, an art centre employee, to be 'frequenters of museums, galleries and artists'. They visited museums abroad and at home, and at home, they visited nearly all exhibitions that were scheduled.

This large body of experiences was also reflected in the numerous works and artists mentioned in the interviews, in informants' descriptions of museum experiences, and in the chronological range and stylistic variation of the art works

to which the informants referred. They also cited works and artists that do not usually feature in the media, such as Bandinelli, Patinir, Madrazo, Sean Scully, Hannah Collins and Alfredo Jaar. Their knowledge of museums was also vast and their accounts of their experiences were correspondingly elaborate: they described visits in great detail and were capable of accurately placing works in museums and galleries.

Juan Manuel, for example, a retired textile engineer, was able to place the Laocoön Group and Dürer's *Adam and Eve* in the Uffizi Gallery, the *Rosetta Stone* in the British Museum and Turner's *The Fighting Temeraire Tugged to her Last Berth to be Broken Up* in the National Gallery. Furthermore, he could even distinguish between different areas or rooms in museums, for instance, 'the Richelieu Wing in the Louvre' or, in reference to Madrazo's *Countess of Vilches,* the 'Casón del Buen Retiro' (part of the Prado Museum).

Visitors also revealed the social properties of their biographies during their interviews, providing insights to their social circle and referring to people who visited museums with them and who shared their interest in art. Despite their general perception of having a reduced social circle associated with art, these individuals mentioned numerous people (family, work colleagues and friends) with whom they shared museum experiences and visited museums.

We also observed individuals whose biographies were shaped by occasional art museum experiences. These individuals indicated that they 'are not in the habit of looking out for an exhibition every week', and alleged a lack of time to justify what they believed was limited visit frequency (one or two visits a year). This occasional

attendance resulted in a narrow range of museums, works and artists cited; primarily mentioned were universally known painters such as Picasso, Dali and Van Gogh, and art works like *Guernica*, the *Mona Lisa,* and *Las Meninas*. The comments of these visitors regarding museums and art works lacked precision, and were usually related to the perceptual qualities of the works. Such individuals, for example, noted colour, shape, lighting, composition, size, brushstroke type, and so on, that is, the visually recognisable aspects of art work. Joaquim, a 27-year-old physiotherapy student who admitted 'not having a long history of going to museums', commented on his favourite work of art, *The Scream* by Edvard Munch, as follows:

> The face of the scream, it's dramatic, and it happens in a place where there should be no drama because you see the bridge, the sky so red and, behind, two people walking, so the situation is not at all dramatic. However, the situation that the central figure in the picture is experiencing is dramatic. I don't know, I haven't studied the work or anything, I'm saying what I think about the work, there must be a story behind it.

In this case, and despite this being his favourite painting, the respondent did not have a thorough understanding of the work, admitted to not having studied it, and referred exclusively to formal visual and perceptual aspects for which no specific artistic code or language is necessary.

The social biography of these informants revealed a social circle (mostly friends and family) that included few people who shared their interest in art. Rather than

refer to individuals with whom they shared their experiences, they pointed to the lack of interest of most members of their circle. This was illustrated by Jaume, a financial reports technician with a recently developed interest in the arts: 'Not many people [are interested], to be honest; my brother doesn't care, he has virtually no interest, my colleagues have little interest, they don't like it much. [I share this] with few friends.'

3.4.2. Strategies

The results suggest that individual biographies influence the interaction strategies used to share each stage of the museum experience. Visitors who presented their biographies in terms of regular art museum experiences described the activity as having before, during and after phases. All individuals coincided in their interest in sharing the experience. As Juan Manuel said, 'any visit to a museum if shared is wonderful.'

We observed that, prior to the visit, these individuals were already beginning to shape the museum experience. Decisions were made and information was sought regarding which exhibition to visit, when to go and whether to go alone or accompanied. The information sought may be rudimentary (museum schedule, exhibition times and costs) or detailed (the exhibition and the art works). The means used to obtain this information to document the visit were also varied, mainly the press, the Internet and other individuals in their social circle.

The individual sometimes sought the information alone, and on other occasions did so by communicating with other individuals. In the first case, the visitor

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interacted socially with him/herself, reflecting on the exhibition to be attended, and even imagining how it would turn out: 'Beforehand you always have expectations or try to imagine how it will be, right? Whether it will be any good or no good', stated Claudia, a 28-year-old visitor with arts training. The alternative strategy for sharing the museum experience, as data indicated, was the interaction with members of the social circle, in a two-way interaction in which opinions on the visited exhibition and on future exhibitions were exchanged. According to Juan Manuel:

> I talked to a person who had been before and we shared the experiences all over again with someone who's going and [who wants] you to explain your experiences and your views and anything else that maybe they don't know but that you think is important.

The strategy chosen to share the in-museum experience appeared to depend on the ease with which an individual could find a suitable companion. These individuals attended exhibitions accompanied and unaccompanied with similar frequency; they even contradicted themselves when they expressed their preferences; Ester, for example, a 60-year-old chemical engineer with no artistic training, said that 'going with someone is nicer', yet later in the same interview said that 'sometimes going alone is preferable'. Our data suggested that the choice depended on the companion available. Although sharing the experience may be wonderful, not just any individual serves as an appropriate companion. In Juan Manuel's words, the companion must be a 'valid interlocutor'. This ideal partner should, like them, have the artistic language needed to discuss the works of art,

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that is, a common language with which to share the experience. Ester commented as follows: '[I want] a person who understands, who has a level that enables them to comment'. Marc, an expert in contemporary art, had this to say on the same topic: 'In my circle, [I share the experience with] my wife, because she has more or less the same level of knowledge.'

The interviewees explained that they also sought, as a companion, an individual with whom to share the pleasure of viewing art works, who appreciates art and with a similar capacity for an emotional exchange during the experience: 'I like to go with someone, accompanied by someone with energy, who likes art and who likes to enjoy themselves, like me', explained Juan Manuel. The content of the interaction that took place during the museum visit embraced cognitive and emotional dimensions, stated our informant: 'There is information and feeling … but one thing is linked to the other.'

In short, according to data, informants used to visiting art museums, tried to do so accompanied by individuals, who were cognitively and emotionally like themselves. As companions they had comparable artistic knowledge and liked to share the experience through a fluid exchange of emotions. In this way, they participate in social interaction that meets their needs. In the case of professionals working in museums, we found that the solution, as indicated by Ferran, a modern art expert, was to seek a peer, because they felt 'the need to share the aesthetic experience with other people in the profession'. When these individuals could not locate a suitable companion, they preferred to forego sharing the in-museum experience and make the visit unaccompanied, at their own pace, interacting with

their own thoughts, and interpreting the experience for themselves. What is remarkable is that these individuals did not refer to social interactions with other (unknown) individuals in the museum.

In the post-visit phase, data suggested that social interaction increased among individuals as they commented on and shared their museum experience more widely. If the visitor made the visit unaccompanied, then he/she transferred the interaction to another context, both spatially and temporally, and shared the experience in his/her social circle when an opportunity presented itself. However, interaction also increased after the visit for accompanied visitors. These individuals, in fact, preferred to share their experience and comments after leaving the museum; in the words of Ferran, 'the shared experience comes into being after walking round an exhibition alone.' The fact that social interaction occurred in this phase suggests that the museum experience extends beyond the time actually spent inside the museum. Moreover, the experience may be extended over a lengthy period of time, as interaction may occur in disparate moments that are not necessarily immediate to the visit. Individuals maintain the interaction in a self-reflective manner with the help of aids, for example, purchasing the exhibition catalogue so as to enhance the experience at home and recall it in the future. The experience can also be shared, as something ordinary and routine, in conversations at different times and places, as Gabriel, a 34-year-old economist and regular art museum visitor, related: 'If I'm with people who have not seen the exhibition, at a dinner or a meal, and we're chatting, so hey, what have you been doing and such, well, in such cases [I share the experience].'

Comparisons of the descriptions of experiences revealed that participants with biographies based on occasional art museum visitors considered the visit to be the beginning of the experience; that is, there was no pre-visit phase. Before attending an exhibition these individuals did not seem to be aware of living the museum experience; they did not usually prepare or plan the visit, and they did not usually collect information on the exhibition. As Julio, a sociology student, pointed out, 'there is no prior ritual.' The visit, usually, occurred spontaneously in response to some form of advertising or a recommendation by someone in the individual's social circle, and not as the result of any voluntary search, as Carlota, a 26-year-old financial analyst, reported: 'I didn't find out for myself, no, I was told it [the exhibition] was good and so I just went.'

According to the evidence, for these individuals the experience began inside the museum, that is, during the visit itself, when they sought to share the experience with their companion. 'The fun is commenting during [the exhibition]', stated Julio. Hence, the interaction strategy adopted was always the accompanied visit, as Lucía, a political analyst with a biography revealing occasional art museum experiences, argued: 'It's a shared experience for me because I've always been accompanied, it's an experience you share with someone else'. Although these individuals (as we saw earlier) had a social circle limited in terms of art enthusiasts (hence the difficulty of finding a companion), they admitted that they always visited museums accompanied.

The choice of companion seems to influence the type of interaction when sharing the experience. Our informants pointed to their companion being either a museum

visitor with similar experiences or a regular visitor with advanced artistic knowledge. In the first case, individuals sought a companion who resembled them and with a similar level of art knowledge, as Carlota's words reveal: 'I went with two friends, we were discussing what they thought, and I realised they, like me, were not very interested in the subject [art in general]'. This strategy allowed visitors to share the museum experience in a well-balanced interchange regarding their perceptions during the visit. In this regard, Joaquim stated:

> [You want] a person who ideally shares your taste, because if you go to an exhibition that you very much like with another person who doesn't like it, you lose the magic of the interaction, it's best to see things you both like.

The social dimension predominated in these visitors' museum experiences, which, as we can see in the next extract from Julio's interview, were lived as leisure activities:

> I went with a friend who does not usually visit museums. He came round because it was Sunday and I said, hey, what do you think? Let's go see Picasso. And he came with me, he didn't find it too bad and we could talk a bit about what we saw.

In terms of content, this kind of social interaction was based on a simple exchange of opinions and value judgments about works of art—what Lucía described as 'throwaway comments regarding whether you liked it or not.' The conversations did not last long, informants said, because they felt unable to interact and

'uncertain regarding what to say.' One informant, Joaquim, stated: 'I couldn't spend five hours talking about art because I haven't a clue, and much less of any specific exhibition. I don't think I know enough about art to talk at any length about it.'

The second strategy reported by our informants aimed to overcome such limitations by seeking a companion with museum experience who could explain and help them understand the art works. Interaction with a companion in this case may lead to a deeper cognitive understanding of the exhibition. Joaquim commented regarding his companion:

> She understands much more than I, she knows of authors I have no idea about, she studied art history and knows much more than me. I feel sure that she'll compensate for my failings and that she'll tell me things that interest me.

Noteworthy is the fact that this museum visitor referred to feeling 'sure', and later 'tranquil', confident that his companion—in possession of the code needed to interpret a work of art—would facilitate interaction with the exhibits. However, visitors also referred to the need for their more artistic companions to speak using understandable language—to be 'accessible experts', as pointed out by Irene, a 42-year-old administrative worker who admitted going only occasionally to art museums, mostly with her family. That is, understandable expressions should be used that aid the production of meaning from interactions both with the art works and with the companion.

Since these individuals sought social interaction, whether to share the experience or to share the knowledge that would enable them to interpret the art works, visiting alone was not their preferred strategy; they reported no experiences of this kind despite claiming not to mind visiting museums unaccompanied. The reason given for visiting museums in company was precisely their limited artistic skills, according to informants' narratives, as the words of Xema, a social sciences teacher, exemplify: 'Since my artistic knowledge is limited, I won't go alone. I'll see the Modigliani retrospective [with my partner].' Nevertheless, these individuals said, they would visit the museum alone—despite not having artistic knowledge— if they had specific and relevant social contextual knowledge that would enable them to interpret the exhibits. Lucía admitted not visiting art exhibitions unaccompanied due to a lack of art knowledge, yet, she said she felt able to go alone to a history exhibition because she had a smattering of history knowledge. The unaccompanied visit, therefore, might require something more than a contextual understanding in order to be able to interpret the exhibition:

> When they hold exhibitions of this type [on the Civil War] there is no excuse and I would go alone really. I didn't go alone in the end, but I would have, probably because I know more about history than art history.

After the visit, social interaction decreased again in these interviewees. Some narratives showed that there was some interaction between visitors immediately after the visit, when they discussed the exhibition and shared their opinions briefly; however, most individuals who made accompanied visits and whose

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biographies reflected occasional art museum experiences preferred to make comments during, and not after, the visit ('especially during... and maybe in the two hours after'). In the absence of reports indicating that these individuals shared their museum experiences over time and beyond the space-time contexts immediate to the visits, we can infer that they no longer shared their museum experiences once a certain period of time had elapsed and, therefore, these experiences played a minor role in their daily lives.

3.4.3. Content

The content of the museum experience seemed to vary according to both biography and interaction strategies. From the narratives of the informants we can deduce that, for visitors with a biography revealing regular interaction with art works, the content of the experience had both individual and social dimensions inserted before, during and after the museum visit, depending on the interaction strategy chosen. If the strategy was the unaccompanied visit (maybe because of the difficulty in finding a 'valid interlocutor'), the two dimensions were experienced at different times; whereas if the visit was made accompanied, the two dimensions could be experienced simultaneously during the visit and also at other times. For these visitors the individual experience was particularly marked during the visit; the visitor was able to interpret the art works and, irrespective of whether they were unaccompanied or accompanied, the focus was on appreciation of the exhibition, including, for example, 'the exhibition discourse, its coherence, the quality of the art works and the presentation and lighting', as Ferran commented in his interview. The autotelic nature of the museum

experience was evident in that its goal was none other than that of 'enjoying the exhibition' and the art works, following the itinerary, and flowing with it: 'the art works, nothing else, it's the quality of the works that determines the satisfaction,' said Marc.

In accompanied visits, individuals interacted with their companions by sharing the experience. The enjoyment obtained from the individual dimension was added to that of a social sharing of emotions. For unaccompanied visits, individuals sought to round out the experience by interacting with other individuals in their social circle before and after the visit. Thus, the content of the experience for these individuals encompassed both the individual and social dimensions, but they enjoyed the experience most when they could share their experience during the visit. The second-best strategy—going unaccompanied—displaced the social dimension mainly to the periods before and after the visit.

The content of the experience for the informants who described themselves as occasional visitors was primarily focused on sharing the experience during the visit. Despite our having specifically asked informants about their experiences in art museums, the narratives also referred to cultural activities in other fields, such as theatre, music, opera and literature, with respondents saying that they liked 'sampling different kinds of art and culture,' and doing so in the company of other individuals. We can, therefore, deduce that these individuals valued a museum visit as an opportunity to participate in a shared cultural activity. These informants, in their accounts of museum experiences, did not specifically refer to the exhibition as the reason for enjoying the visit, but to indicators of social interaction during

the visit, such as the fact of 'sharing [the experience] and commenting on it and killing an afternoon.'

The data suggested that the pre- and post-visit phases were of secondary importance for these individuals, since their enjoyment depended on social interaction during the visit. To enhance enjoyment, they would appreciate a companion with enough artistic knowledge to help them interpret artworks. The unaccompanied visit was not their strategy to enjoy the visit, first, because they could not share the experience and, second, because alone they lacked the necessary artistic knowledge to enjoy the visit.

3.5. Discussion and conclusion

Following recent proposals for museum visitor experience research (Dawson and Jensen, 2011; Falk, 2009), we adopted a holistic approach that extended beyond the visit itself. We have provided evidence that the museum experience has a social dimension for accompanied, as well as unaccompanied visitors. For the latter, the evidence suggests that the social dimension exists, in particular, before and after the visit. Thus, the space-time framework of the museum experience extends beyond the boundaries of the museum. These results highlight the limitations of research that focuses on the space-time framework of the museum visit in itself (see, for example, Hood, 1993 and McManus, 1994). Our results indicate that, when we consider the experience holistically, that is, including before, during and after the museum visit (as proposed by Dawson and Jensen, 2011; Draper, 1984; Falk, 2009; and Falk and Dierking, 1992), the space-time contexts are linked and affect

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our interpretation of the experience. Consequently, investigating them independently could lead to biased interpretations.
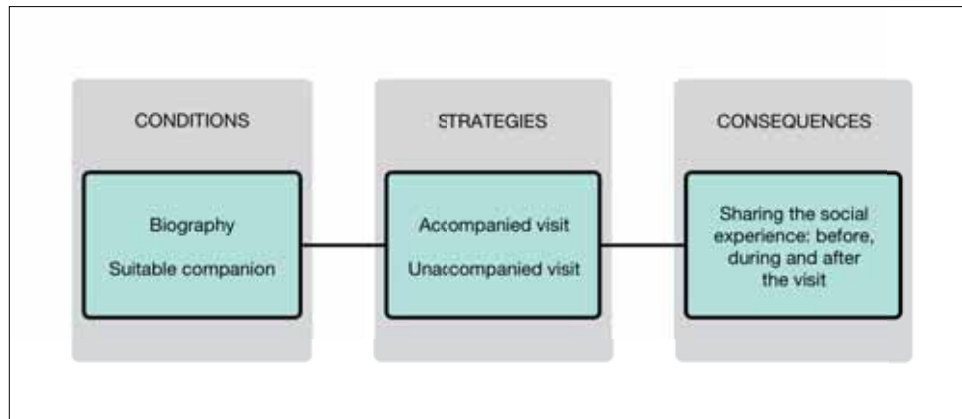

Figure 1. The building blocks of the social dimension of the art museum experience

Our description shows that unaccompanied or accompanied art museum visits are not universal categories, but alternative strategies that depend on the personal biography of the individual (see Figure 1). Thus, visitors are strategic agents (as Falk, 2009 and Rounds, 2004 suggest) who play temporal roles in order to equip the museum experience with a social dimension. The narratives of the respondents reveal preferences for accompanied museum visits, but their biographies hinder or facilitate, as the case may be, the possibility of locating what they would consider to be a suitable companion. This 'valid interlocutor', to use one informant's words, is defined in different ways depending on the individual's biography. Hence, individuals with biographies reflecting an extensive museum experience and in possession of sophisticated artistic language point to greater difficulties in locating a suitable companion with a similar biography to share the experience. If this companion can be found, the strategy is to visit the museum accompanied;

otherwise the visit is unaccompanied, and the strategy is to locate the social dimension temporally in the periods before and after the visit, and spatially outside the museum. However, unlike vom Lehn, Heath and Hindmarsh (2001) and vom Lehn (2006), we found no evidence of interactions with other unknown individuals visiting the museum; nor did we find evidence of symbolic interactions with the exhibits, with their authors (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 1990), or with themselves (Bruder and Ucok, 2000; Falk and Dierking, 1992). On the other hand, individuals with biographies reflecting occasional art museum experiences and who use everyday language to talk about art, temporally and spatially place the social experience within the museum. These individuals also seek a suitable companion to share the experience, either someone with a similar biography, or someone whose biography reflects extensive art museum experiences who can aid them to interpret the art works—but provided the language they use does not underline the difference in biographies or complicate the interaction. In other words, as found by Anderson (2003), Anderson, Storksdieck and Spock (2007), and Falk and Dierking (1997), the content of the visitor's experience was related to the strategy used for the visit.

Our holistic vision of the museum experience highlights the fact that the traditional opposition between the social and the individual museum visit experience (Debenedetti, 2001, 2003; Hood, 1983; McManus, 1987, 1994; Packer and Ballantyne, 2005; Silverman, 1995) is nothing more than an artefact resulting from studying exclusively what happens during the museum visit. Our evidence shows the following: (1) the social and individual dimensions can be lived by the same

individual, simultaneously as well as at different times and in different places, depending on the visitor's biography and visit strategy; (2) going to the museum unaccompanied or accompanied are strategies chosen according to the visitor's biography and social context; and (3) both dimensions contribute to the enjoyment associated with the experience, and whether the social dimension takes place before, during, or after the visit simply, depends on the visit strategy.

Regarding the social dimension of the museum experience, the research literature has placed in opposition the social experience and the individual experience of individuals depending on their condition as accompanied or unaccompanied visitors, respectively (Debenedetti, 2001, 2003; Hood, 1983; McManus, 1987, 1994; Packer and Ballantyne, 2005; Silverman, 1995). However, our research shows that the museum experience is always social in that it is invariably shared, and also that the social dimension is not limited to visits made in the company of others. The experience can also be shared at times other than during the visit itself—that is, before and after visiting the museum— and this is the case irrespective of whether the visit was made alone or accompanied.

Finally, our main conclusion is that going alone or accompanied are not universal categories, but interaction strategies that help individuals displace the individual and social dimensions, and so enjoy better the museum experience. We show that going alone or accompanied are simply strategies that, combined with visitors' biographies, influence the way visitors experience their museum visit. The research goal, then, is not just to describe the properties of individuals that visit museums alone or accompanied, but also to understand why individuals

sometimes go alone and sometimes go with a companion. In other words, visiting a museum unaccompanied or accompanied is not an individual's property, but an interaction strategy chosen according to certain conditions. These strategies, moreover, have theoretical and practical consequences regarding (1) the sharing of the museum experience and (2) the interrelatedness of the experiences before, during and after the visit.

Concretely, managers might take advantage of separating the study of visitors' reactions to a particular exhibition from understanding the visitors' experiences. The former can help managers to prepare a particular exhibition, whereas the latter will help them to define museum long-term goals and services. Studying visitors' experiences means interpreting how they enjoy the museum experience, and it goes even further than measuring their reactions to particular exhibitions; it requires acknowledging that the categories *going accompanied* or *unaccompanied* are not universal categories but visitors' strategies. Then, depending on the strategy chosen, visitors' experiences might extend beyond the four walls of a museum. Considering that the before, during and after the visit are not isolated phases, means that the services in each phase interact with each other. For instance, designing a Web site with activities that relate to each stage of the experience could allow visitors to be linked better to the exhibition and the experience in general. Furthermore, museum managers could even mobilise the association of museum friends or local art students to influence individuals' strategies of visiting the museum.

3.6. Acknowledgements

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Interviewee	Age	Sex	Occupation	General education	Artistic education	Art museum Visits/year
José Manuel	62	Male	Retired	Textile engineering degree	No	≥3
Ester	60	Female	Full-time chemical engineer	Chemistry degree Engineering degree	No	≥3
Gabriel	34	Male	Full-time economist	Business degree	No	≥3
Claudia	28	Female	Humanities Ph.D student, part-time cultural management worker	Humanities degree	Some art history courses as part of degree	≥3
Xema	40	Male	Full-time secondary social sciences teacher	Social science degree	No	≥3
Marc	55	Male	Contemporary art lecturer. Ex-art museum manager	Art history degree. Master in art theory and aesthetic ideas	Art history degree. Master in art theory and aesthetic ideas	≥3
Julio	27	Male	Sociology student	Sociology degree (ongoing)	No	<3
Eduardo	56	Male	Full-time lawyer	Law degree	No	<3
Jaume	27	Male	Full-time finance accounts technician	Business degree	No	<3
Karina	42	Female	Business management Ph.D. student	Business degree	No	<3
Albert	31	Male	Civil servant (culture department)	Political science degree	No	<3

Carlota	26	Female	Full-time financial analyst	Economics degree	No	<3
Flora	56	Female	Employment in different art institutions	Art history degree	Art history degree and contemporary art specialism	≥3
Víctor	54	Male	Writer and art centre manager	Philology degree (ongoing)	Informal education (raised among artists)	≥3
Joaquim	27	Male	Physiotherapy student	Physiotherapy degree (ongoing)	No	<3
Lucía	26	Female	Full-time political analyst	Political science degree	No	<3
Lorena	29	Female	Press officer (political party)	Audiovisual communication degree	No	<3
Tina	55	Female	Art museum manager. Museology lecturer	History and anthropology degree. Master in cultural heritage and museology	Master in cultural heritage and museology	≥3
Lyss	36	Female	Part-time English tutor	Psychology degree (ongoing)	No	<3
Ferran	54	Male	Art museum department manager. Modern art lecturer	Art history degree	Art history degree	≥3
Irene	42	Female	Full-time administrative clerk	Vocational studies in administration	No	<3

Table 1: Interviewee profiles.

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4. Discussion

The two articles included in this thesis have contributed to knowledge regarding the art museum visitor's experience by examining the emotional dimension and the social dimension. In both cases, however, the research focus — bearing in mind different contexts — is the study of individual experiences before, during and after the museum visit so as to ultimately provide a holistic view of the experience.

The narratives of art museum visitors who shared their experiences with us form the basis for most of our data. Personal interviews referring to their experiences enabled us to deepen our understanding at the individual level and to subsequently analyse interpretations via constant comparison. This methodological approach to the museum experience enabled us to study the museum visiting experience in its full temporal range and so consider whether there was any relationship between the different dimensions of the experience.

Asking participants about past museum experiences uncovers information on pre-visit and post-visit aspects, to be added to details of the visits themselves. In the

first article we describe experiences marked by their high emotional intensity; in the second article we describe the social dimension of the museum visit, before, during and after it took place. In-depth interviews allowed us to describe both these aspects. If we had used another approach to obtaining in situ data, e.g., observation, we would not have been able to reflect the actual moment of the intense experience (the first article) or record the moments before or after the visit (the second article).

The two articles contribute transversal knowledge on culture consumption by art museum visitors, with the results yielding information about the museum experiences of visitors, about the conditions in which the experience unfolds and about the satisfaction experienced. Together they provide evidence of how an individual's social and cultural context can influence their museum experience. We can thus describe the conditions that give rise to different experiences of visiting a museum — even in the same individual when their sociocultural context changes.

4.1. The unforgettable aesthetic experience: the relationship between the originality of artworks and local culture

The most important contribution of the first article is its definition of the concept of an "unforgettable aesthetic experience", as distinct from four other experiences described in the literature: the iconic experience (Alexander, 2008a,b), the optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 1990), the extraordinary experience (Arnould and Price, 1993) and the peak experience (Celsi et al., 1993).

The unforgettable aesthetic experience is characterized by its high emotional intensity and duration in time. Most individuals who live an unforgettable aesthetic experience refer to sensations such as a distorted sense of time, transcendence of the ego and a fluid and absorbing experience. Not all individuals report having such an experience, so a comparative analysis enabled us to describe the pre-conditions for the unforgettable aesthetic experience, as follows: (1) the individual is aware that they are viewing an original artwork; and (2) the individual possesses adequate contextual cultural capital (CCC) to interpret the cult value of an artwork in its local context.

From these two premises we can deduce that the content and impact of the aesthetic experience may vary according to the individual and to the artwork — a conclusion that would indicate this experience to be similar to the iconic experience described by Alexander (2008a,b). Both the iconic experience and the unforgettable experience are lived by viewers able to assign a cult value to the artwork (Benjamin, 1955), typically socially awarded in a particular community. Attributing this value opens up the experience at the emotional level.

Thus, in line with cultural sociology theories, we can say that artworks have an emotional impact that depends on the individual's ability to interpret its value. The experience will differ depending on the work (its relative cult value) and on the individual (who should have adequate CCC to interpret this cult value). The fact that the experience varies among individuals is consistent with conclusions by Griswold (1987), who showed how the meaning ascribed to literary works changes depending on the social context of the reader.

Our work also shows that CCC affects the viewer's perception of content and, consequently, the associated emotional intensity of the aesthetic experience. Thus, individuals with the CCC that enables them to interpret and decipher the value of an artwork will be able to attribute it with cult value and so will live an unforgettable aesthetic experience; in contrast, individuals who only enjoy the perceptual properties of an artwork will attribute it with exhibition value and will live an ordinary aesthetic experience.

The notion of an emotional charge in the unforgettable experience also calls to mind the optimal experience described by Csikszentmihalyi (1988). While both experiences elicit emotion and produce intense pleasure, the content and the conditions necessary to experience that pleasure are different in each. The optimal experience — which requires the individual to have the necessary skills to perform an activity — is characterized as having an end in itself, with the perceived pleasure or satisfaction increasing in parallel with difficulty and with skill acquisition. Csikszentmihalyi, using the example of players with superior or inferior skills to their rivals in chess, argued that the activity will lead either to boredom (more skilled player) or to anxiety or frustration (less skilled player). Balanced difficulty-skill levels render the experience fluid, with the emotional intensity increasing in line with both. In the optimal experience, therefore, the intellectual dimension prevails: specific knowledge is necessary to ensure a pleasant experience. It is for this reason that Csikszentmihlayi and Robinson (1990) chose to study art viewing experiences as reported by art experts.

However, the fact that the emotional dimension (especially) also came into play for these experts, calls into question the predominance of the intellectual dimension.

Our research extends the results of Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) in that we characterize the unforgettable aesthetic experience, which, unlike the optimal experience, is outstandingly emotional. To experience the intense emotion of the unforgettable experience, the individual needs to have adequate CCC to interpret and appreciate the cult value of an original artwork. Given that this experience occurs in individuals who are not art experts, we understand that the artistic institutional capital — as legitimized by academic certificates — referred to by Bourdieu (1987) is not, in fact, a pre-condition. The individual will live an unforgettable aesthetic experience if they have adequate CCC — even if acquired through life experiences (cf. Bourdieu's embedded capital) — and if they are sufficiently aware of the originality of the artwork to interpret its cult value.
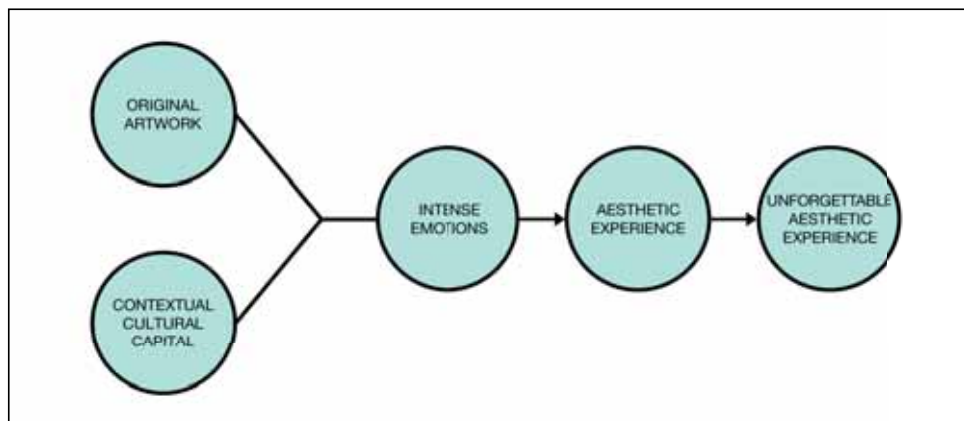

Figure 1. The unforgettable aesthetic experience.

We can thus summarize the two conditions for an unforgettable aesthetic experience as the possession of adequate CCC and awareness of viewing an original artwork (Figure 1).

The emotional content of the unforgettable aesthetic experience derives from both the individual's awareness of viewing an original, socially valued artwork and their capacity to pay tribute to the artist and to the society that values it. The original artwork is understood to acquire meaning that enables the viewer to build an imaginary bridge to the artist and the artist's context. The individual must be able to decipher the artwork in order to imagine this connection with the artist. To paraphrase Alexander (2008a,b), the fact that the viewer is aware of the social significance of the artwork intensifies the emotional experience. The individual retrieves the image of the artist and the artist's context from their own CCC, while the artwork acts as the source of their emotion. The high emotional intensity of the unforgettable aesthetic experience is only evident in individuals with adequate CCC who are aware that they are viewing original artworks. When the viewer is aware that they are viewing a copy, the pleasure is less because the cult value that enables the individual to mentally and emotionally connect with the artist is absent. The experience in this case is an ordinary aesthetic experience.

This emotional component of the unforgettable experience, very much linked to the cult value associated with an original artwork, supports the notion that cultural capital is contextual and/or local, as Geertz (1981) and Griswold (1987) suggest. Our results point to two situations that clearly illustrate this contextual property of cultural capital. The first situation is when an individual switches to a sociocultural

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context which is not their own (e.g., from a European to a non-European context). In this alien context, the viewer with adequate CCC in their own sociocultural context is comparable to an individual with no CCC. Ignorance of certain cultural and social elements restricts their ability to interpret the social value of an artwork, resulting in the individual living a more ephemeral and more ordinary experience marked by moderate emotional intensity. The second situation is when we compare the experiences of an individual visiting an art museum and an art gallery. The museum exhibits are socially valued cultural expressions attributed with the corresponding cult value by individuals with adequate CCC (who will experience the corresponding intense emotions). Art gallery exhibits, however, are usually by artists unknown to the viewer, except in cases where they have the specific CCC that includes those specific works. When the individual is unable to interpret the social meaning of an artwork in an art gallery, they are comparable to someone with inadequate CCC. They consequently tend to focus on the perceptual dimension of the artwork, attribute it with exhibition value and live an aesthetic experience of moderate emotional intensity. We would suggest, therefore, that art museum visitors should not be categorized according to their possession of adequate CCC, as this property does not respond to a fixed typology of viewers but refers to context, which is not fixed: a visitor may have adequate CCC in one environment and not in another.

The unforgettable aesthetic experience is also distinct from the optimal experience in that repetition of the former results in disappointment, whereas repeating an optimal experience is satisfying because it enhances skill. Social theories of

modern hedonism (Campbell, 1989; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982) suggest that the pleasure traditionally derived from the direct consumption of material objects becomes the pleasure of illusions and fantasies offered by rituals of consumption of material objects. According to Campbell (1989), the pleasure is achieved through the meanings transmitted by the objects — a theory underpinning both the iconic experience and the unforgettable aesthetic experience. The modern hedonist is able to use their imagination to conjure up realistic images of situations that produce an emotional reaction and even a pleasant experience. Pleasure can therefore be obtained before, during and after consuming an object. An important feature of modern hedonism is that, in order to experience pleasure in an object or situation, the individual must be aware and must pay attention to their feelings; Csikszentmihalyi (1988) also noted this quality as a prerequisite for an optimal experience. Campbell (1989), however, warns that when the individual fails to realize their fantasies and reality is compared to a mental recreation, the comparison inevitably leads to disappointment — or what Ritzer (1999) refers to as disenchantment.

In our research, however, and contrasting with Campbell's (1989) disappointment and Ritzer's (1999) disenchantment, the consummation of the desire to see the original artwork of a socially valued artist is not necessarily disappointing or disenchanting, but may even be memorable due to the high emotional intensity experienced. Viewers with adequate CCC for decoding and interpreting the sociocultural value of an original artwork report intense experiences that they remember with pleasure many years after originally viewing an artwork they had

dreamed of viewing. However, when the individual tries to repeat the experience of viewing the same artwork, they feel disappointed. Such visitors idealize their memories to such a degree that they are inevitably disappointed when they try to reproduce the same intense emotional and aesthetic pleasure.

Finally, the unforgettable experience is different from both the extraordinary experience (Arnould and Price, 1993) and the peak experience (Celsi et al., 1993). Arnould and Price (1993) investigated the extraordinary experience for whitewater rafting from an ethnographic perspective, whereas Celsi et al. (1993) adopted a phenomenological perspective in studying the peak experience as a high-risk leisure activity involving physical exertion (skydiving). The extraordinary and peak experiences are similar to the iconic, optimal and unforgettable experiences in terms of the high emotional intensity but are especially characterized by a strong social dimension. The extraordinary and peak experiences, as shared experiences, have the goal of forming a community and interacting with other individuals. This feature differentiates them from the unforgettable experience, which is more associated with the notion of personal transcendence. Note, however, that all five experiences — unforgettable, optimal, iconic, extraordinary and peak — share the almost mystical, transcendental nature of extreme enjoyment which enables the individual — through total immersion in the experience — to escape from the mundane.

The extraordinary and peak experiences, like the unforgettable experience, endure in time; they leave their mark because of the associated emotional intensity and personal meaning. Leading to personal growth and reinforcing personal identity,

they are potentially renovating or transforming of the self — even to the point of changing the concept of the self. However, the extraordinary experience is viewed as connected to and in harmony with nature; also, like the optimal experience, it is perceived as a flow. The peak experience, which has no direct link to nature, seeks strong emotions (in the pursuit of danger) over the entire activity. It aims to test personal boundaries and is marked by emotional peaks rather than by the flows observed in the optimal, extraordinary, iconic and unforgettable experiences. Whereas the extraordinary, peak and unforgettable experiences are lasting and are remembered intensely over time, the optimal experience is an autotelic, transitory experience that is enjoyed in the moment.

4.2. Art museum visitors: interaction strategies for sharing experiences

In regard to the second article we highlight methodological and theoretical implications for research into the museum experience.

From a methodological point of view, studying the museum experience requires the following: (1) holistic investigation of the museum visit experience, i.e., considering the periods before, during and after; and (2) analysis of experiences according to individual visitor biographies and contexts.

The theoretical implications are as follows: (1) the three phases of the museum visit experience (before, during and after) are interrelated and depend on each other; and (2) visiting the museum unaccompanied or accompanied is a temporary and not a universal category, as, depending on their circumstances, the same individual may choose to go unaccompanied or accompanied. Both premises also

point to a third theoretical implication: the individual and social dimensions of the museum experience are not necessarily mutually exclusive but may be distributed over time.

 Our results highlight the limitations of the existing literature regarding the museum experience, which has focused exclusively on the spatial-temporal framework of the museum visit itself (Hood, 1993; McManus, 1994). Focusing on the central phase of the experience may lead to biased interpretations — such as limiting the social dimension for individuals who make the visit to the museum accompanied. In line with proposals from researchers such as Falk (2009) and Dawson and Jensen (2011) — following, in turn, Draper (1984) and Falk and Dierking (1992) — we adopted a holistic perspective of the experience, extending it beyond the visit itself to consider pre- and post-visit periods.

We observed that the social dimension of the museum experience unfolds not only during but also before and after the visit, most especially for individuals who visit unaccompanied. This evidence suggests that the spatial-temporal framework of the art viewing experience extends beyond the boundaries of the museum to encompass three distinct but interdependent phases: before, during and after. Addressing these areas in isolation and ignoring their interrelatedness potentially biases interpretations of the experience. In other words, the spatial-temporal context of the experience goes beyond the visit and the museum. Furthermore, it also differs between individuals. The museum experience therefore needs to be considered holistically in terms of the interdependence of all possible spatial and temporal contexts.

Studying individual visitor experiences reveals that visiting a museum unaccompanied or accompanied is not a universal but an ad hoc strategy. The assumption that there are two universal categories of visitors — accompanied and unaccompanied — could lead to biased interpretations. Our results suggest, rather, that going unaccompanied or accompanied are, in fact, strategies that depend on the individual's personal biography and the alternatives available to them for shaping the social dimension of their museum experiences.

Our description of the social dimension shows that individuals choose their strategy according to certain conditions related to the particularities of their biographies and the possibilities of locating a suitable companion. The consequences of choosing one or another strategy can be observed in the temporal distribution of social interactions before, during and after the museum visit (Figure 2).
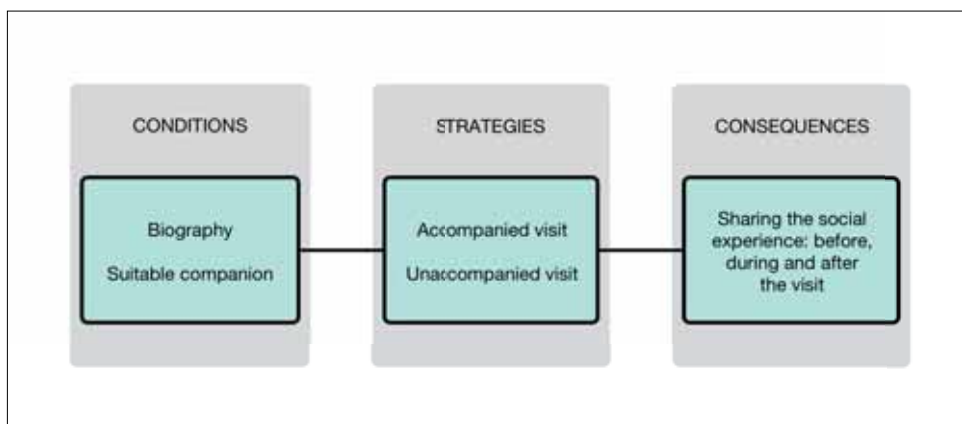

Figure 2. The building blocks of the social dimension of the art museum experience

Although our respondents preferred to be accompanied, this depended on whether they could locate a suitable companion (a "valid interlocutor" in the words of one

interviewee), defined in different ways depending on the biography of each individual.

Individuals with extensive museum experience refer to difficulties in finding suitable companions, understood, in this case, as individuals whose biographies are similar in terms of art experience. If they are unable to find someone suitable, the preferred strategy is to make the visit unaccompanied and to shift the social dimension temporally and spatially to before and after the visit; they thus share the experience through social interaction with other individuals in locations outside the museum. Unlike vom Lehn, Heath and Hindmarsh (2001) and vom Lehn (2006), we found no evidence that unaccompanied museum visitors interact socially, in any conscious way, with other visitors or staff members.

For individuals with biographies reflecting occasional art museum experiences, the ideal companion is defined either as (1) an individual with a similar biography or (2) an expert in art who, adapting to their companion's biography to avoid an imbalance that would make interaction difficult, helps interpret artworks. If an ideal companion is located, these individuals concentrate their social interaction in the spatial-temporal setting of the museum; otherwise they do not visit the museum.

In line with Rounds (2004) and Falk (2009), we can conclude that art museum visitors are strategic agents who decide how they visit museums and when they interact socially. Each new visit involves a new strategic decision, so attending museums unaccompanied or accompanied should be understood, from the visitor's perspective, as an ad hoc strategy, and from the researcher's perspective,

as having no universal meaning. Studying the experiences of art museum visitors requires contextualization at the individual level, marking a shift from traditional divisions of individuals in static, universal categories. As we saw in the first article, experiences vary between visitors but also in the same visitor, as the experience depends on both their biography and their sociocultural contexts.

A final theoretical implication overturns the traditionally perceived opposition between the individual and social dimensions. While the literature tends to contrast the individual experience of unaccompanied visitors and the social experience of accompanied visitors (Debenedetti, 2001, 2003, 2010; Hood, 1983; McManus, 1987, 1994; Packer and Ballantyne, 2005; Silverman, 1995), our results suggest that this duality is the outcome of a restricted vision of the spatial-temporal framework (limited strictly to the visit and the museum). When the three stages of the museum experience are viewed holistically, however, the individual and social dimensions can both coexist in the same visitor and can be distributed throughout the entire experience. The museum experience is thus an inherently social experience, irrespective of the strategy chosen by the individual for the visit. This is because the experience is shared by the visitor, unaccompanied or accompanied, before and/or during and/or after the visit. The social dimension of the museum experience, therefore, expands spatially and temporally.

The particular case in which the individual chooses to make the visit unaccompanied (because they are unable to locate a suitable companion) and so transfer social interactions to the before and after periods, illustrates the interdependence of the three phases. The desire to share the experience leads this

individual to shift social interaction to outside the museum context, so the decision as to visit strategy has a bearing on the before and after periods. If we only consider visitor behaviour during their tour of the museum we deduce that the social dimension is underdeveloped; in contrast, if we consider the three phases, the weight of the social dimension in the overall experience becomes significant.

In conclusion, evidence from our research shows that the individual and social dimensions of a museum visit are not mutually exclusive but can be experienced — depending on their biography and visit strategy — by the same individual during, before and/or after the visit.

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5. Conclusion

The aim of our research was to contribute to understanding the art viewing experience in museums. Adopting a humanistic and social perspective, we addressed the complex relationship between art and humans in their social and cultural contexts. However, instead of studying merely what happens during the visit, we explored the accumulated experiences of viewing art in different museums and in different sociocultural contexts. Our goal was to contribute to the creation of a theory based on the experiences of our informants and so describe and explain both their aesthetic and social experiences in terms that are universal.

We first examined the aesthetic experience from the theoretical framework of cultural sociology. Thus, instead of studying how context influences the production of art (the object of study of the sociology of culture), we studied how art influences the aesthetic experience of individuals. This approach enables art to be described in relation to viewers while taking into account the sociocultural production and consumption contexts.

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Our results indicate that individuals can enjoy an unforgettable aesthetic experience (emotionally intense and lasting in time) when they view art in museums; however, this experience is not dependent on the individuals themselves but on their awareness of the social value of the artwork. Nevertheless, when they switch to a different sociocultural context, these individuals may not enjoy an unforgettable aesthetic experience. This is because their awareness of the social value of the artwork is less. Our results are thus related to the notion of cultural iconicity — referred to by the strong programme of cultural sociology — which considers that artworks have a social value that transforms them into sacralized cultural icons anchored in a concrete temporal-spatial context that individuals recognize and try to experience. In other words, the unforgettable aesthetic experience is fundamentally an intensely emotional experience that socially connects the individual to the significance of a work and to its cultural context.

Hence, in order to live an unforgettable aesthetic experience, the individual must be aware of viewing an original artwork but also should have adequate knowledge of the social value of the artwork (i.e., what we call contextual cultural capital). When the viewer recognizes the cult value of the artwork, they open up to the emotional dimension of the experience, given that they are sufficiently knowledgeable to establish a symbolic bridge with the artist and the artist's context.

Our second article addressed the social dimension of the art viewing experience in museums. Emphasizing a holistic perspective that considers the periods before,

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during and after the museum visit, we studied — as proposed by symbolic interactionism — social interactions with artworks and with other individuals on the basis of meanings produced as a consequence of individuals' previous experiences and interpretations generated through their own cultural codes.

We observed that the social dimension is distributed over the three stages of the museum experience, irrespective of whether the visitor attends the museum unaccompanied or accompanied, and, moreover, that the social dimension may concur with the individual dimension. Going unaccompanied or accompanied does not respond to universal circumstances but is a social interaction strategy that depends on the individual's biography and social context: individuals decide for themselves how the social dimension will be distributed over the entire museum experience. Consequently, we suggest that the before, during and after periods of the museum experience should be studied together because they are interrelated. These results have important theoretical and methodological implications as they challenge current understanding of the social dimension of the art museum experience and suggest that, to study this experience, we must go beyond the museum walls and use other qualitative research methodologies.

Appendix

Appendix

Interview Protocol (translated from Spanish)

1. What kind of art are you interested in? Why?

2. What do you know about art? How has this knowledge evolved over time?

3. Where do you usually go to contemplate art?

4. How did you first come into contact with art museums?

5. In your environment, who shares your interest in visiting art museums?

6. How does that influence you?

7. How do you choose which museums-exhibitions to visit?

8. Over the last year, what museums-exhibitions have you visited?

9. Describe your last visit. What did you visit? Why did you choose it?

10. Before attending, did you think much about the museum-exhibition? How did you feel before, during, and after the visit? Did you talk to anyone?

11. What did you expect to get from your visit?

12. How do you feel generally when you visit an art museum?

13. What does it mean to you to visit a museum?

14. What do you usually do before, during, and after you visit a museum? Have you any particular habits? What museum services do you typically use? Why (not)? And when your visit to the museum ends...?

15. During your visit to a museum, what do you usually enjoy most?

16. What would lead you to visit more art museums? What would lead you to enjoy art museum visits more?

17. Try to remember a time when you especially enjoyed a museum visit. Why was it so enjoyable?

18. What do you feel when before a work of art? And when before a work of art that you like very much?

19. Have you viewed works of art that were not originals? How does a copy make you feel?

20. In your opinion, what does one need to enjoy a visit to an art museum?

21. Generally speaking, what do you get out of visiting art museums?

22. Do you visit art galleries? What do you get from visiting a museum that you do not get from an art gallery?

23. Since you first started visiting museums, how have you changed in the way you appreciate art?

24. What does one need to enjoy a visit to an art museum?

25. What does one need in order to enjoy art?

26. If a friend asked why you visited art museums, what would you answer?

27. What would your ideal companion for visiting art museums be like? Why?

28. How do you share your visits to art museums with others? What is it that you share?

29. When do you usually share your experience of visiting an art museum?

30. Given your own experience, how do you think one should contemplate and appreciate art in museums?

31. How would you define yourself in regard to how you appreciate and enjoy art?

32. In relation to your interest in art, do you belong to any kind of association? Why (not)?

33. Why do you think such associations are necessary or useful?

34. Do you buy art? Why (not)?

35. In the past five years, what paintings have you bought?

36. What leads you to decide to buy a painting?

37. What do you get from buying paintings?

38. After buying a painting, what do you share with others?

39. In your own experience, describe the typical process for buying a painting from a gallery?

40. How do you enjoy the paintings you buy?

41. What does it mean to you to own paintings?

42. What would lead you to buy more paintings?