



Private View? The Organisational Performance of 'Privateness' and 'Publicness' at an Art Gallery

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cus**Laura Harris** 

University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

Abstract

This article takes a cultural approach to analysing the profound privatisation of the public in one of the many places in which it manifests: an art gallery. I argue that, as well as categories of political and economic bearing, 'privateness' and 'publicness' are cultural categories through which lived experiences are made meaningful. They are therefore performable by organisations that have dual public and private accountabilities. I draw on the cultural pragmatics understanding of 'performance' as well as a mesosociological attention to groups to study a private view as one example of such a performance. Through the manipulation of *arenas*, *relations* and *histories* I show how the art gallery staff managed to uphold the meanings of both privateness and publicness at this occasion, and manipulate them according to the different desired outcomes of social contexts. In conclusion, I argue that organisational performances of privateness and publicness are in a dynamic tension with one another; that the performative balancing act is a central part of the day-to-day work of such organisations; and that the cultural approach can help us unravel organisational strategies to paper over the social exclusions that characterise their 'publics'.

Keywords

art gallery, mesosociology, performance, private, public

Introduction

Art galleries are beholden to both privateness and publicness. They are caught in the crossfires of a value system that puts a premium on publicness, an economic context that incentivises privateness, and conflicting histories of art as both a civic good and an asset class. In this, art galleries share a similar position with many other organisations delivering public services under neoliberal conditions: parks (Loughran, 2014; Smith, 2018), schools (Carrasco and Gunter, 2019), hospitals (Jones, 2018), libraries (Blewitt, 2014). Such organisations therefore find themselves in the symbolic wilderness between

Corresponding author:

Dr Laura Harris, Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology, University of Southampton, Building 58, Southampton, SO17 1BJ, UK.

Email: l.harris@soton.ac.uk

publicness and privateness, required to extract value from an apparent publicness while ingratiating and accommodating multiple and considerable vested private interests. The conventional opposition between the public and the private becomes a problem of organisational performance – how can the art gallery make its claim of publicness convincing, while bending to the demands of privateness?

This article is a study of how privateness is performed on-the-ground in a state-funded, non-commercial art gallery where publicness is a highly prized credential. It begins from the premise that, as well as categories of political and economic bearing, ‘privateness’ and ‘publicness’ are cultural categories through which lived experiences are made meaningful. I conduct the study through a focus on private patronage and its attached ‘VIP events’, using the example of a private view that had both invitation-only and public-facing facets. To study this private view, I apply performance theory to organisations (Alexander, 2004), arguing that the social practices of staff combine with spatial and aesthetic strategies to produce the experiential spaces of privateness and publicness. As these performances often depend on cleaving apart the experiences of different groups of people at the same occasion (Wynn, 2016), I analyse them through a mesosociological framework drawn from Gary Fine (Fine, 2010, 2012). Crucially, I will suggest that these performances depend on managing and curating the perceived antagonistic relationship between privateness and publicness.

My intentions in this article are twofold. Firstly, it is an attempt to analyse privateness and publicness as cultural categories, as guiding scripts for interpersonal interactions and organisational performances (Goffman, 1983). This can operate at a remove from the parallel economic or political categories, but is intimately connected to them. This matters because it illuminates how these categories can be manipulated or performed to serve certain interests. The second intention is to combine performance theory (Alexander, 2004) and Fine’s ‘tiny publics’ (Fine, 2010) to offer a cultural sociological approach to studying the social life of organisations. With this, I hope to sharpen our analytical toolkit for studying the deep entanglement of publicness and privateness in our everyday lives.

I begin with a literature review of the private and the public as applied to art galleries. From here, I move on to introducing the performance perspective I bring to this study, as well as the tools that I draw from Gary Fine’s mesosociology: *arenas*, *relations* and *histories* (Fine, 2012: 165–169). These help to explain how categories of meaning, such as ‘private’ and ‘public’, are made salient in interpersonal contexts. After introducing my fieldsite and methods, I detail one gallery in the process of hosting an occasion in which the *arenas*, *relations* and *histories* were highly controlled in order to establish strategically useful spaces of privateness and publicness: a private view. In concluding remarks, I stress that much could be gained by coupling existing approaches to studying organisations that negotiate the tensions between the private and the public through the lens of organisational performance.

Literature Review

Art Gallery Publicness

The public is a core sociological concern, most influentially theorised by Jürgen Habermas (Habermas, 2005; Habermas et al., 1974). Following Habermas, the ‘public

sphere' has come to mean the coming together of (economically) private individuals to debate and participate in the shaping of a shared set of ideas, rules and relations and, collectively, to exert a force on institutions of power and governance (Habermas, 2005). In reality, the word 'public' is put to many uses; as Habermas describes it, the term is a 'clouded amalgam' (Habermas, 2005). 'Public' is used to refer to anything from spaces – including municipal spaces or 'third' spaces like cafés – to communal social arenas like the internet (De Magalhães, 2010: 561), to 'public opinion' (Manza and Brooks, 2012). Publicness has also been shown to come in many 'different shades', as varying 'degrees of 'access', 'actor' and 'interest' bring multiple forms of privateness into the public realm (Akkar, 2005: 16). In many contemporary public spaces, the decreasing role of state actors in favour of private or voluntary actors has been referred to as the 'contracting-out' of publicness (De Magalhães, 2010).

A space is commonly understood as public when it is imagined to furnish a widely distributed set of people with access to a collective asset (whether organised through the state or otherwise): a park, a library, a municipal museum. It follows that experiences are most readily conceived of as public when they are marked by an apparent social openness and inclusivity in both form and content, and/or when they are rooted in a space that reads as public. To the extent that these criteria are apparent in experiences of organisations, like art galleries, claims of publicness appear legitimate.

State-funded art galleries have a vested interest presenting their spaces as public, and a scan of UK gallery mission statements reveals 'publicness' as a recurring trope. This is reflective of the current discursive and policy context that promotes broadening access to arts and culture to an ever wider set of people (Jancovich, 2011). Art Council England's Strategic Framework 2010–2020, which disciplines the professional field of English publicly funded cultural organisations, therefore made a core principle that 'the cultural sector . . . strives to engage the public' (Arts Council England, 2013: 7). As such, state-funded, non-commercial art galleries are in the business of publicness, with much professional activity and resources invested in 'outreach' and 'participation' (Jensen, 2013). In addition, art galleries – typically their marketing teams – seek to 'perform their function of acting . . . "for the public benefit"', that is, to make convincing their success in realising their public mandate (McLean and O'Neill, 2009). This manifests in programming, architectural, and design choices (Harris, 2022: 323).

This is only the most recent chapter of art galleries and their publics. As Rhiannon Mason argues, 'from the mid-18th century to the present day, the argument that museums [and art galleries] should be "for the people" has been a recurrent one' (Mason, 2004: 56). Throughout the 19th century the 'public' to which art galleries addressed themselves was broadened through parliamentary, media and professional debates over the role of galleries in society, and galleries such as the National Gallery (London) were developed (Whitehead, 2005). Contemporary discourses of publicness are the result of this ongoing, and analytically well-trodden, negotiation between cultural organisations and notions of the public.

Sociological analysis of art galleries and their publics has three main concerns: the association between art galleries and publics writ large throughout history (Coombes, 2012; Duncan, 1995, 2004, 2013; Kaplan, 2006; McClellan, 1999; Macdonald, 2012; Mukerji, 2017; Prior, 2002); audience composition (Bourdieu and Darbel, 1997); and

policy and its impact on public-facing practices (Jancovich, 2011, 2017; Jensen, 2013). Of these approaches, Bourdieu's study of the exclusions that characterise art gallery publics has proved the most theoretically consequential, framing understandings of how galleries reinforce class-based distinctions in wider publics, discipline taste, and unevenly distribute cultural capital (Bourdieu and Darbel, 1997; Grenfell and Hardy, 2007: 65–107; Lehnert, 2018). Studies of gallery architecture and its relationship to public-formation usefully turn this analysis towards the production of art spaces (MacLeod, 2013: 176–186; Patterson, 2020). Taken together, these studies tend to use publicness as a standard against which art audiences, policies, institutional practices, and spaces can be measured. However, amidst all this countervailing sociological evidence, state-funded art galleries continue to perform publicness. How art galleries make credible their claims of publicness has been studied less comprehensively than the general critique of such claims. This is my concern in this article, and it hinges on taking a different approach to publicness – publicness as a phenomenological achievement.

Art Gallery Privatness

Broadly speaking, the private is defined by its 'conventional opposition to the "public",' and by its association with 'a bourgeois view of life' which values 'seclusion and protection from others' (Williams, 1983: 242–243). This seclusion is often experienced as intimacy, and 'privateness' runs on a parallel track to the 'personal' (Williams, 1983: 243). As an umbrella term, therefore, privateness covers everything from the spaces of the self, such as the mind, the body and the home (Madanipour, 2003), to private wealth and the private sector. It follows that experiences are most readily conceived of as private when they are intimate, personal and exclusionary. A convincing display of privateness therefore requires the deliberate and conspicuous display of social exclusivity, and a 'protection' from the generalised public.

Privateness takes multiple forms in the art gallery. Firstly, following Bourdieu, the art gallery throughout history can be understood as the reserve of privileged classes and thus an instrument in the protection of bourgeois private interests (Bourdieu and Darbel, 1997). Secondly, private or exclusive events often form part of an art gallery's social or commercial programme. These are often motivated by private income generation, such as the private hire of gallery spaces for weddings. Private patronage is a further form of privateness. State-funded, non-commercial galleries benefit from the sponsorship or patronage of private individuals, corporations, royal, elite, or state actors, 'gifts' which are rewarded with 'wall plaques and special events' (Alexander, 2014; McClellan, 2008: 2).¹ This continues the long tradition of private patronage that has economically structured cultural production, and has long produced tensions in the social life that surrounds art, artists and cultural organisations (Balfe, 1993; Baxandall, 1988; Chambers, 1970; Cooper, 1996; DeNora, 1997; Garber, 2008). This relates to the 'market rationalism' built into state funding of the arts which incentivises financial 'resilience' through the soliciting of private income and the adoption of business rationales (Greer, 2021; Gupta and Gupta, 2019), often resulting in high-value, high-visibility, high-controversy sponsorship (Evans, 2015; Kirchberg, 2003; Stefani and Garrard, 2019).

All these forms of ‘privateness’ are brought together in the hosting of invitation-only wine receptions, private tours and exclusive dinners for private patrons or potential patrons. The operating assumption behind such events is that private patronage flows from a uniquely close personal association with a cultural organisation. This is the ‘social identity perspective’ of arts patronage, in which private ‘gifts’ are couched within personalised relationships with the cultural organisation and contribute to the donors’ sense of self (Swanson and Davis, 2006). ‘Invitation-only’ events are therefore spaces in which the relational nature of this transaction plays out. These social situations require organisational displays in which attendees’ experience is marked by privateness and an elevated and elevating association with the gallery.

It is this which make such ‘VIP’ events a useful case study for my purposes here. These private VIP contexts are made meaningful by their deliberate and conspicuous social exclusivity, and their ‘protection’ from the generalised public – a public that is elsewhere understood as the proper beneficiaries of the gallery’s work. If we borrow from economics to understand art galleries and their programmes as a ‘public good’ – that is, a ‘good in which the act of consumption by one individual does not reduce the possibility of consumption by others’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 26) – then the scarcity which marks patrons’ experiences as uniquely valuable must be produced by other means. Differences must be ‘cultivated’ in people’s experiences of the same organisation (Lamont and Fournier, 1992). How is this achieved in on-the-ground, interactional contexts when the imperatives of publicness and privateness collide?

Organisational Performance

Asking how art galleries balance the conflicting demands of privateness and publicness on-the-ground exposes a gap in the existing literature. Most studies of privateness and/or publicness as they relate to the art gallery treat the terms as essentially issues of economics and governance. This overlooks the fact that privateness and publicness are additionally experiential categories, guides of interaction, and codes by which social settings are made meaningful. Approaching them in this way allows us to explore how privateness and publicness are encountered, how privatisation is made palatable, and claims of publicness credible.

In order to do so, I suggest that privateness and publicness are *performable* by organisations. I am drawing on a cultural pragmatics understanding of ‘performance’ as ‘the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation’ (Alexander, 2004: 529). In this case, the staff of an art gallery wield the means of symbolic production, and collectively display the meaning of social situations (Alexander, 2004). This process of displaying the meaning of situations requires careful planning and a great deal of representational work goes into this performance (McLean and O’Neill, 2009). Relational, spatial and aesthetic strategies are designed which symbolically link the situation to widely understood categories, such as the apparent openness and inclusivity which colour situations public, or the social exclusivity and intimacy which colour situations private. Such strategies and practices amount to an *organisational performance*.²

Organisational performances are modified in support of the different outcomes required of different social situations. This makes it important to recognise not only what an organisation does as part of a performance, but also who it has recruited as the target audience. This requires attention to how an organisation, like an art gallery, creates groupings and cultivates differences among the individuals that make up its constituents (Lamont and Fournier, 1992). Organisational performance, as an analytical framework, must therefore be refined to account for the *group* as the primary unit of observation. This focus on the group can be found in mesosociology, particularly that of Gary Fine (Fine, 2010, 2012, 2019; Goldfarb, 2006; Maines, 1982; Smelser, 1997; Wynn, 2016). This approach isolates the shared sets of meanings and interactional codes – or ‘ideocultures’ (Fine and Fang, 2019) – that characterise group social action as a unit of sociological analysis. Organisational performances therefore hinge on their success in installing sets of meanings into groups of people.

Fine offers three scaffolds of group interaction that can be taken as the key variables of organisational performances: *arenas*, *relations* and *histories* (Fine, 2012: 165–169).³ Firstly, the setting or space in which the group comes together, or the *arena*, sets material limits on the group and furnishes it with a set of ‘opportunities and understandings’ (Fine, 2012: 165). The ‘behaviours, thoughts, and emotions’ that circulate within the group are informed by this shared space and its material and symbolic properties (Fine, 2012: 165). Secondly, the character of relationships between members of the group, or the *relations*, establishes the ‘interactional map’ or ‘social cartography’ within the group of participants (Fine, 2012: 167–168). This could mean weak or strong inter-group ties, formal or informal interactions, or established or fleeting relations. Finally, a set of common reference points, or *shared histories*, are distributed among participants, allowing it to be conceived of as a meaningful, if temporary, microcommunity (Fine, 2012: 169). This common past can either be directly related to previously shared group experiences (e.g. a class reunion), or can be a shared relationship to a wider history which has pulled them together at this event (e.g. attendees of a gig). All three of *arenas*, *relations* and *histories* are concentrated in the ‘occasions’ when groups of people come together (Wynn, 2016), and it follows that an occasion like a private view offers a useful framing device for a study of group-oriented organisational performances.

This offers a rubric for studying how organisations furnish different social contexts with different, even conflicting, sets of meanings. Organisational performances are multi-vocal, and analysis must be attentive to the subtle inflections in performance that shift their meaningful and experiential parameters. In the case of this article, these shifts respond to the different symbolic demands of privateness and publicness, and the perceived relationship between them.

Data and Methods

My interest in privateness and publicness emerged over the course of a 14-month ethnography of an art gallery in the north-west of England. As I observed offices and exhibitions it became clear that an everyday part of this ‘public’ institution was the construction or pursuit of private interests, and that these two categories were inseparable in professional practice in a way that did not disrupt their symbolic opposition in both personal

and organisational value systems. Cultural sociologists of art, and specifically of galleries, often turn to ethnography in order to develop detailed accounts of the complex practices, values, codes and cultures circulated in the backstage of art galleries by artists, art workers and audiences (Bunzl, 2014; Thornton, 2008; Wohl, 2021: 72–101). The anomalies of the art world, such as this muddiness between publicness and privateness or the apparently random distribution of artistic success (Wohl, 2021), are made intelligible through the ‘deep-hanging’ of the ethnographer of art worlds (Bunzl, 2014: 8). For the purposes of my study, therefore, an ethnographic method – in which I incorporated interviews and visual methods – allowed me to locate and analyse the question of organisational performance through close observation of the working practices of the staff, spaces, and social lives in which publicness and privateness are the daily business.

It is important to note the location of my fieldsite within the broader UK art world. The gallery is not located in a commercial centre of the art world and is not regularly in receipt of high-capital one-off donations or philanthropy. London is the commercial centre of the UK art world, individual giving to the arts and cultural sector is centralised in the capital, and London’s cultural sector relies to a much higher degree on private income than elsewhere (MTM and Arts Council England, 2019). As such, the gallery preferred to invest time and resources in generating the instruments from which low-investment, high-frequency donations might follow: membership schemes or online auctions. The price points forecasted a middle-class clientele, but were significantly lower than analogous costs in London organisations (membership £35/year; patronage £300/year; auction prices £100–£1000+). Much like the art market generally (Buchholz et al., 2020), or historical, individualised forms of patronage (Baxandall, 1988), these contemporary forms of cultural patronage are relational, with varying degrees of reciprocity. Organising and hosting these social settings was a central part of the fundraising staff’s job roles.

In the following analysis, I focus on one of these settings. The private view was a highly curated organisational performance that evidenced the performance of both privateness and publicness. This event took place in October 2017, about halfway through my ethnography of the host gallery. Private views are the celebratory events which open visual art exhibitions, the parallel of ‘Opening Nights’ in theatres, ‘Premieres’ of films, or ‘Album Releases’ in music. As such, they are occasions in which art organisations engage in dense representational work. As Bunzl reports, art gallery staff invest a great deal of energy into producing an event that has the buzz of ‘a real *happening*’ [italics in original] in order to capture the imagination of audiences, the column inches of critics, and the capital of patrons (Bunzl, 2014: 24).

The private view of my study had two main facets, condensing the multiple agendas operating in the art gallery into one time and place. The first was a private drinks reception followed by a tour of the gallery hosted by the Artistic Director. This was an invitation-only event aimed at identified ‘friends’ of the organisation, and the guestlist included philanthropists, existing donors to the gallery, academics, and board members. This event was motivated by an upcoming online fundraising auction. The second facet of the opening night was an openly or ‘publicly’ accessible reception. This part of the private view was attended by a broader, generalised public, predominantly made up of the cultural workers and audiences that comprise a city’s ‘arts scene’. This facet of the private view was designed in the image of publicness that disciplines contemporary

organisations funded by Arts Council England. As such, in the analysis that follows I am interested in the nesting of a private context within another, larger, and allegedly public context.

As a result of my ongoing ethnography, I had a long-standing research relationship with members of staff, particularly those in programming, marketing and development who were present at the private view. I benefited from their habit of talking me through their work and their experience of the event. The following analysis is based on field-notes written up after the event, in addition to interviews with members of the programming, marketing and development teams, observations and minutes from relevant meetings, and email communications. The data I will draw on predominantly relate to the invitation-only aspect of the exhibition opening, as this is where I was mainly based. I joined the public-facing event later, allowing me to offer some reflections on this event as well. The fact that I was 'recording' the events was signalled through signs displayed throughout the arts centre. I changed into 'smart casual' clothes in an attempt to fit into the differing atmospheres that I would encounter during the private view.

Despite my smart casual clothes, the private tour of the exhibition that followed the drinks reception was the only aspect of the life of the art centre that was made off-limits to me as a researcher during the 14 months that I was collecting data. This highlights that our position as researchers, especially when studying privilege, is often bound by the customary ways in which advantaged groups claim privacy, and in which privacy is itself a hallmark of an elevated social position. Gatekeepers at the organisation clearly felt that my presence as a researcher would undermine their intended organisational performance.

Data were coded in nVivo, through which the separation and stratification of privateness from publicness emerged as a key theme. This was then read back into the relevant policy context, largely in reference to Art Council England's strategic framework 'Great Art and Culture for Everyone', in order to understand further the pressures under which the art gallery was operating (Arts Council England, 2013). Issues of space management, social interactions between staff and attendees, and institutional history recurred throughout my analysis, leading me to locate Fine's *arenas*, *relations* and *histories* as guiding principles for my study of this organisational performance of privateness and publicness.

Analysis

An art exhibition's private view is a stage for an organisational performance. The event follows many months of planning, multiple forms of labour, and an intense period of installation within the gallery spaces. Its planning requires a different set of skills to the exhibition planning, and while curatorial input is needed, communications or marketing, events or programming, and development or fundraising teams are implicated. These are the teams whose everyday work deals less with the creation of the material and symbolic content of the exhibition, and more with the creation of the identity of the organisation.

During fieldwork, private views were a regular topic in staff meetings and were a part of discussions from the earliest days of the exhibition planning process. Staff members, who attended other organisations' private views in a blurred social and professional

capacity, reflected on the strategies they witnessed there and how they reflected different organisational performances. For example, a nearby gallery was reported to have supplied free cocktails sponsored by a local restaurant and to have established a 'party atmosphere' as befitted their on-trend and cutting-edge programme. When private views broke with convention, such as taking place in an afternoon rather than evening, this prompted considerable discussion – however, the risks of breaking these conventions were mitigated when credentialed galleries had done so first. Contingency plans were arranged for elements beyond the gallery's control, such as the changeable British weather. In other words, the all facets of the private view were carefully chosen in reference to analogous galleries' practices, and in order to signify this gallery's symbolic location in the field.

In such discussions, staff members agreed that their gallery's private views were set apart from others in one key way: they were 'not exclusive'. Its 'public' or 'civic' role was a core theme of the organisation's identity and performance, often eclipsing, or being seen as productive of, its artistic role. This 'civic' role was both the unique selling point that differentiated the gallery from the relatively densely populated field of galleries in the city, and a moral code through which many staff members articulated their work life. Indeed, the gallery's 'civic' role was so integral to its symbolic and operational system that it allowed staff to achieve a degree of consensus uncommon in art galleries (Bunzl, 2014). Where art gallery staff can find themselves trapped between personal aesthetic preferences and organisational pressures, the moral goal of publicness was so personally (or performatively) held that it replaced these machinations: what was good was what served the interests of their public. This operated as a less ambiguous goal than does aesthetic excellence, not least because it has more readily been reduced to objective markers of success (e.g. audience statistics). Publicness was therefore at the centre of a great deal of the gallery's 'reputational discourse', marketing literature and funding bids (Mason, 2004: 56), and private views offered a chance to drive home this narrative.

At the same time as staff members were busy aligning the organisation's performance to the virtue of publicness, other staff members were busy 'diversifying' the gallery's income streams by turning to the private sector or private individuals. They explained this work through reference to specific fundraising instruments devised by their core funder (Arts Council England) that rewarded the generation of new private investment (e.g. the Catalyst scheme). In interviews, these staff members expressed themselves as personally, as well as professionally, motivated by the task of increasing funding for the arts. They spoke openly about the ethical and political questions attached to arts funding, including state funding, with a manager summarising: 'what you do with the money is more important than where it came from'. This shows again how the commitment to publicness functioned as a justification in the pursuit of privateness, resulting in on-the-ground conflicts between the two oppositional categories in performance settings like the private view.

During the time of my research, the gallery trialled several new fundraising schemes. These included a membership scheme with a sliding scale of benefits and costs from £35 to £300 per year, as well as an online fundraising auction, selling 54 artworks donated by emerging and established artists who had previously exhibited in the art gallery. Although an auction has a clearly transactional element, layered onto this auction were the

meanings and gratifications of private patronage, and, more broadly, served to marketise notions of ongoing reciprocity and mutual indebtedness (Mauss, 2001). Not only was this an opportunity to invest in art – it would have been possible to buy work from any of the artists featured another way – this was also an opportunity to invest in the general cause of art and to signal support for and association with the art gallery. In addition to these fundraising schemes, I was told that more customisable ‘tactics’ were also used to ‘lure’ potential private income, including offering ‘logos on the wall, drinks receptions in the gallery, or private tours’.

These ‘tactics’ came to bear on the design of the private view. The decision was taken to host an exclusive event in addition to the standard, publicly accessible and larger event. Invitations were sent to individuals, or ‘friends of [the gallery]’, to whom the staff wished to make relatively direct appeals in the service of an upcoming online fundraising auction. This invitation-only event was the operationalisation of the ‘social identity’ model of arts funding, aiming to engender in attendees a sense of identity or association with the art gallery that might endear them to the auction or other ways to financially support the organisation (Swanson and Davis, 2006). In order to achieve this, the art gallery sought to create a distinguished and distinguishing atmosphere at this invitation-only event – in a word, they sought an atmosphere of privateness. This event started earlier than, but merged into, a freely accessible event where guests could see the exhibition and socialise in and around the gallery. This ‘public-facing’ event fitted into the sector-wide performance of arts publicness.

The gallery therefore had to administer two separate and apparently conflicting performances during the same private view. The invitation-only event had to furnish the group of attendees with the trappings of privateness, in other words, a personal and exclusive experience, with a view to engender a feeling of personal attachment justifying financial investment. The public-facing event had to furnish the group of attendees with the trappings of publicness, that is, an experience of social inclusivity and collectively, with a view to supporting an organisational narrative of its civic function. In what follows, this will be shown to have been achieved through the manipulation of *arenas, relations and histories*.

Arenas

The art gallery of my study had at its disposal several settings within its building. Each of these settings were designed and employed by staff towards specific ends. The symbolic focal point of the building was the gallery itself. The gallery, however, took up a relatively small footprint within the building. As is typical of contemporary art galleries, the building also featured a casual café frequented by both gallerygoers and non-gallerygoers, a series of specialised shops, conference rooms available for private hire, and a performance space used for musical, dance, and other events. In addition, the building had a space branded as the ‘Bistro’. This was a relatively ‘upmarket’ space, offering the ‘freshest and finest’ meals available at a higher price point than the café, a bar serving soft and alcoholic drinks, and a mixture of dining table and lounge seating. The Bistro was available for hire for special and formal events, such as weddings, providing an

income stream.⁴ As such, the space was frequently reproduced in the art gallery's marketing material with a view to characterise it as a chic, elegant, and aspirational place.

It was incumbent on the gallery's staff to select locations within its building that best served the organisational performances required by specific events, the spaces most likely to bring about the desired behaviours, thoughts and emotions in participants. The Bistro was identified as the appropriate location in which to host the invitation-only drinks reception of the opening night. This was a strategic 'tactic' employed by gallery staff, intended to furnish the invitation-only group with an arena that matched their elevated social position, their private seclusion from the general public, and to engender the desired sense of emotional and cultural attachment to the organisation. The Bistro recommended itself to this pursuit in three ways.

The first asset of the Bistro was spatial. The Bistro was physically elevated and distinct from other settings within the art gallery. As such, invited guests made their way through the rest of the building and its activity, ascending the stairs that led them out of the publicly accessible spaces and into a space to which their invitation granted them entry. This was not signposted. Instead, guests either engaged members of staff or relied on previous experiences within the gallery to locate the drinks reception. In the act of following this route, and the confidence with which they did so, guests claimed and signified their membership of the gallery's group of 'friends'. This process – the leaving behind of the public space – was a journey into privateness.

The second asset of the Bistro was aesthetic. The dark wood and leather interior of the space, the high ceilings and large works of art on the walls spoke to a modish and sophisticated aesthetics. The design language here, and in contrast to elsewhere in the building, carried with it a parallel etiquette and atmosphere of relative formality while being sufficiently inviting to encourage congenial sociability. This is an aesthetic and ambience comfortable with the socially elevated, elevating and private (i.e. bourgeois) position of arts and cultural spaces, a symbolic space in which the group were invited to 'belong'. The Bistro also provided an aesthetic umbrella under which specific sets of meanings could circulate – the close associative link between cultural organisations and privileged or elevated social groups, their leisure pursuits, and their patronage, for example – sets of meanings that were wilfully distanced from other areas of the art gallery such as the café.

The final asset of the Bistro was material. The room had only one entrance at which the gallery's Artistic Director and CEO were stationed, ensuring guests, who typically arrived in pairs or small groups, were immediately greeted, often by name. This personal welcome established a sense of privacy and intimacy. A large bar occupied the centre of the room, providing a visual focal point and evoking rituals of pleasure. Complimentary drinks were laid out on the bar in champagne flutes, served by a member of the gallery's catering team wearing smarter clothes than was typical for this team. Low tables provided surfaces for guests to congregate around and onto which catalogues for the upcoming online auction were placed, but the sofas and seating were largely overlooked in favour of standing in small groups. The relatively spacious layout of the room also allowed individuals to mingle at ease, to greet acquaintances, to move in and out of bubbles of conversation, and for staff to circulate. This lent the event a dynamism as people flowed through the space, without requiring a high degree of commitment to interact

with strangers. Taken together, these material factors backed up the organisational performance of privateness, both as a simple description (i.e. protected from the generalised public) and as a social script, or interaction order, with attached behaviours and interpersonal conventions.

In comparison, the public-facing event was hosted in the café. This was typically the most populated area within the gallery, a space busy with casual social interactions. Unlike the Bistro, the aesthetic here was wilfully welcoming. It was airy and spacious, with an artfully dishevelled 'kids' corner'. Unlike the dark interior design of the Bistro, the café was white and bright. This is an aesthetic familiar from many contemporary coffee shops, which equally capitalise on a notional publicness (Bookman, 2014; Felton, 2018). This offered an aesthetic symmetry with the white walls of the adjoining gallery, and it also distanced it from the formal and dark design language of the Bistro. It was large with high ceilings, which amplified the hubbub of conversations at the public-facing event and allowed people to flow freely through the different pockets of conversation (often greeting acquaintances as they did so). Wine was available, although donations were suggested, and speeches were greeted with emphatic applause. In aesthetics, space and symbolism the café provided a light and 'open' atmosphere, which complimented an organisational performance aligned to the apparent openness and hospitableness of publicness (this 'openness' is a design language common to contemporary gallery architecture (Smart, 2020)).

The café was also the part of the gallery that interfaced most with the surrounding city in ways that often had little to do with the artistic programme. In the everyday life of the gallery, the café is where people came to rest during a day's shopping, or which they used as a shortcut, or where they came just to spend time, with no intention of consuming either art or coffee. In this respect, the café was perhaps more consequential for the 'civic' branding of the gallery than the art it displayed. For those who did want to engage with the art, they must first go through the café. This was key to the selection of the café as the arena for the public-facing private view. It suggested a continuity between the art that occasioned the private view and the diverse social life that routinely animated the space. What's more, it provided a setting in which the casual social interactions in the café could spill over into the gallery, again suggesting a continuity which supported an organisational performance of publicness.

Relations

Back in the Bistro, social practices of staff working the event consolidated its privateness. In order to both achieve and signal the occasion's 'protection' from the generalised public, and as already noted, high-ranking staff were located at the event's entrance. This had two effects. Firstly, it acted as a form of light policing. This same effect could have been achieved with varying levels of conspicuousness: from the use of bouncers and a 'your name's not down, you're not coming in' mentality, to a more delicate and subtle approach. The latter option was chosen, which nonetheless allowed invited guests to be assured of their own legitimacy as guests, and likewise the legitimacy of other guests. It also afforded a degree of flexibility, as the staff could spontaneously admit people (such as myself) or turn them away. This marked attendees as members of an 'in group' – a

core tenant of private events, and notably different to the unrestricted welcome offered at the public-facing event.

Members of staff from the development and programming team also attended the private event. These staff members circulated throughout the gathering to a higher degree than the Artistic Director and CEO. They held sustained, interpersonal interactions with individuals or small groups of attendees with whom they often had little preceding social connections. In these interactions, staff members performed deference, and did not enter into conversations on an equal social footing. They would wait for an opening, or a visual cue, signifying that attendees' attention had been caught by the auction catalogues that were distributed around the Bistro. Taking up this cue, staff members would politely insert themselves into proximity with the attendee, and provide information about the upcoming online auction including the connections between the art works on sale and the art gallery. Once this interaction had come to a natural conclusion, staff members politely retreated. As such, their labour at this event can be seen as a supplement to the auction catalogues themselves, explicitly framing the investment as a civic good couched in a relation of 'friendship', while implicitly offering a way to signal support for the arts, and feel connected to the art gallery as a cultural organisation of note. These interactions – characterised by deference and bounded by instrumentality – were some of the most conspicuous ways in which the gathered group of attendees was linked to the agenda of the art gallery to generate private income.

Following the wine reception, a private tour offered to invitation-only attendees made them the first audience group to experience the exhibition. As members of this group emerged from the gallery, they merged with the generalised public at the rest of the opening night, smoothly becoming part of this larger group. This evidenced the social pecking order that the gallery had set up in the event. Membership of the invitation-only group was a sufficient condition of entry to the wider public; membership of the wider public was an insufficient condition of entry to the group of private guests. As such, the invitation-only event did not only cultivate differences between sections of the gallery's guests, it stratified and ordered these differentiated groups, nesting an 'insider' or private group within the larger and generalised public.

This illuminates something further: it was not a mistake or aberration for privateness to overlap with publicness. Instead, this overlap allowed private guests to appreciate and indeed experience the gallery performing its civic function, a function that was a central part of the marketing team's call-to-action. However, the timing of the event was such that public guests were less likely to be aware that a separate, invitation-only event was being staged. Through allowing these two social groupings to collide, in a carefully managed fashion, the gallery was able to display the civic value of private patronage without risking the performance of publicness with its dependence on equality of access. This demonstrates that it is not simply that the art gallery staff sought to keep publicness and privateness mutually uncontaminated. Instead, their goal was to control how the two experiential categories *related* to one another in time and place.

Meanwhile, different relations between guests and staff of the organisation were taking place in the public-facing private view. Other than the catering team, staff there mingled with guests in a blended social and professional capacity, greeting one another by name and forming porous clusters of chatter. This is typical of the arts, where social

and professional networks overlap (Gill and Pratt, 2008). Staff–guest relations therefore shed their formality along with their more conspicuous instrumentality. This more horizontal ‘social cartography’ (Fine, 2012: 167) marked the event with the apparent inclusiveness characteristic of publics.

This relative freedom from organisational control also opened the door for dissensus to arise that had not been apparent in either the invitation-only private view or in many staff meetings. Here, staff began to express and discuss personal assessments of the exhibition that were not uniformly positive. Engaging in these evaluative interactions is characteristic of the ‘public sphere’ (see earlier). However, these discussions were contained, constrained, and easily curtailed when the necessity arose. The evaluative function of the public-sphere, with its inherent risk of negative judgement, ran counter to the objective of this event: to *appear* public in part through a lack of friction or social dissensus. Staff knew this keenly, and critical interactions were engaged in only when to do so would be unlikely to cause them professional harm.

Indeed, the event was a sanitised social space in which the tensions of life and lives beyond the gallery walls were hidden. This social cohesion was in part achieved by the relative homogeneity of guests – a social group that could have been predicted by much sociology of art. Despite the apparent openness or inclusivity that characterised staff–guest *relations*, as well the meaningful heavy-lifting done by the choice of the café as the *arena*, the event was populated predominately by the city’s art scene, including artists and professionals. The filtering role performed by the Artistic Director and CEO at the invitation-only event was here performed by the social field itself. As such, to the extent that the event characterised the organisation as embedded in the social, cultural life of its city, it contributed to a performance of publicness. However, the event also emphasises how performances of publicness may rest on deeply entrenched social exclusions – it is far easier to perform publicness than to achieve it in a field as historically as riddled with classed and related biases as the arts.

Histories

The *arenas* and the *relations* reflected the different priorities of the organisational performances. Their salience, however, was drawn from long historical traditions of art organisations and their social lives. These *histories* provided the symbolic backdrop to the performances, influencing the parameters of meaning within which they were experienced.

The invitation-only event spoke to two related histories. The first was narrowly related to the art gallery itself. The exhibition being opened was part of a larger celebration of the history of the art gallery, and the artworks for sale in the upcoming online auction were made particularly meaningful (over and above their other values as art) because their artists had a historical connection to the art gallery. As the main strategic fundraising instrument at the event, the auction offered a way to become personally implicated in and associated with the history of the art gallery. The artworks, if purchased, were a way to make this association and attachment tangible and displayable (a form of multi-layered cultural capital). The degree to which the auction was an organising principle of the event highlights the strategic attempt on behalf of art gallery staff to encourage in

members of this group a close personal identification with the history and future of the art gallery.

More broadly, however, the invitation-only event was situated within the long history of cultural organisations generally as a site of social and cultural prestige. It formed part of a continuum of private patronage that might have had its historical high-tide-mark in Renaissance Italy, but which has always figured into the structuring of art, culture and its connection to power. Although this history was not front-and-centre of the event, it provided a way of making sense of the invitation to invest private wealth and personal identity in being a patron of the arts. The auction offered a way to turn this personal identification into a private asset, but to do so through the moral code of charity rather than that of wealth accumulation. This is the historical context in which the invitation-only event sat, a context of securing and maintaining private bourgeois interests and cultural capital. Crucially, however, the event was designed to reanimate this history as a form of contemporary, cultured and civilised benevolence (McCormick, 2015). The Bistro, the social practice of staff, the conspicuous displaying of the gallery's publicness – all of these were devices to perform, to the select group of invitees, a palatable, even commendable, form of privateness.

This was a stark difference to the historical saliences of the public-facing event. There, the art gallery sought to perform itself as within the tradition of art galleries as 'for the people' (Mason, 2004: 56). This tradition places value on the civic role of art, a value which has been the justifying principle of art galleries from the 18th century vanguard of national museums (Duncan, 2004), through the post-war 'arts centre movement' (Hutchinson and Forrester, 1987), to the contemporary policy and professional emphasis on participation (Jancovich, 2011, 2017). In this tradition, art galleries are evaluated by their success in being sites of the 'public sphere' (Habermas, 2005) – the communal, open contestation of ideas and culture. The aesthetic, spatial and social 'tactics' put in place – the use of the café, the overflow into the gallery, the dissolving of differences between staff and guests – were designed to make credible a performance of publicness, and to display the meaning of the gallery as a site of social participation and a collective asset. The success or failure of the public-facing event therefore hinged on the performative othering of its symbolic other: privateness.

Conclusion

The empirical work of this article has shown the art gallery in the act of a multi-vocal organisational performance: a private view. The art gallery performed itself differently according to the desired outcomes of social contexts. Different venues were chosen, different forms of sociality were enacted, and different sets of meanings and histories signalled. To detail this, I have developed an approach to studying organisations that recognises that the 'reputational discourse' of organisations is realised through social, spatial and aesthetic strategies in ways that align to the cultural pragmatics understanding of 'performance' (Alexander, 2004; Mason, 2004: 56), and that depend on a process of cultivating differences amongst groups (Fine, 2012; Lamont and Fournier, 1992). The term 'organisational performance' captures this approach.

The theoretical work of this article has been to take a cultural approach to analysing the profound privatisation of the public, and one of the many ways in which it manifests, offering a way of seeing how the structural clash between the private and the public is turned into organisational performance categories. Private experiences hinge on the principle of exclusivity; public experiences on the principle of inclusivity. These simple and oppositional cultural codes are challenged in social contexts where privateness and publicness are coexistent and deeply entangled economic and political realities, from public services (Blewitt, 2014; Jones, 2018), to public space more broadly (Akkar, 2005; Smith and Low, 2006). The art gallery is just one example of this. Countless researchers have already made clear the social costs of entangling public and private interests, from the ‘corrupting’ effect of the UK’s private–public partnerships (Mair and Jones, 2015), to the eroding of the principle of universal healthcare by the ‘mixed economy’ (Pollock, 2005). The value of taking a cultural approach is to add to this analysis a critique of how organisations may camouflage the extent and effects of the private interests vested within them, and use performance strategies to paper over the social exclusions that characterise their ‘publics.’

Finally, I have argued that performances of privateness and publicness are in a dynamic tension with one another. Through the case study of this article, I have shown that in the art gallery there is no publicness without privateness, and no privateness without publicness in *both* a structural and experiential sense. The gallery’s performance of publicness depended on the conspicuous othering of privateness; the performance of privateness made public good a justifying motif. This performative balancing act, I suggest, is a central part of the day-to-day work of organisations operating with dual public and private accountabilities. Control over the ways in which the two categories appear to relate to one another in on-the-ground interactional contexts is an integral weapon in these organisations’ symbolic arsenal, in the cultural sector and beyond.


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ORCID iD

Laura Harris  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9146-1168>

Notes

1. In England, private arts patronage is concentrated in London (MTM and Arts Council England, 2019), a point to which I return in the ‘Data and Methods’ section later in this article.
2. ‘Organisational performance’ is already a concept in business used to measure a business’s success in achieving its goals. This is not the use to which I put the term.

3. In this, I depart from Alexander's elements of cultural performance, while keeping the same spirit. See Alexander (2004).
4. The café, Bistro and other commercial activities of the gallery were run as a private limited company that functioned in parallel to the charitable arm of the organisation, a typical business model of art galleries.

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Author biography

Laura Harris is an Anniversary Fellow at the University of Southampton (Sociology, Social Policy, and Criminology) where her research project is called ‘Experimental Filmmaking and the Cultural Sociology of Place’. With a background spanning sociology and art theory, her research interests include the social life of art galleries, cultural sociology, and the overlap between visual methods and contemporary art practice. She recently contributed a chapter on art gallery windows to *The Cultural Sociology of Art and Music: New Directions and New Discoveries* (ed. Lisa McCormick, 2022).