

Critical Focus: Study of an Arts Centre

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

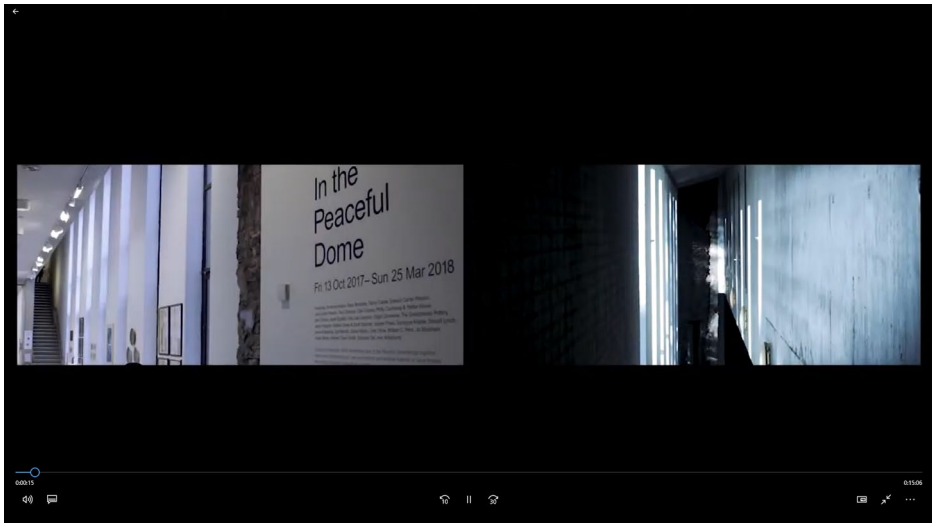
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Abstract

Critical Focus: Study of an Arts Centre is a 15-minute, two-channel film documenting the everyday life of an art gallery during the exhibition installation period. It was made as part of a sociological investigation of skilled but invisible labour in the art gallery, such as that of gallery technicians. In addition to this focus on skilled labour, the film focuses on the atmospheres of the different spaces in and around the gallery, and the ways they are produced by different social actors. The accompanying essay introduces the context in which the film was made, as well as the theories that informed it. These include theories of atmosphere and skill, as well as the styles and practices of artists who make documentary-like work themselves. The essay also details choices that are both ethical and stylistic, such as the close angles, the focus on material and architectural textures, and a focus on hands rather than faces.

Keywords

art gallery, artists' moving image, atmosphere, labour, visual methods



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There is a moment in *Critical Focus: Study of an Arts Centre* when two gallery technicians unwrap Jacob Epstein's sculpture *Genesis* (Epstein, 1929–1931) before walking off screen (09:10–09:38). The sculpture, which I have elsewhere critiqued using intersecting theories of the colonial and male gaze (Nelson, 2010; Harris, 2022: 329–330), is left alone, sitting solid and unmovable now that the hoists and technicians have departed. It waits, in silence and backdropped by whitewashed walls, for the gaze of a future public. This moment of stillness, during a busy 15-minute film, catches my attention as I watch *Critical Focus* back 5 years after making it. Since conducting visual fieldwork of gallery technicians' labour for my PhD, the stillness of typical art gallery exhibition has never felt quite the same. No longer do I experience the gallery as a place out of time, a still cocoon for contemplation. Instead, I feel like I have started watching a film right at the end – all the action has passed; the protagonists have walked off screen.

When I started the visual ethnographic research that resulted in *Critical Focus*, I did so with an idea of making the 'invisible labour' of the art gallery visible (Crain et al., 2016). Labour is made 'invisible' when it takes place in contexts that are hidden from public view or when it goes unappreciated in the public imaginary. Working conditions tend to worsen when labour is made invisible, often in ways that compound other forms of social marginalisation (Pendo, 2016). The visibility of labour also often tracks onto cultural valuation systems. For example, Steven Shapin has shown that the cultural narrative of the individual scientific genius has obscured the vital role of laboratory technicians in scientific breakthroughs (Shapin, 1989). The art gallery, as a place of work, is deeply entangled with such conventions of labour visibility. The artist and, in recent decades, the curator are made 'hypervisible' by being publicly attributed as authors of the space (Crain et al., 2016, p. 10). The cleaners and technicians, meanwhile, are required to perform their labour without leaving a trace, and in conditions of heightened precarity produced by freelancing and outsourcing. My visual fieldwork aimed to draw attention to this hidden work of art galleries and the times and spaces in which it took place, as part of a broader sociological study into the uneven distribution of value within galleries as a place of work.

The motivation to film was informed by the documentary tradition of exploring the backstage work of institutions, epitomised by the films of Frederik Wiseman. Wiseman has been described as a 'sociological filmmaker' (Curry, 1985) for his interest in portraying the networks of people behind various (mainly American) organisations: a hospital (1970), a boxing gym (2010), and the New York Public Library (2017), among many more. Wiseman's understanding of institutions is distinctly sociological. He approaches them as 'a series of activities that take place in a limited geographical area with a more or less consistent group of people being involved' (quoted in Rosenthal (1971)), focusing on the collective work of these groups and avoiding to-camera interviews, captions, voiceovers, or clear narratives. His approach mirrors the 'production of culture perspective' in the sociology of art which focuses on the networks of activity, including distribution, teaching, and preservation, that work together to produce the institution(s) of art (Peterson and Anand, 2004).

The method, style, and focus of Wiseman's work provided the inspiration for my use of film in the exploration of the backstage work of an art gallery. *Critical Focus* was shot over a month during which one exhibition was removed and another installed at the

gallery that was my PhD fieldsite. This came in the middle of a 14-month ethnography which followed the exhibition from early planning stages through to public reception. My camera allowed me to stake a place in the busyness of the installation, to invite people to point me towards aspects of interest, and to channel my sense-making through the lens, or rather, to ‘think with film’ (Durand and Sebag, 2015). Crucially, filtering my attention through the affordance of the film camera sensitised me to even the most subtle changes in sounds and sights. The sensory world of the installation – which was dusty, noisy, and busy – slowly morphed into the cerebral space that would be the result. The camera demanded that I was reactive to these changes in real time (e.g. changing my audio or lighting settings), but the fullness of the shift became apparently only when I returned to the 13 hours of footage in the edit suite. Filmmaking, in other words, was both a way of collecting data about the gallery instal and a way of seeing it.

The process of shooting the film and watching the footage back in the edit made it evident that the places(s) of the gallery, as atmospheric locations, were deeply consequential on the unfolding action (Böhme, 2017; la Fuente et al., 2022; Sumartojo and Pink, 2019). Largely following philosopher Gernot Böhme, atmospheres have been theorised as ‘spatial bearers of moods’ which shape social action and meaning-making (Böhme, 2017, p. 16). Atmospheres are the spatially manifest phenomenological architecture within which experience takes place. Within sociology, a diverse set of topics and field sites, from cafes (Kuruoğlu and Woodward, 2021) to hospital wards (Kanyeredzi et al., 2019), have been studied to demonstrate how atmospheres produce experiences dappled with shades of significance. In the case of my research, producing the cerebral atmosphere required by the ‘white cube’ model of art galleries was a primary requirement of success for gallery technicians, and to do so without leaving a trace (O’Doherty, 2000).

Atmospheres, and how they are crafted, became a primary focus of the edit and, elsewhere, of my textual analysis (Harris, 2022: 321). This honed the purpose of the film from being an exercise in simply rendering the gallery technicians’ ‘invisible labour’ visible, to introducing the experiential elements of their practice and places of work which the ‘production of culture perspective’ cuts out. As such, I borrowed from Wiseman’s approach – a focus on the everyday work of institutions, a resistance to clear narrative – while choosing to focus less on the discursive production of the art gallery than on the atmospheric elements of this work.

The link between filmmaking, place, and atmosphere has been well evidenced within the visual methods literature (Pink et al., 2015; Simpson, 2015). To make ‘atmosphere’ a focus of a film is to pull away from the ‘expositional’ mode of documentary, that is, films that rely on voiceovers and narrative, and move towards the more ‘poetic’ mode (Nicols, 2001). My limited use of voice in the film is a major departure from Wiseman, but was a choice informed by many filmmaking artists that focus on the atmospheres of places: Ben Rivers’ *Sack Barrow* (2011); Sarah Morris’ *Abu Dhabi* (2017); and Morgan Quaintance’s *Letter from Tokyo* (2018). These films offered me an aesthetic language to draw on beyond the narrower tradition of visual social research methods.

Stylistic decisions emerged while I was deeply immersed in practicing my (fledgling) film editing skills. Anthropologist Tim Ingold (2008) presents skill as a ‘developmentally embodied responsiveness’, or a ‘thinking-doing’ (Ingold, 2018, p. 160). I was

applying this theory to the gallery technicians' labour, but it also offered a way of understanding my own editing practice. I made hundreds of aesthetic choices in this responsive fashion, a result of my sensory immersion in the footage and its textures; the affordances of the editing software (Premiere Pro); and my emerging sociological analysis of space, skilled labour, and atmosphere in the gallery installation. For example, I made the decision to adopt a two-channel approach, a standard trope of artists' moving image. My choice was informed by a desire to reflect the heterogeneity of action within the film; to introduce a new spatiality to the viewing experience (it was originally designed to be displayed on two abutting screens); and to distance the film from the visual language and temporality of the expositional documentary. This aesthetic/analytical choice is indicative of countless others, a process that I consider a sociological 'thinking-doing' channelled through the medium and technologies of film (Ingold, 2018, p. 160). Too often, visual methodologies make a black box of the editing process, which is a vitally important site of visual knowledge production.

Critical Focus is a closely shot film. There are lots of architectural details (see 02:04; 03:20; 03:45), hands at work and play (see 06:57; 09:39; 12:32), and people with their back to camera or their heads out of shot (see 04:43; 12:28; 13:57). This is partly a stylistic choice to bring something of the interiority of the art gallery into the film, and to focus on the tactility of the gallery installation. It is also an ethical decision to limit the extent to which the participants are recognisable. My access to the installation was granted by institutional gatekeepers, but on the first day of shooting, I took time with each gallery technician to explain my research and receive consent. After the edit, I sent each technician a copy of the film with timestamps of when they appear to allow for any to withdraw at this point.

The research methods went through an ethical review process at the University of Liverpool, which gave specific approval for the visual part of the study within broader approval of the ethnography. I also followed the protocol of the gallery which was to make members of the public aware of filming/photographing through signs (see 12:51). I also could also direct them to participant information sheets available from the front desk and introduced the project through my interactions. The International Visual Sociology Association guidelines state that 'confidentiality is not required with respect to observations in public places', but I nonetheless aimed to record only incidental information on public participants in the gallery spaces. Members of the public do briefly appear in the film but they do so without audio, and I collected no further identifying information on them (Papademas and the International Visual Sociology, 2009, p. 254). Galleries are highly mediated sites, and it is a commonplace for galleries to themselves record private views or other events for use as marketing material. Indeed, I often worked alongside a cameraperson that the gallery had hired.

Critical Focus had its first public showing at the art gallery during the final stages of the exhibition it features. In this, the film could be seen to have achieved one of its goals: to contribute to the visibility of hidden work in the art gallery. Beyond this instrumental purpose, however, *Critical Focus* also demonstrates an interdisciplinary approach to thinking through film, as both a medium and technology, in shaping and conducting social research – and, crucially, the analytical function of the edit. In *Critical Focus*, this manifested as the expanding of the research topic from being about invisible labour to being about the hidden

processes that produce atmospheres. In the years since the film was made, theories of atmosphere have been increasingly applied to artists' film (Bruno, 2022; Dickinson, 2023). This has created a rich theoretical grounding for social research to expand its visual repertoire, and to further blur the line between artistic and social scientific research practices. In inspiration (Wiseman) and form and style (artists' moving image), *Critical Focus* is an exercise in conducting a sociological study not only of art but also with it.

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Author biography

Laura Harris is a cultural sociologist currently working as an Anniversary Fellow at the University of Southampton on a project called 'Experimental Filmmaking and the Cultural Sociology of Place'. She has a background in art theory and sociology, and many of her current interests have their roots in these two disciplines. She is often to be found working between sociology departments and contemporary art galleries, and previous collaborators have included Bluecoat (Liverpool) and the Talbot Rice Gallery (Edinburgh). She is also book review editor at *Cultural Sociology* and co-convenes the BSA Sociology of the Arts Study Group.

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