Goffman in the gallery: interactive art and visitor shyness

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In an effort to facilitate public engagement, contemporary art galleries and museums house interactive exhibits incorporating digital media. Despite removing traditional barriers of cultural capital, however, these exhibitions now presume a level of technological and performative competence, which can feel equally intimidating to visitors. Reporting on an UK-based ethnographic study and using dramaturgical theory, we show how interactive exhibitions can evoke situational shyness in visitors, through the combination of a demand for active, performative engagement and the deliberate restriction of instructional and explanatory information. In this ambiguous setting, visitors search for a social script to guide their action, the absence or opaqueness of which creates self-conscious inhibition. Actors adapt to this resourcefully by looking toward others to provide a replacement script; these may be companion visitors, strangers, or imaginary audiences. Some visitors, meanwhile, demonstrate resistance by refusing to engage with the interactive art agenda altogether, preferring to assume a role of detached spectatorship.

Keywords: Goffman, interactive art, shyness, interaction, scripts
intimidating to many visitors. Using Scott’s Symbolic Interactionist theory of shyness as a situational role-identity, we show how the interaction context of the gallery can evoke dramaturgical concerns about “not knowing the rules” of this exclusive art world and making an embarrassing mistake. However, we emphasize the agency with which actors deal with this discomfiting ambiguity, by devising their own social scripts to frame a definition of the situation. This supports Scott’s argument that shyness is not a passively endured individual pathology, but rather a normal, socially intelligible condition that demonstrates a commitment to dramaturgical teamwork and interaction order.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Art as Interaction

The emergence and development of interactive art since the mid-twentieth century reflects an increasing recognition of the social dimensions of museum and gallery visiting. In contrast to the traditional organization of such institutions as bastions of “high” culture (Williams 1958), the contemporary heritage and tourism industries are concerned with promoting cultural inclusivity, democratizing access, and facilitating public engagement (Hetherington 2007; Tlili 2008). A new emphasis on the educational role of museums and galleries (Heath and vom Lehn 2008; Hein 2009) reconfigures them as dynamic and interactive spaces in which anyone, regardless of social background, can participate. New technologies, especially digital media, are often integrated into the artworks, to address the problem of how to “make the seemingly tedious engaging” (Meisner et al. 2007:1532). In place of glass boxed-artifacts and curiosities displayed beyond reach, curators increasingly seek to bring abstract ideas to life with “hands on,” practical activities that encourage “learning by doing” as well as creativity, fun, and play (Heath and vom Lehn 2008). As well as digital information kiosks outside exhibitions, inside we find technologies embedded in the artworks themselves: interactive installations may incorporate built-in software, wireless networks, or locative devices, such as Global Positioning Systems (GPS) and cell phone applications. At the simplest level, visitors might just press buttons to change information display screens, while more complex exhibits invite them to make sound recordings, upload videos, or scan QR codes to leave critical feedback for the artist (Chalmers 2011).

This new trend is an outcome of debates about what constitutes “art” and the role that it plays in society. Gell (1998) makes a distinction between traditional esthetic theories, based upon a Kantian ideal of the “pure” qualities of a piece, interpretive theories, which focus on what is defined as art in a particular sociohistorical context, and institutional theories, which examine the agency of artworks and their creators in the process of (re)producing culture. The latter two approaches allow for a more critical analysis of the political dimensions of art, as a vehicle of both power and resistance. Adorno’s ([1944] 2001) critique of the mass production and circulation
of ideologically inscribed artifacts through the “culture industry” has been used to buttress anti-esthetic sociological arguments (Zangwill 2002), such as Bourdieu’s (1996) remarks on the social judgement of taste. In contrast, modern art that involves challenging the audience or subverting their expectations, can be read as a form of resistance to dominant ideologies or cultural hegemony (Inglis and Hughson 2005).

Most significantly for our perspective, the enthusiasm for interactive exhibitions invites a reinterpretation of the notion of “art as communication,” whereby social interaction rises to prominence. As Becker (1983) argued, “art” is not merely a self-contained product, but rather a relational process of collaboration between various players in an “art world,” each of whom has a role to play: not only artists but also curators, designers, dealers, and most importantly, audiences. Whereas historically, artists were assumed to be conveying a distinct message, which audiences must decipher, contemporary interactive art disrupts this transmission model of knowledge transfer and argues instead for a two-way conversational process. The meaning of an artwork is not fixed inherently in the object or its creator, but rather is co-defined and negotiated in an open-ended dialogue between artist and audience. This “relational esthetics” (Bourriaud 1998) demands a more active, demonstrative mode of engagement from the visitor, whose interpretations of the artwork complete its meaning; the exhibit or artifact itself is defined as a piece of shared intellectual property (Cook 2008). Audience participation is not merely encouraged but required in order for an exhibit to “work” effectively (Edmonds et al. 2009; Hein 2009), and it becomes hard for visitors to adopt the more passive, traditional role of the detached spectator. Rather than being allowed to wander unobtrusively around the museum or gallery space, privately consuming artworks, visitors are now expected to perform and display their involvement publicly, communicating a response back to the artist. Thrust into the spotlight as an actor frontstage (Goffman 1959), the visitor becomes objectified as part of the installation, their reactions laid open to observation, evaluation, and scrutiny.

Galleries as Theatrical Spaces

Symbolic Interactionism (SI), and in particular dramaturgical theory (Goffman 1959), can help us to understand how these changes are experienced by gallery and museum visitors, and the effects that they have upon their patterns of behavior. Recently, it has been recognized that the majority of people visit museums and galleries in groups rather than alone (vom Lehn et al. 2001), and so quite apart from the question of engagement with artifacts, there is a whole other social interaction context to be studied in terms of the gallery as a situated, practical setting (Heath and vom Lehn 2008). The field of Visitor Studies, by contrast, typically depicts a sequence of individuals encountering the exhibit in isolation, and fails to consider the roles played by fellow actors in their midst, such as gallery staff, companions, or strangers who just happen to be copresent within their perceptual range (Goffman 1963, 1981; vom Lehn et al. 2001). There is also a tendency to refer to patterns
of generic visitor behavior, without taking into account the range of experiences, concerns, and (in)competences that different people bring to the setting. Similarly, the field of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) has presented a solipsistic view of individual “users” engaging with technologies in a rational, goal-driven, and strategic manner, overlooking the messy, creative, and negotiated aspects of practical activity (Heath and vom Lehn 2008). Where co-visitors are acknowledged by these two disciplines, they have been relegated to the status of passive onlookers, adjuncts, or commentators to the presumed principal user’s activity, and excluded from collections of visitor feedback.

In criticism of these models, Heath and vom Lehn (2004) argue that audience responses are more often collaborative than individual: they are occasions of joint action (Blumer 1969). Fellow visitors help each other to decide whether or not to approach an exhibit, how to engage with it, the meanings they give to it, and the memories they take away (Heath and vom Lehn 2004). Together they navigate a shared social space and coordinate their action to produce an emergent, adaptive definition of the situation (Thomas and Thomas ([1928] 1970). It is therefore somewhat ironic that the notion of “interactive art” refers only to the interface between user and artifact, ignoring the wider range of interactions that take place within this art world, as visitors encounter artists, curators, companions, and bystanders, not to mention nonhuman interactants such as technologies and cultural discourses (Luff et al. 2000).

Moreover, we argue that these interactional forms, though relatively mundane, are not necessarily harmonious. As well as cooperating in their appraisal of exhibits, visitors may also experience moments of conflict, tension, and discomfort in encountering the unfamiliar. Encounters within gallery spaces, like any other sites of interaction, must be stage managed, performed, and directed (Atkinson 2006) by teams of actors, who may or may not support each other’s role performances (Goffman 1959). Furthermore, the audiences they play to may remain skeptical, critical, and unconvinced, creating scenes of awkward or strained interaction (Davis 1964). This serves to counter the oft-cited criticism that SI presents a rosy-colored vision of social order and underplays conflict (Gouldner 1979; Meltzer et al. 1975). Recent defences against this allegation (Jenkins 2008; Scott 2010) have shown how SI and dramaturgy are in fact highly concerned with issues of power and inequality, albeit at a microsocial level. Indeed, studying moments of interactional strain, when social norms are broken, misread, or troublingly imperceptible, may reveal more about what these tacit rules are than would abstract, hypothetical models of conformity (Garfinkel 1967).

Shyness and the Quest for Social Scripts

To this end, this article considers one particular instance of micropolitical tension: the shyness that is experienced by many who visit contemporary museums and galleries. We suggest that, despite its ostensibly positive aims of social inclusion, the shift toward interactive art has had the unintended consequence of excluding some visitors who do not fit with its agenda because of their preferred mode of
engagement. The new expectation of performativity and heightened visibility can evoke dramaturgical stress, insofar as actors feel uncertain about how to respond appropriately. This manifests as shyness: a feeling of self-conscious inhibition about performing in public or being otherwise subjected to evaluative audience scrutiny (Crozier 2001; Scott 2007; Zimbardo 1977).

Previously (Scott et al. 2012), we argued that the model of the inclusive museum or gallery presupposes a certain kind of “ideal” visitor, who is confident, extrovert, playful, and willing to risk making a fool of themselves. Curators cite adherence to the “visitor self-discovery model,” which prescribes not only that patrons should engage actively with exhibitions, but also that they feel willing and able to. Sociability, communication, and participation are regarded as central facilitators of learning (Heath and vom Lehn 2008), the implication being that those who “fail” to engage thus will have a less pleasurable or fulfilling experience. The combination of the ideal visitor archetype and self-discovery agenda leads to the deliberate restriction of explanatory information in gallery spaces, on the assumption that visitors will work things out for themselves. We argue that this model is unrealistic because it fails to take into account the subjective experience of interacting with new and unfamiliar technologies, particularly when this involves giving some kind of publicly visible performance that may be scrutinized by onlookers. Despite the official reassurance that there are no rules of engagement and “anything goes,” visitors may still suspect that artists have a hidden agenda of implicit preferences, and worry about “getting it wrong.” There may be concerns about “knowing what to do” to respond appropriately, from operating technical devices and media to improvising an embodied movement, often in conjunction with a fear of embarrassment. As we shall show, this sensation of performance anxiety is not specific to a small minority of “shy” people, but rather is a situated response that may be evoked in all visitors.

This kind of symbolic, situational social exclusion forms an interesting parallel to older debates about social class and related demographic factors as fixed, embedded barriers to participation in cultural institutions. Bourdieu ([1973] 1997; 1996) argued that artworks were coded with exclusive symbolic meanings, accessible only to those who possessed sufficient cultural capital—specialist skills and knowledge, acquired through education—to understand them. Those who lacked these competences would never really feel at home in high culture art worlds and so were structurally disadvantaged (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991; Prior 2005). The principles and practices of the contemporary “inclusive museum” have gone some way to alleviating this problem, through such measures as abolishing entry fees and encouraging school visits. Conceptually, too, the assertion that interactive art has no intrinsic meaning, and that visitor responses create it, to some extent obviates the need to worry about “not knowing” or understanding enough intellectually. However, while these barriers to cultural competence may have been removed, new obstacles have sprung up in their place, namely the perceived lack of technological and/or performative competence. Furthermore, these new barriers may cut across traditional divisions of gender, age, class, and ethnicity, insofar as they are situationally evoked by the
design of exhibition spaces. Shyness is not a sign of individual abnormality, but a universal experience with the potential to affect everybody in some situations (Scott 2007). In the spirit of the social model of disability (Shakespeare 2006), we suggest that the “problem” of reticent engagement is not one of “shy visitors” as an impaired minority, but rather one of the design of social environments that fail to cater for a wider range of skills and competences.

Here we apply one of the authors’ (Scott 2004, 2005, 2007) SI theory of shyness as an emergent property of interaction rather than an individual pathology. In contrast to psychological models of shyness as a personality trait, temperament, or genetic disposition (for a summary of these, see Crozier 2001), Scott argues that it is a situational, deviant role into which anyone can drift (cf. Matza 1964). Shyness is a condition of dramaturgical stress, which arises when an actor perceives himself or herself to be relatively incompetent at managing a social encounter, compared to those around him or her—the Competent Other (cf. Mead 1934). There is a fear of exposing these backstage flaws to scrutiny in the frontstage region (cf. Goffman 1959) by making an embarrassing mistake, and a heightened sensitivity to the prospect of being watched by a potentially critical audience.

Those who routinely experience shyness report that the most difficult situations to deal with are those that are not clearly scripted by mutual expectations, and which therefore demand improvisation (Scott 2005). In the absence of explicit rules, and expectations about how the action will unfold, actors may feel uncertain about what to do to behave appropriately. In contrast, the situations least likely to evoke shyness are those that are relatively controlled and predictable, insofar as these lend themselves to opportunities for backstage rehearsal and supportive facework gestures from teammates (cf. Goffman 1959, 1967). Consequently, Scott (2005) argues that shyness is not a passively endured but rather an actively performed social role, involving complex skills of impression management. People use dramaturgical strategies to manage their shyness, such as “hovering on the fringes” to observe situations before joining in, preparing scripts of things to do or say and practising them in backstage rehearsals, and using material objects as props or side involvements (Goffman 1963), to deflect the audience’s attention.

The importance of control and predictability in stage managing social encounters points to the dramaturgical notion of scripting (Gagnon and Simon 1973; Goffman 1959). This echoes ethnomethodological and phenomenological ideas about social life being ordered by tacitly understood rules and taken for granted assumptions (Garfinkel 1967), which provide pragmatic recipe knowledge (Schütz 1972) about how situations will unfold and thus allow actors to assume a nonreflexive natural attitude (Schütz 1972). Social scripting theory posits that actors remain immersed in the highly contextualized minutiae of their day-to-day existence, experiencing social reality as a series of mini-dramas (Douglas and Johnson 1977; Lyman and Scott 1976). Insofar as the situations and problems they encounter are recurrent, actors seek to impose meaning upon them by searching for patterns, order, and routine. We script interaction contexts by identifying certain theatrical components.
within them, such as the event frame (cf. Goffman 1974) which provides a mutually understood definition of the situation (Thomas and Thomas [1928] 1970), the roles we expect people to play, and the episodic functions, or sequence of actions that will take place (St Clair et al. 2005; Wiederman 2005). Overall, these social scripts contribute to the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1967), whereby shared beliefs and expectations at the micro level are consolidated into macro level, institutionalized, normative codes of conduct, which appear to actors as real and external. Communicated through culture, media, and socialization, these wider scripts provide guidelines for role performances in situated contexts, which help to reduce much of the anxiety and uncertainty actors would otherwise feel at having to improvise social action (Wiederman 2005). According to this theory, actors prefer situations that have clear social scripts, and when faced with scenarios that are unscripted, or whose frames are ambiguously framed, they will seek to create one.

METHODS AND DATA

The findings presented below come from an EPSRC-funded project investigating how wireless technologies and pervasive (hidden or invisible) computational devices embedded in social environments affect shyness: by evoking, mediating, or potentially attenuating this reaction in those who use them. This was an interdisciplinary collaboration between the departments of Sociology and Informatics at the University of Sussex, which involved three separate studies of different empirical settings. Our study explored the perspectives of various players in the interactive art world, including not only visitors but also those we call art providers (interactive artists, software designers, museum and art gallery curators, volunteers, and paid gallery staff). This article focuses on the visitor experience, but elsewhere (Scott et al. 2012), we have discussed the latter group’s views.

We conducted two multi-method case studies of UK-based interactive art exhibitions: Fabrica, a small local contemporary art gallery in Brighton, and the V&A (Victoria and Albert), a large traditional museum in London. In 2009, Fabrica was housing an exhibition called “Chameleon,” by the artist Tina Gonsalves. This consisted of filmed portraits of ordinary people as “talking heads,” whose facial expressions subtly changed in response to the visitor watching them, mirroring their emotions. Pictures and information about this exhibition can be found in http://fabrica.org.uk/exhibitions/chameleon-tina-gonsalves/#lightbox/0/. The V&A’s exhibition, “Decode,” in 2010, contained a variety of pieces using digital computer code, which allowed visitors to leave traces of themselves behind in the artworks, thus contributing to their evolving form. For example, one exhibit (“Videogrid”) was a wall of short films made by visitors, which kept changing as new recordings replaced older ones; another (“Weave Mirror”) was a wooden sculpture that changed shape to reflect the body silhouette of the person walking toward it; and a third (“Venetian Mirror”) created an image, projected onto the gallery wall, of an ancient oil painting of the visitor seated before it. Pictures and further information about
this exhibition can be found in http://www.vam.ac.uk/microsites/decode/exhibition/
interactivity.

Working from an interpretivist epistemological stance and SI theoretical framework, we sought to understand the subjective meanings that visitors gave to their experiences, whilst verifying this to some extent through empirical descriptions of observable behavior. Bearing in mind Scott’s (2007) theory of shyness as a situational state rather than an individual attribute, we did not presume that there was a minority of “shy visitors” whom we should study, but rather that anyone could become shy within the social setting of the gallery, and thus that we could potentially sample from the whole population of visitors. This was a strategy that we were able to pursue more systematically with some techniques than others within our multi-method research design.

Our fieldwork consisted of qualitative and quantitative participant observations of visitor behavior in both galleries (conducted over four sessions of 2–3 hours in each gallery, including overheard conversations, descriptive fieldnotes, and nonverbal gestures that we defined as indicators of shyness, such as blushing, gaze aversion, and closed bodily postures); sixty tracking maps that recorded patterns of movement around the spaces (in Fabrica only; conducted systematically on every fifth visitor); ten gallery “walk-around” interviews, in which visitors volunteered to be accompanied by a researcher and give a live commentary on their experience of the exhibitions; six telephone interviews (with visitors who had contacted us to express an interest in the research, after leaving the gallery); 150 in situ visitor questionnaires (fifty at Fabrica, one hundred at V&A); video and still photography in each exhibition; and color-coded “emotion maps,” through which six visitors indicated their feelings about different exhibits by labeling thumbnail images of them with different colored stickers. With the art providers, we conducted ten semi-structured individual interviews and ran a focus group with eight local artists and curators. Hinton-Smith also worked as a volunteer at Fabrica, which gave her some insights into the role of art providers and helped her to build rapport with interviewees. To obtain additional background data, we visited thirty other exhibitions, created a web discussion forum and conducted an online quantitative and qualitative questionnaire with over hundred respondents. The qualitative data were analyzed by three authors of our team (Scott, Hinton-Smith, and Härmä) using Atlas.ti software, and we routinely compared and merged our findings to ensure inter-rater reliability.

It is also worth noting that three of the research team self-identified as shy people ourselves, and this undoubtedly affected our relations with participants. Elsewhere (Scott et al. 2012) we have provided a reflexive, confessional account of the experience of being “reluctant researchers” who felt shy about managing various aspects of the data collection process.

RESULTS

The principal finding of our study was that shyness was a common and contextually appropriate response of visitors to interactive art. Far from there being a small
minority of unfortunate “shy visitors” who struggled to engage, as the self-discovery model would suggest, we found that most people approaching the exhibits displayed and/or reported some degree of shyness. That is not to say, of course, that nobody “performed” demonstrably as the artworks required — on the contrary, the majority did show a willingness to engage actively rather than remain as passive spectators. Nevertheless, the ways in which most visitors did so conveyed a distinct impression of reticence, self-consciousness, hesitancy, wariness, or inhibition. Insofar as the majority of the respondents did not describe themselves in questionnaires and interviews as generally “shy people,” this lends support to the idea that the shyness they experienced was situationally evoked by the interaction context of performative exhibitions.

Below we unpack this argument in more detail, drawing on the notion of social scripting as a crucial means by which actors negotiate and sustain interaction order. Most situations rely upon tacit knowledge of shared social scripts to guide people’s behavior, but the interactive gallery subverts this by deliberately removing such cues to create a state of anomie, or normlessness (Durkheim [1893] 1984). This is rather disconcerting for the actors in that situation, who nevertheless respond in agentic, skilful ways to restore a sense of order. Thus firstly, we consider how, in the absence of a formal, explicit set of guidelines for behavior, gallery visitors search for the normative framework that they feel must be there: they presume that there must be a script but that they are too deficient in technical or performative competence to perceive it. Next, we see how the failure to discern this script evokes situational shyness: dramaturgical stress about one’s ability to participate effectively, manifest as reticent or inhibited responses to exhibits. However, this shyness is not a passively endured state but rather an actively managed performance: the third section shows how visitors adaptively seek out replacement scripts, by looking to their peers for a definition of the situation. Finally, we consider those who rebel against the whole idea of performative engagement with interactive art, choosing instead to remain in the role of the detached spectator. The abandonment of scripts serves as a challenge to the dominant assumptions and value judgements of this contemporary art world.

Finding the Script

The main reason why interactive installations made so many visitors feel shy was the absence of a clear set of rules or expectations to script their behavior. As noted above, artists working in this genre tend to restrict or even negate the provision of written explanations, information and instructions about their exhibits, and leave it up to their audiences to respond however they like. While these intentions may be understood by seasoned regular consumers, who are comfortably immersed in the artworld’s shared universe of meaning (Berger and Luckmann 1967), the more casual, occasional visitors from the lay public seemed less enthusiastic. Many of our participants voiced uneasiness about the prospect of improvising a performance in case they got it “wrong,” as if there were a distinct “right” way of doing it.
(cf. Becker 1986), and skeptically reviewed their own conduct in postmortem reflections (Crossley 2006). For example, this visitor wrote in an evaluation of the Fabrica exhibition that he/she was concerned about whether he/she had given the desired or appropriate reaction:

Sometimes I was thinking, was I doing this right? Should I be jumping up and down, should I be more active? Should I have stronger expressions? (Anonymous visitor questionnaire 2)

The remarks of another visitor indicated an awareness that her relatively subdued mode of engagement did not fit the artist’s agenda and might be regarded as deviant:

Upon leaving after a medium length visit, one woman who engaged with the exhibition considerably with interest, tells me, ‘Very clever. I’ll have to come back when I’m a bit livelier’. (Hinton-Smith fieldnotes, 17.10.2010)

A common assumption was that the artist had a clear message or intention that they were trying to convey, and that there was an implicit, secretly preferred mode of response. The implications here of trickery, manipulation, and deceit led to the formation of a suspicion awareness context (Glaser and Strauss 1964), whereby one interaction partner suspects that they are being duped by the other and thus that they are vulnerable to exploitation. This sense of exclusion from a set of privileged, restricted knowledge was identified by Simmel (1908) as a characteristic of the “stranger” position in interaction, and is central to the experience of shyness (Scott 2004). Actors feel especially concerned about performing appropriately when they regard themselves as outsiders to a group of Competent Others, who do seem to know the rules and therefore have the power to be critically evaluative (Scott 2005, 2007). Being made to improvise a performance before such an audience is especially dramaturgically stressful, and in these situations shy actors prefer to follow others than to lead (Scott 2005, 2007). Gallery visitors may hold the view that the artist is the “expert” and they are content just to learn from them: they do not necessarily want to be positioned center-stage as protagonists in interpreting the meaning of an artwork, and/or may feel ill-equipped to assume this role. This resonates with critiques within medical sociology of the move towards patient-centered consultations and shared decision making, whereby it is argued that patients are reluctant to take on the active role ascribed to them and prefer instead to defer to the doctor’s authority and officially qualified expertise (Pilnick and Dingwall 2011).

Consequently, many visitors expressed a strong desire for the provision of more information and instructions. They wanted the unspoken rules to be made more explicit, to find out what was expected of them in order to avoid risking the exposure of their (presumed, relative) ignorance. For example, this walk-around interview revealed how one participant chose her favorite exhibit on the basis of its unambiguous design:

I think that one, because it’s so obvious what you’re supposed to do, I felt less self-conscious about doing it. I’ll not be making an idiot out of myself doing the
wrong thing. It’s set. There’s something that you obviously stand in front of, and it says it, in big letters. I think some of the others could do with having a bit more, bigger instructions… You have to be brave to try things without necessarily knowing what it is that you’re doing, and that makes it feel self-conscious: the fear or making a mistake or doing something wrong. (Rebecca, V&A museum visitor)

Losing the Script

In the absence of clear rules, the unscripted nature of visitors’ encounters with exhibits evoked an array of “shy” responses. Loss of script is identified as a major cause of embarrassment in interaction (Gross and Stone 1964), when actors feel uncertain of how to enact and coordinate their role performances. In turn, the anticipation of this interactional strain may lead to shyness as an actively deployed response, insofar as reticence and inhibition are subjectively experienced as embarrassment-avoidance strategies (Scott 2007).

For some, merely being present in the unfamiliar, ambiguously designed space was enough to elicit this reaction. Conspicuousness is a common trigger of blushing, the hallmark of shyness and embarrassment, in that even before a performance begins, actors may anticipate potential blunders and experience unwanted social attention (Crozier 2006; Leary 1996). Dramaturgically, this entails a self-conscious awareness of oneself as a performer, unwittingly thrust out into the frontstage region (Goffman 1959), where any mistakes will be subject to critical audience scrutiny. In the gallery setting, such visitors’ perceptions of their Shy “Me”—an image of oneself as inept at interaction, from the view of the Competent Other (Scott 2004; cf. Mead 1934)—were accentuated by the lurking suspicion that they were excluded from this secretive, insular art world because they did not “know the rules.” As this interviewee explained,

I can go into a gallery and feel like I stand out, I kind of feel like I am being watched by other people, being judged. It’s kind of automatic, instant. A lot of the time the feeling hits me before I’ve even had a chance to think about it.

(James, Fabrica visitor)

For others, shyness was evoked by the immediate performative context of engaging with exhibits. Without the support of a social script, actors might forget their lines, fluff the delivery, make an embarrassing physical pratfall or “blank out” completely (Schechner 2002; cf. Miller 1996). As discussed above, new symbolic barriers to accessibility have emerged in the interactive museum, in terms of visitors’ felt lack of technological and/or performative competence. In the first case, we observed many visitors appearing nervous and flustered about using the digital media embedded in the exhibits. This can be understood within the wider context of science and technology being perceived, as art traditionally was, as an exclusive domain of tacit knowledge and expertise (Collins and Evans 2007). Where machinery or software formed part of the design interface but was not rendered comprehensible by clear instructions, those unfamiliar with it felt wary of “doing it
wrong” or “breaking it” through some clumsy blunder. The following observational fieldnotes illustrate how this fear created a barrier to engagement:

Group of three men and one woman near entrance. Woman: “Oh, I don’t understand. I’m lost already.”

Two young women come up and do the same - giggly and confident but don’t realise about pressing screen, so it doesn’t work. They wander off, embarrassed. (Scott fieldnotes, V&A museum)

In the second case, visitors were self-conscious about performing in the more conventional, theatrical sense: having to express themselves in a demonstrative way through some form of embodied action that would be witnessed by an audience. The most shyness-inducing exhibits seemed to be those that required visitors to enact a bodily movement or vocal utterance, insofar as these made them feel personally exposed and vulnerable to scrutiny. As one interviewee put it,

I would not like to do anything that required me to do something like jumping, or shouting or something noticeable. (Kay, V&A visitor)

The absence of rules and ostensible reassurance that “anything goes” opened up an infinite range of possible performances, which was paradoxically intimidating in its freedom. Improvisation in social situations is a common trigger of dramaturgical stress, for it renders the actor vulnerable to criticism as a writer as well as performer of the show: they become doubly responsible for making sure that it unfolds smoothly (Scott 2007). As stand-up comedians have testified (Cook 1994; Oddey 1999), the prospect of having one’s performance critically evaluated is much worse when it is one’s “real self” at stake rather than a scripted character that one has donned. For example, at the V&A, the aforementioned exhibit “Videogrid” invited people to make a short film of themselves, which was then projected onto a large screen alongside others in a grid pattern. Another required visitors to make a vocal sound into a mouthpiece, which created colorful visual patterns on a screen. The following visitor’s response showed how both of these exhibits made him self-consciously aware of himself as an incompetent social actor:

The moving video wall and the slow changing dark mirror. Even after over 30 years of life images of me can seem strange and not consistent with how I imagine myself. Also the one that required you to speak. I felt that other people would internally criticise what I would say and I didn’t feel confident about what I could say. (Mike, V&A visitor)

Not surprisingly, this dramaturgical stress was heightened when actors found themselves alone center-stage, giving a solo performance. Without the support of teammates—companions and fellow visitors who would share in the limelight—actors became more acutely aware of their burden of responsibility for carrying the show. Both our observational and interview data confirmed that gallery
visitors were more self-conscious and reticent about engaging with exhibits when they were frontstage alone, compared to those who visited with companions. Many reported that they were shy about even entering galleries by themselves, quite apart from having to perform to the staff by demonstrating (or faking) interest and enjoyment, and preferred to be surrounded by others to deflect the audience’s attention:

I think something like this you probably need to be in a group or with someone, to get better value, because I think then I’d be less self-conscious. (Rebecca, V&A visitor)

I didn’t really like it, I have to say. But, as I say, I think if I’d have been with someone, I might not have felt so self-conscious. (Lynne, V&A visitor)

Those who were brave enough to perform alone looked visibly embarrassed, perhaps concerned that their actions might be judged “wrong” or inappropriate. In the absence of teammates to validate their performance, actors were reluctant to venture a line of action (Goffman 1963) that might not fit the elusive, intangible script. For example, one V&A exhibit, “Dandelion,” required visitors to blast a noisy hairdryer at an image of a flower on a screen, which made its petals fly away. As the screen was large, this demanded quite elaborate, extended body movements (sweeping the arm, crouching, and bending, etc.), which, combined with the fact that only one person could use the equipment at a time, rendered the visitor highly conspicuous:

Man aged 25ish alone. Picks up hairdryer self-consciously, looks around, but no one else there - think he’s looking for a friend. Doesn’t seem to want to do it without an audience. Looks very embarrassed. Hardly uses hairdryer, puts it down and walks off. (Scott fieldnotes, V&A, 27.02.2010)

This self-consciousness can be understood as a particular form of stage fright which emerges during the performance itself, when an actor remains critically detached from the role that they are playing. Hayman (1969) makes a distinction between actors who stand “inside” versus “outside” of their characters, “finding the role in oneself” as opposed to “finding oneself in a role.” This mirrors the distinction between two classic theories of acting: respectively, Stanislavski’s (1948) “Method” of immersing oneself in the character, and Brecht’s technique of critically reflecting on it (Willett 1992). Hayman suggests that the former type of actors are more convincing, whereas the latter can be uncomfortable to watch, insofar as the audience recognizes the separation of actor from character, and so cannot suspend disbelief in the reality presented. Stage fright, meanwhile, is the actor’s own view of this situation: a self-reflexive awareness of role distance (Goffman 1961), whereby the actor stands outside of his or her performance and views it critically from the perspective of the audience. S/he remains consciously aware of the contrived nature of the performance and of the potential for mistakes, which makes it difficult to get into character and lose oneself in the moment. This effect is of course exacerbated
when an actual blunder occurs, as in the following case of a visitor fearing that his technological incompetence had been exposed:

[Videogrid] A crowd of about ten people waiting politely. Only one man wants to have a go. Makes film of himself doing a slow motion punch, but very self-conscious - keeps looking around and smiling at everyone in embarrassment. Especially embarrassed when it doesn’t work and he has to re-make the film; the punching gesture has lost its humour and spontaneity and looks even more contrived. Walks away shortly afterwards. (Scott fieldnotes, V&A, 27.02.2010)

Consequently, visitors expressed a desire for greater privacy when engaging with exhibits. Feeling uncertain as to how to behave, and concerned with how their performances might be evaluated, they felt it would be dramaturgically safer to be able to experiment alone. For example, one visitor explained her preference for an exhibit that was surrounded by an opaque screen: this created a backstage region (Goffman 1959), wherein actors could hide out of view of the audience, playing with ideas and rehearsing their lines of action:

You know that you could make a few really good things if you... if nobody was watching you, you could have a really good time. I think it's good the way it's screened off, because nobody can see us. (Katie, V&A visitor)

Replacing the Script

Visitor shyness was neither enduring nor endured, however; instead it was resourcefully managed. In the absence of an externally imposed set of rules and expectations, patrons sought out alternative normative frameworks to guide their behavior. They did this by looking toward three types of fellow actors in the setting, whom they co-opted as script-writers to provide a new definition of the situation (Thomas and Thomas [1928] 1970). Adhering to these replacement scripts, they felt reassured that their performances were contextually appropriate within that local world and thus that they were safe from judgement.

Teammate Validation

First, visitors who were accompanied by family or friends often shared with them the responsibility for defining the situation and setting the rules. Our fieldnotes showed repeatedly that visitors appeared more confident and were more demonstrably performative when they were in groups, compared to the self-consciousness they exhibited when alone frontstage. The solidarity and cohesiveness of these groups formed a protective shell around the actor, shielding them from the scrutinizing judgements of outsiders and obviating the need to worry about measuring up to any external standards or expectations. They created a self-contained local world with its own codes of conduct, which could be freely decided upon by the members, and whose reality remained intact for as long as they upheld its definition as such
(cf. Berger and Luckmann 1967; Thomas and Thomas [1928] 1970). Thus we found numerous instances of visitors playing to each other in groups, collaborating on the cocreation of performative rules and negotiating lines of joint action:

[Videogrid] Young couple from earlier. Seem very confident and keen to have a go. Watch impatiently from the side, trying to peek around people. Within one minute she says “Shall we record one?” and he says “Yeah!” They do a silly film together, pulling faces, then immediately go round to the other side of the screen to see the results. I follow them: they are taking photos of each other standing next to their square on the grid, pointing to themselves in the video and grinning.

(Scott fieldnotes, V&A, 27.02.2010)

Dramaturgically, these groups served as performance teams (Goffman 1959), who would give a collective display and whose members could be relied upon to provide dramaturgical loyalty (Goffman 1959) to one another. Any potential blunders would be concealed by supportive teammates’ gestures of protective facework (Goffman 1967) to prevent the risk of embarrassment. Actors were able to take comfort in the principle of there being “safety in numbers”: whatever they did could not be “wrong,” almost by definition, because those around them were either doing the same thing or normalizing the action as legitimate within their shared universe of meaning. As this interviewee explained,

With other people it just gives you that confidence, because when you’re by yourself, you can be really self-conscious and like other people might kind of think you’re a bit weird talking to yourself... I think maybe if I was with like a group of friends, I would do have a go [on Videogrid], like they are now. (Jiao, V&A visitor)

Following the Herd

A similar pattern occurred in the case of visitors who looked to strangers to define the rules of the situation. Although these were dramaturgically separate “units,” acting alongside each other in situations of co-presence (Goffman 1963; vom Lehn et al. 2001), they could monitor each other’s encounters with the exhibits to work out what their script was: learning what to do and then applying this recipe knowledge (Schütz 1972) as a guide to managing their own conduct. This might entail either sequential individual performances (one visitor observing another’s behavior and then replicating it) or parallel, collective performances (a visitor joining in with or acting alongside others). In both cases, disparate actors came together to turn a situation of unfocused interaction into one with a shared focus of attention (Goffman 1961), thereby distributing the responsibility for sustaining the smooth flow of interaction order.

In most cases, this meant that erstwhile shy visitors could drift into a state of non-shyness, as again, they gained confidence from the reassurance that fellow actors were doing the same thing: in this situated context, at least, they would be following
the locally defined rules. In Scott’s (2007) previous study, self-defined “shy” people explained that they liked to spend time watching social situations before entering into them, in order to ensure that they had grasped the unspoken rules correctly and understood how they “worked”: one participant compared this to watching a fairground ride go through once before getting onto it. Goffman (1959) also refers to the dramaturgical circumspection actors tend to exercise when they approach unfamiliar settings, so that while affecting an expression of nonchalance, they are in fact vigilantly surveying the scene, anticipating potential sources of interactional strain. For example, “Body Paint” was an exhibit that responded to large, sweeping bodily movements by displaying a colorful spray of “paint” across a screen. This was quite embarrassing to engage with on one’s own, but those who were able to watch others could simply imitate them, which was less dramaturgically risky:

[Body Paint] Middle aged couple. Woman makes small hesitant gestures at one edge of the screen, almost writing, just one hand. Then stands to the side watching and smiling, then starts doing the same on the other side. Big gap in the middle of the screen. Then another man aged 50ish comes up and stands in between them - looks like he wants to fill the gap in the screen with color, but ends up mimicking their modest gestures. Then a young Asian woman comes up to take his place, and also makes small gestures. When she leaves, the original couple seem to grow more confident - she makes bolder, broader gestures. (Scott fieldnotes, 27.02.2010)

In other cases, visitors approaching a populated exhibit found that the people there had not managed to create a new definition of the situation and were standing about somewhat awkwardly. Here, the opposite effect occurred, whereby actors drifted into shyness because of the absence of a social script. Thus shyness emerged collectively and contagiously as a product of the interaction context, just as non-shyness did in the previous scenario. For example, the exhibit “Make Out” was a large wall covered in tiny photographs of couples kissing, emphasizing their diverse range of ethnicities and sexualities. Visitors could touch any photograph to change it, but this was not explained in any formal instructions:

[Make Out]. People hanging back, no one seems sure how it works or whether it’s interactive. Couple approach, man touches screen but nothing happens, so walk away. Another man alone takes photo then leaves. Lots of people do this and gravitate to [another exhibit] instead. (Scott fieldnotes, 27.02.2010)

Nevertheless, as new members joined the group, or individual actors broke the silence by proffering a gesture, the situation could revert to one of collective confidence. This underlines the point that (non-)shyness is not an inherent quality of the individual but rather a contingent, emergent product of situated interaction contexts:

[Videogrid] Long pause. No one doing anything, almost contagious silence. About five of us looking at each other. Those two young men come back and look at the screen but don’t make another film. They look at me suspiciously, maybe seeing
me taking notes! I break the tension by moving away, then they do too. Then young couple who had been watching from the side go up and make a film. Then silence again for about five minutes. A few people standing back against the wall, pointing and talking about it, even taking photos but not ‘actively’ participating by making films. Eventually a couple start trying to pluck up the courage to make a film. Woman says “Go on, I’ll do one with you.” Then a man follows her. People start laughing, breaks tension. Others start copying. Lots of laughter, almost contagious. (Scott fieldnotes, 27.02.2010)

Imagined Audiences

A third scenario occurred when visitors approached exhibits in groups but remained dramaturgically alone, because those around them did not cooperate as teammates. The same pattern could be observed in lone visitors. As noted above, when visitors engaged individually, they often felt self-consciously aware of their vulnerability frontstage, as solo performers who could not rely on the support of fellow cast members. This was due to the uncomfortable reflexive perception of themselves as actors, standing conspicuously alone center-stage, giving a rather contrived and artificial performance. However, this feeling could be attenuated if actors could imagine themselves to be playing to an audience, or to be part of a supportive performance team. Consequently, we found that some visitors dealt with this awkwardness by invoking an imaginary audience of peers who would acknowledge and validate their performance.

There were several instances in which a visitor tried and failed to interact competently with the technology, and reacted to the embarrassment by speaking to an imaginary audience. Usually they gave remedial utterances to apologize, account for and repair any interactional strain or loss of face caused by a behavioral mishap (Goffman 1971). For example, response cries (Goffman 1963) such as “oops!” and “oh dear!” serve as gestures of role distance, communicating that the mistake was out of character (Goffman 1961). In playing to these audiences, it was as if the embarrassment the actors felt could be soaked up by these hypothetical teammates, who functioned just as effectively as “real” interaction partners:

[Dandelion] Couple, 35ish. Woman goes up and has a go. Man follows her, sees what it is and bursts out laughing, making fun of her: “Got to get a picture of that!” Takes photo. She walks off saying “I love that…” a bit defensively to no one in particular, looking self-conscious. (Scott fieldnotes, 27.02.2010)

[Dandelion] Young couple (25ish). He picks up hairdryer and has a go while she watches. They discuss and laugh, then walk off. Man says “Oh dear!” as if he has to account for having enjoyed something frivolous and childish. (Scott fieldnotes, 27.02.2010)

Abandoning the Script

Finally, we can consider a group of visitors who sidestepped the whole problem of finding, losing, and replacing the script of interactive art, by abandoning the
performative agenda altogether. Some people remained defiantly committed to the
traditional model of art consumption that positioned audiences as passive spectators,
and refused to comply with the demand for practical, demonstrative engagement.
They did not feel the need to interact with the displays in order to understand
them, and enjoyed simply watching from the wings. This resonates with Scott’s
(2007) remarks about the identity politics of a hypothetical Shy Pride movement, a
counter-discourse (Foucault [1976] 1980) in which shyness might be celebrated, not
pathologized, as a “different but equal” way of being.

We observed a minority of visitors who did not interact with the exhibits in
the manner prescribed by the self-discovery agenda, yet did not appear inhibited.
It seems that rather than this being an expression of shyness, a frustrated desire
to perform, it was a positive gesture of resistance, made by those who did not
want to perform. As these visitors explained in interviews, they found just as much
pleasure in observing others engaging with the exhibits and experiencing the artwork
vicariously, as they were expected to gain through direct personal contact. Jiao, a
V&A visitor, exemplified this view when she said,

“I’m happy to watch other people … I think you can appreciate it by looking,
because it’s quite self-explanatory what’s going on.”

Another visitor concurred,

Katie: I also think it doesn’t have to be you that’s doing it. You can still see what
it’s doing.
Interviewer: That’s interesting.
Katie: I wouldn’t feel like I would have to be the person doing it. Which some
people want to be, don’t they? Like little kids want to be the one who’s having
the go … I’d be quite happy to stand back and just have a look at what it’s
doing. Like, it wouldn’t bother me.

CONCLUSION

Interactive art, although explicitly designed to enhance the visitor’s experience,
ironically ignores the social interaction context of these occasions, and the diverse
skills, preferences, and competences that people bring to the setting. The “interac-
tive” element of these installations refers only to the interface between individual
user and exhibit, without considering the myriad kinds of social interaction that
go on between visitors and other players in this artworld: artists, curators, gallery
and museum staff, technologies, and most importantly, fellow visitors—whether
as companions or strangers in situations of co-presence. Dramaturgically, they are
all implicated in the staging of a collective team performance, which is viewed by
potentially critical audiences. Visitors must attend not only to engaging with the
exhibits but also to performing this engagement, through displays of enjoyment,
interest, knowledge, understanding, and competence.
Not surprisingly, such a challenge evokes dramaturgical stress, particularly because artists deliberately withhold instructional information, wanting visitors to make their own interpretations. Social scripts, important to the smooth running of any interaction context, are of vital concern in this scenario, being conspicuous by their absence. Without the crutch of familiar rules and guidelines for behavior, the situation lacks control and predictability, and there is a greater perceived risk of getting the performance “wrong” in the eyes of critical bystanders. This creates feelings of shyness, reticence and inhibition, as a normal, understandable response to the dramaturgical stress of improvisation. Rather than speaking of “shy visitors” as an unfortunate minority who differ from the mainstream, therefore, we should recognize shyness as a common role performance that emerges from the situated interaction context of the gallery. The “ideal visitor” envisaged by the self-discovery model as someone bold and confident is unrealistic; there is a discordance between the agenda of these art providers and the pragmatic, mundane preferences of lay visitors. This observation may also apply to other contemporary cultural settings that combine integrated digital media with ambiguous rules of conduct and high social visibility, such as college campuses incorporating Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs).

Nevertheless, actors are resourceful in seeking out replacement scripts to adapt to this state of normlessness. They may look to fellow actors to provide a definition of the situation, whether these be companion teammates, co-present strangers, or imagined audiences who validate their role performances. Alternatively, they may reject the performative agenda altogether, sticking resolutely to the role of the detached spectator. This lends support to Scott’s theory that shyness is not a fixed, inherent state, nor is it not passively suffered or endured, but rather that it is strategically managed by actors who are committed to upholding interaction order. If we accept that shyness is a normal, common, socially intelligible response to interaction contexts that evoke dramaturgical stress, and that it is situationally emergent, contingent and processual, then it becomes important not to pathologize such responses as individual failings. In the context of interactive galleries, shyness should be accepted as an equally valid and legitimate mode of engagement with the players in this controversial artworld: these actors are making a strong micropolitical statement through their very silence. Reticence, inhibition, and passivity can therefore be reframed as securely self-contained introversion, detachment, and active disengagement with an imposed and unwelcomed institutional agenda.

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