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THE POLITICS OF INTERFIELD ANTAGONISMS

Journalism, the visual arts and the et al. controversy

Judith Bernanke and Sean Phelan

Bourdieu’s field theory has been used to analyse the internal dynamics of the journalistic field, and to compare journalistic fields in different national contexts. However, studies of the power relations between the journalistic field and other social fields have been less common, despite the theory’s general assumptions about “the media’s” capacity to shape the coordinates and subjectivities of agents elsewhere. This article explores the interfield antagonisms between the journalistic field and visual arts field that followed the nomination of the artist collective “et al.” as New Zealand’s representative at the 2005 Venice Biennale. We focus on a particular journalistic interview where the different subjectivities of both fields encountered each other directly. Using conversation and discourse analysis as methodological supplements, we highlight how the journalist’s rhetorical strategies enacted a logic of symbolic domination which decried the perceived unwillingness of the artists to render themselves accountable to the New Zealand “public”. At the same time, we show how et al.’s counter-response politicized journalistic conventions normally taken for granted, and enabled an expression of artistic autonomy against the symbolic violence and naturalized authority of the journalistic field.

KEYWORDS antagonism; conversation analysis; cultural politics; field theory; interview; New Zealand journalism; visual arts

Introduction

Bourdieu’s field theory has been used to analyse the internal dynamics of the journalistic field, and to compare journalistic fields in different national contexts (see, e.g., Benson 2005; Benson and Hallin 2007; Dickinson and Memon 2012; Krause 2011). However, studies of the power relations between the journalistic field and other social fields have been less common, despite the theory’s general assumption about “the media’s” capacity to shape the coordinates and subjectivities of agents elsewhere. Couldry’s (2003, 655) criticism that field theory researchers have shied away from offering “a general account of the impacts of media representation on social space” now needs qualifying, because of the subsequent uptake of Bourdieu’s work. Nonetheless, writing in 2014, Couldry (2014, 233) still wonders if field theory’s conception of society as a composite of different social fields with their own logics, rules and practices1 hinders its capacity to illuminate the “cross-field” and “transversal” effects of media power.

Couldry recognizes the value of field theory as a mezzo-level framework for illuminating the relationship between journalism and other social spaces. Benson and Neveu (2005)
likewise suggest it offers a potential bridge between “micro-level” analyses of journalism practice and “macro-societal” studies of journalism’s dialectical relationship with other social fields, most obviously the economic and political fields. However, most empirical applications of field theory have focused on how journalistic practices are articulated in different professional contexts (see, e.g., Marchetti 2005; Rupar 2007), though some researchers have gone beyond an internal analysis of the journalistic field to explore the hierarchical structuring of the broader social space in which the journalistic field encounters other fields (see, e.g., Lingard and Rawolle 2004; Phelan 2011). Benson (2005) cites a practical explanation for the relative under-analysis of interfield relations in the resource-intensive nature of researching across fields.

This article presents a case study of the relationship between the journalistic field and the visual arts field. We explore the interfield antagonisms that followed the nomination of the artist collective “et al.” as New Zealand’s representative at the 2005 Venice Biennale. We focus on a particular journalistic interview where the very different subjectivities and performative dispositions of both fields encountered each other directly, in a fashion that amplified rather than neutralized their differences. Using conversation analysis and discourse analysis as methodological supplements, we highlight how the journalist’s rhetorical strategies enacted a logic of symbolic domination, which, mediated by the naturalized authority of the journalistic field, decried the perceived unwillingness of the artists to render themselves accountable to the New Zealand “public”. At the same time, we show how et al.’s counter-response politicized journalistic conventions normally taken for granted, and enabled an expression of artistic autonomy against the symbolic violence of the dominant media representations.

The relevant interview was published on June 23, 2005 in the Wellington-based newspaper, The Dominion Post, one of a number of New Zealand newspapers owned by the Australian company Fairfax Media. It came on the back of an extended period of media denigration of et al. for, among other things, their refusal to speak to the media directly, their alleged contempt for the “NZ taxpayers” who had funded the country’s participation in the Venice Biennale, and for what one Member of Parliament, Deborah Cod- dington, called—in the initial naming of the controversy—as their production of “crap” in the name of art. Local broadcast media, especially the primetime current affairs television show, Holmes, played a key role in bringing national attention to the story in June 2004, and inscribed it in a cross-field dynamic that extended to the political and economic fields. In his characteristically mocking and theatrical style, Paul Holmes, the presenter of the eponymous show, captured the news values of a story that would ordinarily go unmentioned outside specialist visual arts media and journalism:

Should we, the taxpayers, be stumping up half a million dollars to send to the Venice Bien- nale, the world’s most prestigious contemporary arts festival, the work of an artist whose latest work is a toilet braying like a donkey? Ask yourself. (Keane 2004)

Interest in the story waned in the subsequent 12 months, with most non-specialist coverage limited to short reports about the launch of et al.’s exhibit in Venice in June 2005 (Bernanke 2013). The main exception was The Dominion Post. Along with publishing 43 articles that mentioned et al. in 2004 and 2005 (more than twice that of the country’s biggest selling newspaper, the New Zealand Herald), the paper devoted three editorials to the story. The interview analysed here was published to coincide with the start of the Venice exhibit, and represented the culmination of the ongoing efforts of the country’s journalists,
led by *The Dominion Post*, to engage the artist collective directly. It was billed as something of a media event: New Zealanders would finally get to hear directly from what the first television report called the “enigmatic” et al.

We begin by examining the journalistic interview as a “performative discourse” (Broersma 2010a, 18). Underlying the news interview’s obvious features is the journalistic “doxa”: tacit beliefs or values, particular to the journalistic field, that are accepted as self-evident, natural and objective (Bourdieu 2005; Schultz 2007). Conversely, the subsequent section considers the performative dimensions of et al.’s expressive practice as an exemplar of the *avant-garde* identity that the artist collective enacts in the news interview.

The next two sections present a discourse analysis of the exchange between the interlocutors in the e-mail interview: *The Dominion Post* reporter, Robyn McLean, and the different “spokespeople” for the artist collective. Conceptualizing the interview as a “course of interaction to which participants contribute” by turns (Clayman and Heritage 2002, 13), our analysis draws on aspects of conversation analysis to examine the journalist’s rhetoric and the artists’ strategies of resistance. The asynchronous e-mail interview clearly differs from the typical face-to-face exchanges studied by conversation analysts. We focus on how the interlocutors’ rhetorical strategies in the interview signify their distinctive fields of practice. In that respect, our analysis highlights the discursive character of field differences, contrary to what some see as Bourdieu’s neglect of the constitutive effects of discourse (see Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999).

We conclude by summarizing the theoretical import of our analysis, highlighting the significance of the symbolic violence produced by the different interview participants. We also consider the long-term legacy of the et al. case, which was most pointedly captured in a retrospective report commissioned by Creative New Zealand, the state-funded arts development agency that had selected et al. to participate at Venice.

**Journalistic Performativity and the News Interview**

Bourdieu (1991) insisted that communicative practices should always be studied as cultural performances within the broader fields of practice in which they are embedded and generated. He underlined the importance of analysing the social and political conditions of language use, in opposition to what he saw as the tendency of speech-act theorists like J. L. Austin to locate the authority of performative utterances in the illocutionary force of the words themselves. “Linguistic utterances … are always produced in particular contexts or markets and the properties of these markets endow linguistic products with a certain ‘value’” (Bourdieu 1991, 18).

Within the journalistic field, journalists’ symbolic power derives from routine strategies and styles of representation, which are mediated by a journalistic habitus that maintains and promotes journalists’ claim to truth, objectivity and facticity (Schultz 2007; Tuchman 1972). Broersma (2008, 2010a) describes these ritualistic approaches to the construction of journalistic meaning as performative. Journalists convey truth by convincingly “(re)staging” the events that occur in the “real world”. Journalism’s performative power is enacted through its capacity to simultaneously “describe and produce phenomena” (Broersma 2010a, 18).

As with other Anglo-American news cultures, New Zealand journalism has been historically aligned with a “fact-based” news style. In contrast to the analytical “reflective style” of opinion-based journalism, the fact-based news style presents events either through an
informative discursive approach or appealing story-telling conventions. Broersma (2010a, 25) argues it is this factuality that gives journalism its “performative power”. Journalists’ role in constructing the world they report on is simultaneously downplayed, obscured by the performative authority of the claim to provide factually correct representations of social reality (Broersma 2010b). The ontological and epistemological tensions between social “reality” and its journalistic “representation” largely go unproblematized, as part of the routinized operation of journalism practice.

Interviews play a key role in journalists’ reporting routines, both in the “back-stage” sourcing of timely information and the “front-stage” presentation of journalism (Gans 1979). Incorporating first-hand accounts from eyewitnesses and quotes from different sources enacts a commitment to journalistic objectivity (Broersma 2010b; Tuchman 1972) and enhances the apparent credibility of a story. The interview’s structure of the “turn-taking conventions” of a conversation imitates a form reminiscent of authentic social experience. The interview has been strategically valuable to agents within the journalistic field, as a source of prestige and distinction. Interviewing high-profile sources, or personalities of public interest, has allowed journalists—and by extension the news organizations they work for—to distinguish themselves from their peers and boost their cultural and economic capital within the field (Broersma 2010a, 31).

The adoption of the news interview as a journalistic practice has been essential to journalism’s historical formation as a distinctive field (Broersma 2010a). The interview has become a significant cultural form that has contributed to journalists’ relative prestige and autonomy in relation to their news sources. For instance, journalists assert control by selecting the interview topics to be addressed or by redirecting and taking the lead in the conversation (Broersma 2010a). Schudson (1995) explains that the power relations between journalists and their sources are a significant feature of interviews. The tension between “talk as a form of solidarity” and “talk as an assertion of power” is enacted in the balance between the journalist’s dependence on the interviewee’s willing participation and the interviewee’s need for, or resistance to, the public exposure controlled by the journalist (75).

The journalistic interview has also acquired importance in other fields, serving as both an information conduit to the public and a means for the interviewee (and journalist) to articulate a particular persona. Those who participate are, by implication, performatively ensnared in the journalistic game, driven to some extent by the market forces and struggles for symbolic capital that operate within the journalistic field, and their own strategic desire for media capital. As the interdependence of the fields intensifies, so does the potential for journalistic heteronomy and symbolic domination. Journalists’ power to assert discursive authority over agents in other fields is increased, because of the implicit expectation that the interviewee submits to the rules of the journalistic interview and accepts the journalist’s right to steer the conversation.

**Performativity and the Visual Arts**

Within the visual arts field, the concept of performativity has been a significant aspect of the creative process since the 1960s. It has been aligned with the emergence of a post-modern conceptual art tradition that privileges the ideas underpinning the art object, rather than its aesthetic and material properties. Judith Butler’s (1993, 13) theorization of the performatives as “enact[ing] or produc[ing] that which it names” has been an important
influence on art theory circles. The “performative turn”, according to Fischer-Lichte (2008, 22), has been marked by the “dissolution of boundaries in the arts” with artists producing “events which involve not just themselves but also the observers, listeners, and spectators”. These performative events destabilize traditional conventions concerning the role of the artist, audience and gallery, the nature of art, the valorization of the qualities of originality and authenticity, the social construction of identities, the illusion of shared discourse, and the extent to which ritual and spectacle can be transformed into artistic performance. In contrast to more conventional art defined by its optical qualities, conceptual art is characterized not only by what Crow (1996, 215) identifies as a “withdrawal of visuality”, but also by “an increasing emphasis on art as a process of collaborative interaction” (Kester 2004, 53). Kester (2004) contends that the creative facilitation of dialogue is central to much post-modern art, in that conversation about the work is reframed as an interactive component of the artistic practice. In conjunction with this tendency, he identifies a consensus in the post-modern avant-garde that “art must question and undermine shared discursive conventions” (88), thus negating the common-sense assumption that the art object comes with an obvious conversational referent.

This artistic doxa of resistance to social norms is particularly pertinent to the artistic practice of et al. and their explicit articulation of a collective identity. Their embrace of a conceptual art approach also helps explain some of the journalistic antagonism towards their work. Bernanke’s (2013, 97) survey of New Zealand art journalists noted a general preference for traditional mediums such as painting, sculpture and photography, augmented by a suspicion of “art indebted to theory”. Vicente (2005, 78) ascribes a “performative aspect” to “the role-playing of et al.’s multiple identities” in the spirit of conceptual artists such as Adrian Piper. Butler’s (1993) conception of gender identity as culturally constructed and pluralized is played out in the narratives of many of et al.’s personae for whom identity and gender are ambiguous or fluid formations, such as lillian budd, who is described as having switched genders when working as budd shoop and then adopting a genderless role as the commercial entity buddholdings (et al. 2003, 114). A genderless identity is exemplified by the persona of p.mule, with the mule, an “end of the line species”, being the infertile result of a cross between a horse and a donkey (115).

Another feature of et al.’s art is a commitment to subverting the interpretative conventions assumed in conventional narrative representations. One way of opposing these conventions is through confusion, which may be achieved by obstructing audiences’ straightforward engagement with an artwork and their reliance on familiar patterns of interpretation (Pihlainen 2002). For instance, et al.’s practice incorporates texts that have words or sections that are partially erased, scratched through and rewritten. The artists’ use of found objects exemplifies another way of subverting “normal” representational codes. These materials play with the meanings derived from their non-art contexts, but generate interpretative ambiguity when re-contextualized as part of a work of art (Pihlainen 2002).

The point here is that et al.’s resistance to common-sense socially constructed conventions is a defining aspect of their artistic practice, which was sometimes directly interrogated by editorial commentary that valorized traditional artistic approaches (Bernanke 2012). Our examination of the artists’ discourse below will show that the strategies they articulate in the journalistic interview are, to a great extent, consistent with the performative idioms of conceptual art, and were most obviously enacted in the performance of two distinct interview personas. Before that, we first need to examine the journalistic
conventions that *The Dominion Post* journalist, Robyn McLean, employs in her framing of the interview.

**The Reporter’s Questions: Strategies of Provocation**

Although most of *The Dominion Post*’s coverage of et al. in June 2005 was negative, there were some exceptions (Bernanke 2013). Several articles were supportive, including a preview article by the paper’s regular visual arts journalist, Mark Amery, a review by freelance arts writer Josie McNaught, and a first-hand report by Peter Biggs, the chairman of Creative New Zealand. Nonetheless, six articles published between June 18 and June 25 focused on et al.’s elusiveness and refusal to accept the media’s requests for interviews, despite assurances from as high up as New Zealand Prime Minister, Helen Clark. The failure of et al. to appear for media interviews was repeatedly presented as a newsworthy event, generating elaborate accounts of the “dodge tactics” (McLean 2005b) used by Creative New Zealand to shield the artist collective. Ahead of the published interview on June 23, these articles reinforced the antagonisms between the journalistic and visual arts fields. The artists’ and, by extension, Creative New Zealand’s lack of co-operation was represented as arrogant and elitist—an affront to the democratic authority of the country’s government and media.

The chain of equivalence linking the journalistic and political fields in opposition to a common antagonist (Laclau and Mouffe 2001) was extended to include the general public. The impression of a generalized hostility to et al. was signified in the representation of the artists’ refusal to respond to the media’s questions as an affront to “the people”, “the public” and the “taxpayer”; as one article put it, “the taxpayer paid for it [the artwork], but the taxpayer isn’t allowed to ask about it” (McLean 2005a). These appeals typically displace the agency of *The Dominion Post* in constructing et al. as the antagonist, instead positioning the artists in direct conflict with the public’s right to information. The discursive construction of et al.’s identity is mediated by familiar neoliberal tropes—the hardworking “taxpayer” cast in opposition to “unaccountable” cultural elites who use state money to pursue their own special interests (Phelan 2014).

The rhetoric of the interview questions reveals how agency operates in the journalist’s discourse. Many of McLean’s interview questions (see questions 1, 3, 4, 6 and 8 below) are formulated without reference to any third party. Moreover, some questions, for instance, question 1 (“Do you feel you are fulfilling your commitments …”) and question 2 (“There is frustration that you are so elusive.”), elide agency altogether, mystifying the questions of whose “frustration” and “commitments” to whom. The journalist’s alignment with the public is clearly evident in several questions (such as questions 2, 5, 7 and 9), exemplifying the rhetorical strategies used by journalists when engaging in adversarial questioning of public figures. Identification with the public allows McLean to assume the role of a “tribune of the people” (Clayman 2002, 202), and provides an implicitly democratic rationale to justify the combative line of questioning:

1) Do you feel you are fulfilling your commitments by only agreeing to do interviews via e-mail?
2) There is frustration that you are so elusive. Why do you not want to talk about the work of et al.? Do you not think it would help the public to understand the principles surrounding it?
3) Has the biennale [sic] been a worthwhile experience for et al. so far?
4) What is the future direction of et al.?
5) For the benefit of those who want to understand more about your work, could you please explain it?
6) Has the backlash over the work of et al. affected the collective in any way?
7) Do you have a message for the critics and members of the public who have been negative about the decision to send et al. to Venice?
8) How many interviews have you given about the work at the biennale? Have you done any face-to-face interviews with media at all? If not, please explain why not.
9) Because taxpayers’ money has been used [to] help this work come to fruition, do you not feel et al. should be more open to media questioning? Do you understand the level of frustration that exists from people wanting to know what their money is being spent on? (McLean 2005b)

McLean’s adversarial position is clear in the design of questions 2 and 9, which rely on negative interrogative constructions such as “do you not think” and “do you not feel”. Clayman and Heritage (2002) explain that negative interrogatives usually involve critical evaluation of the interviewee’s conduct and are normally designed to elicit bald “yes” or “no” answers. Question 2 begins with a prefatory statement (‘There is frustration that you are so elusive.’), an assertion that establishes a “contextualizing proposition” (203) for the questions that follow. The frustrated subject is not specified and might refer to journalists as well as members of the public. The subsequent “wh-question” (“Why do you not want to talk about the work of et al.?”) presupposes that the artists’ not wanting to speak about their art has caused and legitimized the frustration. Building on this, the follow-up question (“Do you not think it would help the public to understand…”), implicitly suggests that the artists, by refusing to explain their art, are detached from or uninterested in reducing the public’s frustration.

McLean’s final interview question (9) also centres on the artists’ refusal to explain their work. Here, the prefatory statement, in conjunction with the subsequent negative interrogative (“Because taxpayers’ money has been used [to] help this work come to fruition, do you not feel et al. should be more open to media questioning?”), asserts that et al. should feel obligated to respond to the media since taxpayers subsidized the artists’ work. Embedded in this question is the presupposition that the taxpayers and the media are aligned and that et al. are, consequently, democratically accountable to both. The negative interrogative strongly conveys a preference for a “yes” answer. The next interrogative (“Do you understand the level of frustration that exists from people …”) returns to the idea of “frustration” introduced in question 2. However, in this question, the taxpayers (“people wanting to know what their money is being spent on”) are identified as the ones frustrated by the artists’ lack of co-operation with the media. How to respond to this closed question presents a potential dilemma for the interviewee; answering with either a “yes” or “no” would suggest that et al. is either unaware of, or indifferent to, the needs of taxing members of the public. Either response would raise questions about et al.’s character and professionalism, especially in light of the assumption that the journalist, acting on behalf of the public, should determine the appropriate conditions for the interview.

We see a similar dilemma generated by the presuppositions built into question 1 and formulated around the exclusive particle only. Beaver (2004, 51) argues that this “focus-
sensitive” expression carries presuppositions that are not attached to the particle itself, but conveyed through the implications of the surrounding text. The first half of question 1 (“Do you feel you are fulfilling your commitments”) implies that et al.’s participation in interviews is a given and assumes they should recognize their obligation. In the second half of the question, the exclusive particle “only” modifies the word “agreeing” (“by only agreeing to do interviews via e-mail”), implying that et al. has refused to participate in any interviews not conducted by e-mail. The embedded presupposition here is that there are other interview approaches that would have more suitably fulfilled et al.’s “commitments” and that the e-mail format is inadequate.

Our analysis of the interview questions shows how the journalist’s rhetorical strategies function as vehicles of symbolic domination, reproducing the antagonistic stance of the newspaper. The interview is constructed from a perspective—in one sense, an entirely banal journalistic perspective—that assumes journalists have a democratic right to interview et al. and that the artists have a corollary obligation to “front up” to the New Zealand public. The interview questions implicitly undermine et al.’s claim to field autonomy; the work of the artists is represented as a product of taxpayer generosity, rather than their own creative practice. The behaviour of et al. is deemed accountable to the “unitary public” of journalism (Muhlmann 2010), obscuring the possibility of a dissensual public(s) that would be affirmative of the cultural differences embodied in the visual arts field. The normative relationship between the journalistic field and visual arts field is assumed to be a heteronomous one: the discursive projections of the former are imposed on the latter, but in the name of democracy and the public’s right to know.

Tellingly, the article’s final invocation of the public occurs in the last paragraph where readers are invited to e-mail their reactions to the interview. Several leading questions are posed, directing readers to comment on the quality of the artists’ replies. One question asks readers to judge the aesthetic value of the biennale work (“Is it art?”), an assessment that is impossible from just reading the interview. Another asks whether the artists are “still being fundamentally ambiguous”. The adverb “still” suggests that et al. had been unclear in their discussion of the artwork prior to the present interview, which is not likely since the artists, up to this point, had not participated in any interviews with domestic mainstream media regarding the biennale. This question prompts readers to focus on a particular aspect of the collective’s answers, rather than simply allowing readers to respond freely. In a subsequent series of letters to the editor, the position of the public vis-à-vis et al. was represented in a fashion predictably aligned with The Dominion Post’s antagonistic discourse, thus reinforcing the assumed democratic legitimacy of the paper’s stance. The impression of public contempt for et al. was reinforced by the highlighting of some of the more lurid readers’ comments, deriding the artists’ utterances as “gobbledygook,” ‘total nonsense’ and ‘intellectual crap” (McLean 2005e).

The Artists’ Responses: Strategies of Resistance

Two days after the publication of McLean’s article describing her failed attempts to conduct an e-mail interview, The Dominion Post printed et al.’s response, which had been received in the intervening period. A brief article published on the front page, with the sensational title “PM May Become et al. Target”, presented a summary of the interview (McLean 2005d). It included some excerpts of the artists’ edited responses, which McLean
characterized as “vague”, and pointed readers to the interview printed in the National News section.

The published interview itself, entitled “More Bull from Donkey Dunny Artists?” (McLean 2005c), was presented in a conventional turn-taking format, alternating McLean’s (RM) questions with replies from two participants, the first identified as fp and the second being the collective’s usual spokesperson, p.mule. Readers were not given an explanation for the identity of these respondents or their relationship to the art collective until the end of the interview. There, McLean noted that p.mule “specializes in ‘conceptual issues’” for the art collective, and the responses of fp, whose initials refer to the fundamental practice, derive from the artwork’s textual material. In effect, the work, in the role of an interviewee, was positioned as speaking in its own right, exemplifying the performative dimensions of et al.’s artistic practice.

One way et al. tried to subvert the journalist’s symbolic power was by establishing interview guidelines. The artists’ insistence on conducting media interviews through e-mail rather than face-to-face can be understood as a means by which the artists, to some extent, could control the interview exchange and assert their autonomy (Kennedy 2000). By restricting media contact, et al. insisted that journalists “play the game” according to the logic of the visual arts field, thereby challenging the journalistic field’s assumed right to impose its priorities. Within the visual arts field, artistic autonomy may be characterized by a disinterested “art for art’s sake” ideal, as demonstrated by those who maintain the integrity of their artistic practice, despite what Bourdieu calls “the temptation of heteronomy” (cited in Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 184). This heteronomous logic might be manifest in an artistic identity that brackets out aspects of its own practice to “play the media game” or, even more pointedly, in the enactment of a confessional posture suitably aligned to the journalistic demand for accountability and transparency (Docherty 2014).

Visual art takes time—time to produce, to view, to consider and to understand—and the collective did respond to the questions in its own time, a temporal order markedly different from the “presentism” of “media time” (Meyer 2002, 107). From the journalist’s standpoint, any “displacement” of time (Bampton and Cowton 2002), resulting from the asynchronicity of the e-mail exchange, would disrupt the immediacy of the story. Tyler and Tang’s (2003, 253) study of the rhythms of e-mail communication identifies a phenomenon they refer to as “breakdown perception”, the point when an extended pause is perceived as silence and “the sender believes that something has gone wrong”. Accordingly, The Dominion Post’s focus on the artists’ lack of co-operation illustrated not only an effort to discredit the artists, but also a journalistic reaction to the breakdown perception, resulting from the disruptive effect of et al.’s silence.

Besides forcing the journalist to submit to their preferred communication medium, the artist collective also attempted to assert control through their replies to the interview questions. Analysis of the artists’ responses to the negative interrogatives highlights some of these strategies. As illustrated below, fp’s somewhat oblique philosophical answers are framed in the discourse of art theory while those of p.mule tend to respond more directly to the interview questions. In each case, fp’s reply appears first. Q2 below demonstrates the tone and approach employed throughout the interview:

(Q2) RM: There is frustration that you are so elusive. Why do you not want to talk about the work of et al.? Do you not think it would help the public to understand the principles surrounding it?
Until recently one of the major illusions of contemporary art, and one of its most valuable supporting myths, was the notion that laws existed in some form for the creation of art. One of the characteristics of myths is that they seem to promise rules of order but never deliver them. Undoubtedly conscious knowledge of the rules of art would dispel the illusion of art at once, since these deal with unconscious mechanisms concerning the use of objects, materials, and concepts in mediating reality, namely, in defining the artist’s relationships to nature and culture. These relationships, as we shall learn, are only tangentially concerned with physical properties of the art object, that is, its formal content. As proved in the last few decades, art may assume almost any form or be made in any way. The facturing process is not central to the creation of art.

We don’t think we are elusive! The et al. membership in general feel that talking about the work is invariably limiting and confining. We are happy that there are many art interpreters who are both able and willing to talk about the work.

The journalist’s claim in the prefatory statement of Q2 that et al. is “so elusive” is emphatically denied by p.mule. The strength of this rejection, underlined by the exclamation mark, underscores the hostility of the interviewer’s presupposition. The artist collective’s refusal to speak about their art is based on the idea that understanding art is a personal experience in which, as p.mule explains in response to question 5, “the process of viewing art provides the explanation, and it is invariably particular to the viewer. The artist is exactly the wrong person to explain their work, and rarely tries”.

The artists’ reluctance to explain their work is based on a particular conception of the artists’ role, which, as p.mule suggests, is purely creative. The task of explaining art belongs to cultural intermediaries (“art interpreters”), who, according to Negus (2002, 502), provide a necessary “point of connection” between artists and audiences, and serve an essential role in the cultural economy of the visual arts field. These cultural intermediaries, including art critics, curators, art collectors and art journalists, are engaged, to varying degrees, in what Bourdieu would see as the heteronomous aspects of the cultural field, speculating on the commercial or symbolic value of a particular artwork or interpreting the work for a wider public (broadly analogous to the journalistic public).

Although p.mule does not address McLean’s point concerning “the public’s” need to understand the artwork’s principles, fp does respond to one assumption in Q2. Referring to the “laws … for the creation of art” as one of contemporary art’s “most valuable supporting myths”, fp dismisses McLean’s assertion that there are “principles surrounding” art. Moreover, fp contends that attempting to consciously understand what is an unconscious process would effectively destroy the ineffable “illusion of art”; simple descriptions of art’s physical and formal features will not explain a work of art. Not only is a descriptive approach the one that most art journalists apparently prefer (Bernanke 2013), but these physical features of et al.’s artwork are the very qualities that journalists had disparaged in much of the reporting, most obviously through the repeated references to the “donkey in the dunny”. fp’s answers signify an ontological horizon not easily grasped by journalism’s focus on the empirically concrete, and point to the epistemological violence underpinning the journalist’s desire to know the work of art. fp’s departure from the stipulated line of questioning also exemplifies a positive form of resistance to the journalist’s agenda-setting role, by introducing concerns obscured by the questions.
The physical positioning of fp’s answers functions as another strategy for subverting representational conventions. Situating fp’s responses between the interviewer’s questions and p.mule’s comparatively more accessible replies functions as a communicative barrier, or “noise”, interrupting what would ordinarily be construed as a simple question–answer exchange and reciprocal enactment of roles. Besides creating physical distance between the journalist and the interviewee persona who responds more directly to the questions, the interposition of fp’s answers also disrupts the conventions of the journalistic interview. The use of different personas enacts et al.’s collective identity, and frustrates the journalistic desire to locate the empirical “individual” behind the artwork.

The antagonism between the journalist and artist is also apparent in p.mule’s response to Q9, which sidesteps the yes/no dilemma of the closed-question structure and, instead, corrects two presuppositions:

(Q9) RM: Because taxpayers’ money has been used [to] help this work come to fruition, do you not feel et al. should be more open to media questioning? Do you understand the level of frustration that exists from people wanting to know what their money is being spent on?

[...]

p.mule: We have responded to media questions, but this has been a busy time, and our speed of response often has not met that required by the media. The et al. collective has contributed substantially to the exhibition by supporting the fundraising process (with a limited edition art work), which raised about $200,000. “Taxpayers’ money” has been used largely to fund the wider strategic goals of Creative New Zealand.

One of the presuppositions in Q9 concerns the journalist’s claim that taxpayers’ money played a part in realizing or completing the biennale artwork (“help the work come to fruition”). However, p.mule insists taxpayers’ money was allocated to the “wider strategic goals of Creative New Zealand” and not to the artwork, which was supported primarily by the collective’s own fundraising efforts. The artists’ correction reclaims the autonomy of the artwork, and links the taxpayers’ role to Creative New Zealand’s desire to assert the vibrancy of New Zealand art in the creative economy associated with the Venice Biennale. The response also challenges the symbolic authority that “the public”, and the more ideologically charged figure of the taxpaying public, generally assumes in journalistic discourse.

The second correction pertains to the presupposition implied by the phrase “should be more open”, which reproaches et al. for allegedly not co-operating with journalistic requests for interviews. In reply, p.mule declares that the collective had answered questions, although more slowly than “that required by the media”, and explains, in a somewhat wry understatement and in the manner of an apology, that the collective was preoccupied with other concerns (“this has been a busy time”). The answer reinforces the significance of time as a site of interfield antagonism, the slow time of the visual arts in conflict with journalism’s demand for immediacy (Bourdieu 2005; Meyer 2002).

et al.’s efforts to assert their autonomy are evident in their deliberate interrogation of the “taken for granted” social assumption that “the media” have the power to speak “for us all” and define “social ‘reality’” (Couldry 2001, 157). For instance, in their reply to the first interview question, fp questions the arbitrary and problematic nature of journalists’ power:
RM: Do you feel you are fulfilling your commitments by only agreeing to do interviews via e-mail?

fp: There is a great force that creates the movement of thought in the people, and that is the press. The part played by the press is to keep pointing out requirements supposed to be indispensable, to give voice to the complaints of the people, to express and to create discontent. It is in the press that the triumph of freedom of speech finds its incarnation. But humanity have not known how to make use of this force; and it has fallen into (other) hands. Through the press (you) have gained the power to influence.

The reply begins with fp’s observation that the press influences the way the public thinks (“creates the movement of thought in the people”), and then goes on to describe how this influence is enacted. The public-interest role of the press includes “pointing out requirements supposed to be indispensable”, and giving “voice” to complaints and dissatisfaction, presumably concerning the status quo, in the name of freedom of speech. However, this power, fp claims, has been poorly managed and has, instead, “fallen into (other) hands”.

The parentheticals in fp’s reply are significant. The adjective “other” is parenthetically inserted, but rather than introducing an afterthought, the symbolic intrusion draws attention to the qualifier and adds to its meaning. The referent associated with the metonym, “hands”, is not specified, but the signifier “other” positions this unnamed agent in opposition to “humanity” and a problematic “incarnation” of free speech. In the last sentence, fp suggests the press has used its power to influence in implicitly harmful ways; instead of serving the interests of the people, the press initiates ideas and shapes the way people think. Here, fp introduces another parenthetical (“you”), that could be directly addressing the unnamed “other”, the press or the interviewer and, because of the pronoun’s ambiguity, all possible targets are linked through a logic of equivalence that communicates scepticism about journalism’s democratic credo. et al.’s response also gestures towards the detrimental effects of corporate ownership (“fallen into (other) hands”) on a New Zealand media system that is one of the most corporatized in the world.9

**Conclusion: Interfield Legacies**

This article examined how an antagonism between the journalistic field and the visual arts field was articulated in a news interview with the artist collective. Following a period of sustained journalistic denunciation of et al., the interview opened up a performative space in which the symbolic power of both fields was displayed and contested within the journalistic field itself. Our analysis showed how McLean’s questions embodied The Dominion Post’s antagonism towards the artists, though the institutional nature of this hostility was simultaneously disavowed by the paper’s construction of its stance as perfectly aligned with that of the New Zealand public. In contrast, the artists’ response demonstrated an effort to engage the journalistic field on the terms of the visual arts field, through performative practices that asserted artistic autonomy against the common-sense authority of media representations. Our analysis showed how the discursive performances of both the artists and the journalist were guided by the doxa—the unconsciously accepted norms—of their respective fields.

Within the mainstream cultural universe imagined by The Dominion Post, the contest of field identities could only ever have one winner. The paper’s ability to construct the
impression of widespread public hostility to the artists has since enabled a vivid collective memory of the controversy, where “et al.” has become a journalistic shorthand for artistic pretentiousness and indulgence (Bernanke 2012). For instance, a 2008 article in The Dominion Post (“Two Artists Selected for Venice Biennale” 2008) announcing the selection of artists to represent New Zealand at the 2009 Venice Biennale described the et al. nomination as a “public relations disaster” and, in yet another recycling of the laziest motif of the controversy, noted that “the collective’s earlier works had included a toilet that brayed like a donkey”. The toilet and donkey resurfaced in the same paper in 2009, in an article which wondered if a visiting international art exhibit—unrelated to Venice—was “high art or a load of poppycock?” (Fitzsimons 2009). And a 2014 story announcing that the New Zealand investigative journalist, Nicky Hager, would be part of the “backroom” team at the 2015 Venice Biennale ended with a reminder of the earlier “controversy”, when et al. “refused to speak publicly about their Venice exhibition” (Hunt 2014).

The controversy also had significant effects on the visual arts field, especially on Creative New Zealand’s role as an institutional node linking the visual arts field, journalistic field, economic field and political field. In a 2006 report reviewing New Zealand’s participation in the last three Venice Biennales, which was commissioned by Creative New Zealand and authored by a Sydney-based economics and planning consultancy, the “main failing” of the 2005 event was described as “anticipating and managing the negative reaction that the choice of artist received in some domestic media—particularly in Wellington” (Evaluating New Zealand’s Participation 2006, vii). The report made several recommendations about how relations with media might be improved in future, as core “elements” of what it described as “a robust selection, communications and media strategy” (vii). It emphasized the importance of having a “spokesperson for the decision” included on the selection panel responsible for nominating the artist(s) and having “panellists available to speak to the media” (vii). It insisted that the “creative team” itself—including the artist(s), support staff and curator(s)—should include “a spokesperson for the art, with recognised public relations skills … able to communicate with the media” (vii). It also recommended that “the selection panel are provided with briefing material on the media, political, logistics and practical issues and risks associated with the choice of artist” (vii). In effect, the report suggested that anticipating a possible media backlash against the choice of artist should be central to what it called the “risk management strategy” (ix) informing decisions about future nominations.

To give the case its starkest theoretical reading, then, the et al. controversy demonstrated the immense symbolic power of the journalistic field to construct social reality and impose a particular definition of the event that has since been internalized in the collective memory of journalists, arts administrators, politicians and a wider public. Yet, as we have illustrated here, the symbolic violence produced by the media did not go unchallenged. et al.’s media intervention could never succeed within the journalistic horizon in which it was immediately staged. Nonetheless, contrary to dismissive characterizations of their contributions as “gobbleygook”, our analysis showed how their interview answers articulated a thoughtful critique of media power and effectively staged a meta-critique of the discursive assumptions structuring the entire controversy. To do this, et al. needed to produce their own symbolic violence, and interrupt the default comportment of the journalistic interview. The relatively elitist register of the interview contributions undoubtedly limited et al.’s capacity to enable wider public solidarity for their position. Nonetheless, the artists’
responses to the journalist’s questions represented a defiant articulation of artistic autonomy in the journalistic universe where the controversy was constructed.

It is therefore appropriate to invoke a more affirmative note by citing a February 2015 media reference to the controversy that interrogated its hegemonic inscription. Reflecting on how the New Zealand writer and Booker Prize winner Eleanor Catton was disparaged by some journalists and politicians after she described New Zealand as governed by “neo-liberal, profit-obsessed, very shallow, very money-hungry politicians who do not care about culture” (Field 2015), the journalist Phillip Matthews (2015) observed that “[i]f the Catton furore had a prequel it was the art and media controversy around New Zealand’s installation at the Venice Biennale in 2005”. Matthews recalled the controversy in a way that challenged the dominant media narrative. He noted how the “exhibition … was repeatedly misrepresented in the media and as it was part of et al.’s art practice to not speak directly to media, misunderstandings accumulated”. And, in a caustic assessment of the recommendations prescribed in the 2006 Creative New Zealand report, he observed:

Anti-intellectualism was taken as gospel and applied as a marketing strategy. As in the Catton story there was an idea that if the government has funded art, the artist is obliged to do positive tourism promotion abroad. Was Venice about art or New Zealand Inc networking? (Matthews 2015)

Matthews’s counter-narrative shows us how the antagonisms articulated in The Dominion Post interview are the site of an ongoing cultural and media politics, which inflects the relationship between the New Zealand journalistic field and different cultural fields. The et al. case illustrated a repressive journalistic habitus that has previously marked the relationship between the journalistic field and academic field (Phelan 2011)—the symptoms of an oft-remarked national anti-intellectualism, which is belied by the existence of a public that identifies more with the New Zealand of et al. than the New Zealand of The Dominion Post. The symbolic violence perpetrated against et al. may have been legitimized by a journalistic doxa that assumed a democratic register and posture. Yet, perhaps their enactment of artistic autonomy might be read as a positive harbinger of a different kind of media democracy, one that invites recognition of a heterogeneous and dissensual public(s), against the monolithic public of mainstream journalism (Muhlmann 2010). At the very least, the et al. controversy should be remembered as an event that illustrated the democratic limitations and complacency of New Zealand journalism.

Finally, let us end by returning to where we began, by briefly noting the significance of our cross-field analysis from a field theory perspective. Our case study highlighted the politics of interfield relations, and the politics of how the journalistic habitus comports itself vis-à-vis the discourses and performative dispositions assumed in other social fields. It articulated a perspective on a mediatized controversy that went beyond a one-dimensional analysis of how different media covered the story. Instead, it enabled us to grasp the performative logic of the artistic practices themselves, in a context where they were symbolically annihilated by media projections. The analysis of the news interview showed how the media representation of et al. appealed to tropes of accountability, democracy, publicness and transparency that are at the very heart of a liberal, “fourth estate” journalistic identity (see Phelan 2014). The journalistic logic amounted to what Bourdieu (2000, 122) would call a “strategy of universalizing” a particular understanding of the controversy, which was successful in how it forced arts administrators, politicians and others to accept that mediatized definition as the universal one. Examining the artistic
collective's perspective on the same event allowed us to clearly see the contestability of that definition, and its discursive entanglement in a vision that universalizes the reason and imperatives of the journalistic field. The value of cross-field studies such as this one, then, is that they focus closer attention on the cultural politics of how the journalistic field holds other fields to account. Rather than assuming that the journalistic pursuit of public accountability embodies an inherent democratic good, they reveal its symbolically violent tendencies and impulses. Conversely, they also illuminate the politics of how agents in other fields strategically respond in the media and elsewhere, by either submitting to or contesting the authority of journalistic projections.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

NOTES

1. By field, we mean the “objective relations” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 97) that structure the practices of those occupying similar social and institutional spaces.

2. The historical relationship between journalism and the visual arts—in New Zealand and elsewhere—has been uneasy. Szántó (2001, 183) suggests when art becomes “hard” news, it is easily “hijacked by those with non-art agendas”.

3. After a popular art historian described the 2004 et al. exhibit, rapture, as “the donkey in the dunny” in the first television report, the donkey became a dominant motif in media discourse, though it had nothing to do with the Venice exhibit. The descriptor obscured the conceptual richness of the rapture exhibit, which referenced the 1996 underground nuclear tests carried out by the French government in the Pacific.

4. Our understanding of discourse analysis draws on Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) and Laclau and Mouffe (2001); explicating the differences between approaches is not our concern here. We see discourse as more than a linguistic phenomenon; it signifies forms of meaning-making that structure the links between linguistic and extra-linguistic practices.

5. Bourdieu (1990, 56) defines habitus as an “embodied history” of the dispositions that have structured an agent’s social subjectivity.

6. We refer to et al. by their plural, collective identity, consistent with the artists’ own practice. As is well-known within New Zealand art circles, the individual artists that comprise et al. are pseudonyms for artist Merylyn Tweedie.

7. Laclau and Mouffe (2001) conceptualize identities as constituted through their antagonistic relation to that which they are not—to an “other” that stands outside, or at the limits, of a social identity or formation.

8. The Labour government in power during the controversy embraced the concepts of the “creative industries” and “cultural economy”, replicating the “third way” cultural policy discourses circulating elsewhere (Hesmondhalgh 2002). Creative New Zealand’s funding grew progressively during Labour’s tenure. Supporting the participation of New Zealand artists at Venice Biennale therefore coincided with government policy objectives.

9. Our analysis was affirmed in a brief e-mail interview between et al. and the main author. In response to a question about media “misrepresentation” of their work, the artist collective replied: “summed up superbly and correctly” (et al., personal communication, July 30, 2009).
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