

***Trade is Sublime: Rethinking the Field through Multi-modality, Visual Metaphor, and Circulation***

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**I. Introduction**

Between 2008 and 2010, an international team of ten anthropologists, supported by a French CNRS grant, conducted ethnographic research on various aspects of the operations of the World Trade Organization (WTO) Secretariat at the Centre William Rappard (CWR) in Geneva. The idea for this original research was proposed by Pascal Lamy, then Director-General of the WTO, out of a sense that the institution was facing a crisis of purpose following the failure of the Doha Round in 2006. The Doha Round had not resulted in meaningful results and this threatened to compound the marginalized position of the institution and its precarious hold on multilateral trade. Lamy invited anthropologist Marc Abeles to assemble the team, the members of which were given relatively free access to the institution to investigate institutional culture among the secretariat and delegates using a variety of methodologies and disciplinary approaches.

George Marcus of UC Irvine, and Jae Chung of University of Aalen (Germany) were among the team. Marcus and Chung's research collaboration was characterized by well-established modes of ethnographic research (close observation and sustained interviews in a delimited field site), and by a concern with institutional culture and informal norms of behavior. The research produced a number of useful insights about institutional norms at the WTO, the everyday politics of multilateral trade negotiations, and the procedural calibrations of the institution, whose continued relevance in the trade environment depends on being responsive to the trends beyond its immediate Geneva grounds.

This paper reflects on the project that emerged out of Marcus and Chung's original research, which has been conceived of as a "second act." A second act project seeks return to an original site of research with the additional of new imposed device, an intervention, that prompt to generate new ethnographic data collection and deepen original analysis. In this case, we saw an opportunity to re-examine impediments to consensus and predictability in multilateral trade negotiations and how they might be related to particularities of the Secretariat's structure and the crisis of institutional identity, leadership (as the institution transitioned to a new DG), and mandate following the continued failure of the Doha round.

The second act took the form of an art installation, or in our language 'a scenographic prompt', entitled *Trade is Sublime*, which exhibited for two weeks at the Centre William Rappard in June of 2013. Subsequently, it was exhibited in altered form at the AAA's and will likely be re-exhibited in other forums. Through a re-examination of the development of *Trade is Sublime*, we step back to think about how it worked to extend and deepen the study of institutional culture at the WTO. Specifically, we consider the ways in which multimodality and art/design-based interventions might serve the ethnographic endeavour by disrupting traditional modes of anthropological research. Further, we raise questions about the problematics of circulation and response when working outside the typical ethnographic model.

## **II: Multi-modality**

As a scenographer (Cantarella) and an anthropologist originally trained in theatre (Hegel), we began collaborating across our disciplines in 2011, inspired by a series of talks sponsored by the UCI Center for Ethnography in the Rethinking Design series. As an anthropologist, I was attracted to the possibilities that design might open up within anthropology both as a research tool and as a space of analysis. As a designer, Cantarella was interested in exploring how to deploy scenographic thinking outside the milieux of theatre, film and television, in the design challenges posed outside of these

confines, and in the broader possibilities of creating temporary spaces in which people might encounter one another. The collision of these two domains - design and anthropology - with their distinct imperatives, has been generative in helping us both rethink how we normally work and what we produce.

A series of conversations with Jae Chung and George Marcus in 2011 and 2012, resulted in our proposing the project that has come to be called *Trade is Sublime*, which entailed multiple modes of investigation/analysis/representation both simultaneously and sequentially. For the purposes of this paper, we examine the following modalities: a) a produced or staged intervention, b) gatekeeper negotiation, c) the art-making process, or the studio as a para-site.

*Trade is Sublime* is a 'second-act' project, which means that it is inherently tied to the original research project described above. It is premised on that initial inquiry, collected data, and subsequent analyses (cite publications here). Institutions, and particularly high-level, global institutions like the WTO, are hard to study. The WTO is comprised of evolving international cohorts of elites - delegates - as well as of technocrats and bureaucrats who are long-term employees in the Secretariat, none of whom have much incentive to incorporate a researcher in their midst or share and explain institutional knowledge and practices. Ethnographers typically rely long-term participatory engagement in the research community/site to overcome these barriers; Chung in particular spent more than a year at the WTO, built strong interpersonal networks, and was granted access to the inner workings of the institution by participating in trainings and eventually by taking a position in the Secretariat. Despite this, and despite the richness of the data gleaned from that arduous work, both Chung and Marcus perceived that aspects of the WTO were still opaque and sought to take up and further develop emergent threads from that work. This dissatisfaction prompted both a return and a novel form of ethnographic engagement.

### *A Produced (or Staged) Encounter*

As Marcus has noted: "Fieldwork in anthropology needs, for its imaginary, a

different chronotope of practice, and, for many, aspects of scenography are a good model” (Marcus 2010:93). We concur in that aspects of scenography are oppositional to the traditional modalities of ethnographic practice in their ability to produce an alternate chronotope. Scenography, which entails the production or staging of an environment, is fundamentally artificial. It takes cues from real environments and reconfigures them either into alternate naturalistic environments or highly metaphorical environments. In so doing staged environments offer a remove from the everyday and a new spatio-temporal vantage point for experience. Staging is a deliberate process of selecting from an infinite array of visual, textural, and material elements as a compositional practice. A scenographer controls the composition to a certain degree (depending on the collaboration), yet, of course, has little control over reception.

The production or staging of an encounter at the WTO might have taken on a form akin to commerce or service or direct exchange. The ArtPologist Collective has produced encounters in this vein: *The Borrowed Kazan* project entailed setting up a temporary cafe in a Kyrgystani bazaar as an installation to provoke interaction with locals in the marketplace; *The Brighton Beach Memory Exchange* was likewise a temporary kiosk from which the ethnographers offered framed Russian film stills to boardwalk passersby in exchange for memories about those films.<sup>1</sup> These staged environments provoked exchanges by presenting a typical and naturalistic environment (a cafe, a public kiosk/stand) that had local resonance. Moreover, the exchange was tangible (food, framed stills), but these were also purposively ethnographic encounters in that the exchange included information, everyday conversation, and memories.

In designing an encounter at the WTO, our aims were at least twofold: the staged encounter should provide an opportunity for ‘natives’ of the institution to step outside of their expertise, and it should attend to and obey institutional mores such that it was ‘allowable’ in the space. As to the first of these, we sought to stage an environment, work or event that would request a response outside the discourse of multilateral trade per se. The legal, political, and logistical aspects of trade and the role of the WTO are

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.artpologist.org](http://www.artpologist.org).

the lifeblood of the Secretariat and the delegates; members are accustomed to discussing trade policy and bureaucratic procedures. But in order to get at the broader questions of institutional identity in the midst of semi-crisis and transition, we sought to prompt a lateral conversation. This lateral move that asked participants to speak to something outside of their expertise was premised on the notion that shifting the discursive domain would allow for tacit knowledge or some unrecognized truth to seep through. As noted below, we asked people to interpret video installation pieces that used dance and other performance vernaculars to speak to the present and future of multilateral trade.

As to the second aim, it seemed clear that although art has often been used to resist the hegemony of global institutions, including that of the WTO, in this case it was important to pull into rather than push against the institution. We sought to see by finding the spaces of acceptance; art was this space.

The CWR building had previously housed the International Labour Office, which had commissioned a number of large-scale paintings and tiled murals depicting labor and the trades, including 'The Dignity of Labor', by Maurice Deny. This artwork was removed and/or covered during the early WTO era, until 2005 when the Director General Pascal Lamy, a French national, and his team initiated a multi-million dollar renovation project that entailed a large extension and the restoration of these artworks. Lamy had also recently approved the purchase of a series of nearly 50 works by artist Jean-Claude Pretre entitled *11 Septembre De La Paix*. The works are computer-generated faux-maps that are simultaneously meaningful (data-derived) and meaningless (functioning as abstract art), hitting a certain sweet spot in institutional tastes in art. Moreover, Victor do Prado, at the time the Deputy Chief of Staff to the Director-General at the WTO, had a strong interest in reinvigorating the public persona of the WTO through a renewed focus on the artwork housed at the CWR. He was also captivated by the collection of gifts, including many valuable *objet d'art*, that had been amassed over the years at the CWR from member states and suggested that a

'second-act' project might involve these objects; he construed these gifts as symbolic support by member states for the mandate of the WTO.

As such, both do Prado and Lamy supported Marcus and Chung' proposal for a return project that would engage with the restored artwork, the collection of gifts, or in the form of new artwork. An art-based encounter was a point of convergence of the aims of the Secretariat leadership and those of Marcus and Chung. In a sense, this illuminated something useful about institutional identity: art was acceptable territory in this charged environment. Because it operates in the realm of metaphor and interpretation, art is a medium that enables one to speak *to* without speaking *of* sensitive issues. In this case, the issues were the culture of the institution and its present and future relevance.

### *Gatekeeper Negotiation*

Requesting an interview is one thing; an interview is a known type of exchange and easy to give or deny. Requesting permission to exhibit a large scale installation art piece is quite another. Raising the stakes in this way offers potentially larger returns because granting permission becomes more complex and more information must move through internal channels. As we found when pursuing the requisite permission to stage our installation, requesting permission to implement something that had no real precedent at the WTO illuminated internal divisions and fears about public perception. Other artists have explored the issue of state power and bureaucratic processes through requests to install public art, including Christo and Jean-Claude via the *Wrapped Reichstag* project; it is a gambit or generative challenge to bureaucratic entities. A few points here illustrate how interactions with WTO gatekeepers in relation to permissions for *Trade is Sublime* were generative.

The WTO, like other multinational non-corporate agencies, is relatively toothless; it derives its strength from the buy-in and participation of member states. Therefore, the Secretariat, as its operational component, must continually navigate between its individual entities (member states) and its organizational frame. The tension between

national identity and shared interests among member states was made visible through the process of gaining permission. It was suggested, for instance, that the content of the videos in *Trade is Sublime* avoid allegory in relation to national identity to avoid insinuating tensions between or a criticism of particular member states.

Moreover, determining the specific site to exhibit the piece within the CWR, decisions about how the installation would be publicized, the degree to which WTO printing, labor, and electrical resources could be put to use were all subject to negotiation, and each negotiation was revealing. One theme that emerged was the complicated relationship between the Secretariat and the missions. An invitation to an opening reception at the WTO for *Trade is Sublime* could not be formally issued to the missions because this would imply that the Secretariat was initiating or supporting the event financially or otherwise. Rather, the Secretariat must always present itself as serving, rather than directing, the missions and their delegates. Moreover, because the WTO is financially sustained by the member states it has to convey that all monies spent truly facilitate the aims of the organization; there was express concern that funding for our project (from U.S. based institutions) be clearly noted on our materials so as not to raise questions.

Similarly, all formal email communication and printed materials needed to be officially translated into French and Spanish by Secretariat translators, without exception. This applied to communications we attempted to disperse, including a card designed to elicit translations of our project title, *Trade is Sublime*, from delegates and members of the Secretariat. Translational procedures highlighted the bureaucratic commitment to particular definitions of transparency and of democratic access to information, and also explained the slow pace of internal communication.

Finally, the dates we were granted for exhibition fell short by two days of the annual 'open house' at the WTO, when local residents are given access to the CWR and the grounds along Lake Geneva. The open house was part of an ongoing push to emphasize institutional transparency, initiated only recently and connected to post-Doha concerns about the public perception of the WTO. This likewise revealed a concern that

*Trade is Sublime* might be interpreted as critical of the institution and therefore inappropriate for public consumption.

### *The Collaborative Art-Making Process, or the Studio as a Para-Site*

In the traditional ethnographic model, an ethnographer returns from the field with the collected data, analyzes it, and produces written work that interprets and theorizes the ethnographic material. In this model, data is collected first, and then observations and verbal exchanges are distilled in written form. Inscription entails translational practices in that localized concepts and practices must be translated by the ethnographer for an audience unfamiliar with them, and translation is often integral to an analytic process. Moreover, this work is fundamentally solitary and unidirectional; the ethnographer is responsible for producing the written analysis. Although scholars share and reflect on one another's work in formal and informal ways (from scholarly peer-review to sharing drafts with colleagues), those with whom one share's findings do not in turn take those findings and publish their own interpretations of the data; this could violate intellectual property rights or verge on plagiarism. Although a research assistant might turn over interview data to a principal investigator, the principal investigator/ethnographer does not generally gift "raw" data to other scholars. Therefore, fieldwork occurs earlier in time than analysis and writing, which is the endpoint or product, and translation and inscription are the rightful domain of the ethnographer who "collected" the data.

In a multimodal ethnographic process that entails, as did *Trade is Sublime*, collaborative art-making or studio process, such clear lines begin to blur. Temporality, directionality, and interpretive and translational responsibility all shift. Below are some types of exchanges that both contributed to creating *Trade is Sublime* and fed back into the research. When these exchanges began to occur the concept for a second-act project at the WTO was largely nebulous; with six months the piece had been fully conceptualized and operationalized.



- Chung and Marcus describe elements of the original data to Cantarella and Hegel in a series of Skype conversations between California, New York, and Germany and via email. These explications provided an opportunity for articulating and reorganizing data, as well as for new interpretation beyond that included in prior publications on the research, and thus provided an opportunity to salvage underexamined aspects of the data.
- Hegel and Cantarella query to find points of connection between elements of the data and to identify critical questions to might frame the second-act project. In turn, they posit interpretations, both anthropological and in the vernacular of installation art/design/performance.
- Hegel and Cantarella create a text and image-based proposal for a staged encounter/installation at the WTO entitled *Trade is Sublime*. This proposal is submitted to Chung and Marcus, who then submit it to Meridian 180, a virtual discussion comprised of anthropologists and legal scholars, for interpretation and response. The team (Chung, Marcus, Cantarella and Hegel) discusses the responses, incorporating some as they refine and rethink *Trade is Sublime*.
- The revised proposal is submitted to do Prado, Lamy and other key players in the WTO Secretariat for approval. Their response to the proposal adds to insights about institutional identity and bureaucratic processes.
- In collaboration with Marcus and Chung, Hegel and Cantarella make design decisions, develop the film score, put together a team of collaborators that includes additional designers, production assistants, and performers. As the score takes shape, the vernaculars of movement and design are re-translated back through anthropological vernaculars as a process by which the team strives for shared understanding and clarify interpretations.
- During the 2-day film shoot, Marcus, geographer/historian Patricia Seed, Hegel, Cantarella, and the production team develop the content, using the score as a starting point to work improvisationally. Discussions about aesthetic choices (such as decisions about the quality and speed of 'exchanges' between dancers,

the placement of scenic elements like boxes and walls, etc.) also operate as analytic spaces in which to further articulate and pose questions about how multilateral trade operates and current and possible role of the WTO.

- Approximately four total hours of film footage is edited down into three films (Approx. 4 minutes each) to be shown as a triptych; early edits are uploaded for approval by do Prado at the WTO.

Collaboration at the intersection of design/art and anthropology entails multiple logics, which is precisely the appeal. As Grimshaw *et al* (2010) propose, anthropological practice with artists both acknowledges differences and such differences can productively unsettle assumptions. Schneider and Wright describe the differences that emerge in the juxtaposition of art and anthropology processes as “productive irritants” (2010:5); these hybrid contact zones are not only useful starting points, as they note, but also useful as a sustained interaction.

Pre-production and filming (and to a more limited degree, editing of the films and the installation of the piece at the WTO) were both generative processes of collaborative translation and inscription. During pre-production, as the dance score was developed and the piece as a whole took shape, the ‘original’ data (collected during the 2008-2010 fieldwork) was strained through art and design vernaculars. In turn, pre-production generated ‘new’ data in the form of new recollections and reflections by Chung and Marcus, the collection and content analysis of WTO-published pamphlets, reports, books and online content, and reflections on translation, markets, and multilateral trade by the Meridian 180 scholarly community. This new data seeped into and reshaped the project in the form of shifting ethnographic questions and correlating design choices. Naming the piece, for instance, was a pre-production analytic practice that forced us all to reckon with the data to identify a concern that threaded its varied components together. At the same time, and perhaps unlike ‘naming’ that occurs with academic publishing, the name of the piece could be highly metaphorical so that it continued, and continues, to pose questions rather than summarize “findings.”

The generative potential of hybrid contact zones was perhaps most clear in *Trade is Sublime* during the days of filming. Because a film shoot entails a large team of people who are each being paid a fee for a scheduled shoot period, there is intense pressure to work quickly yet in a cohesive and ordered way. Each shot had to be set up, entailing changes in lighting, scenery and props, camera placement, and sound elements, before the performers could begin to work through movement improvisation on camera. During pre-production meetings, the directors (Hegel and Cantarella) and the production team had made some decisions about what and how to film each segment. Yet the nature of the piece was improvisatory such that all collaborators were working off a choreographic score (see below) that contained rules for and key ideas about movement quality and exchange behavior. Therefore, the two-day shoot was a process of continuous and fast-paced decision-making as the piece evolved.

The ethnographic inclination is to listen to the data and then work towards representation that corresponds with ethnographic truth. Designer-collaborators are inclined to listen to aesthetic impulses, with an eye on beauty and visual and aural evocation (in this instance at least). Hence, during the shoot Marcus and Hegel often referenced elements of the data as they made decisions about how to direct performers to guide the performers towards a movement language related to themes in the data. At times, we even evoked specific ethnographic material and sought to articulate its movement correlates. At the same time, the ethnographic 'truth' was resisted through on-the-spot design choices that took cues from the performers' improvisational work, such as a visual effect that could highlight and extend a particular gesture. Conversations between and among Marcus and Hegel, the performers, the cinematographer, and Cantarella and other designers, were at times halting, opaque, and unsettling, and at other times found a common sensibility. The intensity of the shoot brought into relief different insights that each collaborator brought to the table. In so doing, it served as a hybrid contact zone to create a new language about and of the subject, and even upended definitions of the subject.

### III. Designing the (Art) Intervention

#### *A frame for the work*

The design for our intervention at the WTO operated on two distinct, but interconnected levels; the creation of the autonomous art object and the establishment of a specific frame of reference through which that object's meaning could be disputed.

Our process began by focusing on the frame. Despite or perhaps because of the fact that institution wanted art per se, positioning the intervention so that it could create real productive encounter became challenging. The dedication of space for aesthetic contemplation within a space of productive labor (education, commerce, politics etc..) often has the converse effect for what is desired; positioning the ideas as art diminishes its potential impact because it is passively available as part of the work environment. Galleries generally serve as a kind of a quarantine, protecting the surrounding environment from virulent qualities of the work. This happens regardless of the subject of the work. The gallery frame distances the work, positions it as an object of appreciation, and ultimately suggests that all work sells that same story - creativity as a triumph of the human spirit.

The strategy of radical shock used to combat this process that has become commonplace in contemporary art practice or the European regiethater<sup>2</sup> were off-limits to us due to sensitive nature of the institutional culture.<sup>3</sup> In addition, because the work had to "look like art", we could not disguise it as art by other means as we had in the *214 Sq. Ft*<sup>4</sup> project. Our eventual decision was to frame the piece as a proposal for a monument. This activated the work in two ways: a) as a proposal (and not a completed work) it suggests potentiality - something to be voted on, and b) by introducing

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<sup>2</sup> Regiethater is a term for typically European director-driven theatrical form that often deploys violence or sexual imagery for shock effect.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, Marcus' prior attempt to engage with artistic collaborators from Basel had floundered precisely because of this. The artists' desired to work within a their own fixed aesthetic language that had currency in the gallery world, but was too invasive for the WTO space.

<sup>4</sup> *214 Sq. Ft.* was a 2010 work we created in collaboration with Project Hope Alliance and installed at various sites in Orange County, CA, including UC Irvine, Saddleback Church, The Balboa Bay Club, and City Harvest warehouse. As of 2014, it is still in circulation as part of awareness-raising and fundraising to support services for homeless families in Orange County; as the creators, we also used it as a staged ethnographic encounter to prompt conversation about the meanings of poverty, homelessness, shelter, and morality.

monumentality we could reference back to the traditional use of art within the institution as a means of concretizing an abstract value.

### *Proposals*

Presenting proposals as a site for public discourse has its strongest tradition in architecture and landscape design. It has become standard practice for high profile projects to have design contests in which proposals are presented for public discourse. Often presented in public displays, reprinted in newspapers, and recorded in virtual forms, they enact a kind of aesthetic democracy in which viewers are asked to vote for their favorite. This process is often coupled with an “expert” judging panel that officiates and has final say in designating a winner. The process may be repeated again when the real agents of powers (developers, politicians, etc..) fund the project. The development of the High Line in Manhattan, for instance, followed this pattern. A public design competition sponsored by The Friends of the High Line in 2003 garnered 720 entrants and designated five winners. This process was repeated in 2004 with an official Request for Qualifications this time in partnership with the City of New York. This process designated four different finalists as well as the eventual winner, James Corner Field Operations in partnership with Diller Scofidio + Renfro.

The effort put into design proposal and competition processes reflects a general agreement that architecture has both public and private implications. For vernacular buildings this tension is reflected in the zoning and planning process, whereas proposals for structures with high symbolic value (the High Line, Ground Zero, the Columbia University expansion plan) are disputed through public or semi-public forums. The stake that residents have in their city, neighborhood, and block may result in a passionate, engaged response. At the same time, the design proposal process also can be seen as means of silencing that response through the performance of democratic process.

The proposal as a medium effectively posits a future for disputation, and we took up this mode of proposal by presenting three competing art objects side by side and

designated them clearly as proposals in our didactic materials. These works were presented not as a trace or record of past artistic activity, but rather as an implication of a future creation. This was an attempt to generate a sense of ownership stake in that future by “residents;” members of the Secretariat and member state delegates.

### *Monumentality*

As the home to many international organizations, Geneva is rife with monuments. The city is peppered with statuary from its past as city of refuge to its 20th century history as home of the Wilsonian institutions (League of Nations, ICRC, ILO, etc.). The architecture of the CWR includes allegorical painting and figurative sculpture that monumentalize the dignity of labor, the benefits of leisure, mining, Irish industrial development, peace, and justice. Monuments are fundamentally metaphorical, yoking together abstract ideas with concrete visual representations. More specifically, they seek to unearth tacit, culturally-agreed upon truths, and to grant such truths permanence. This process can be destabilizing when these truths are in flux, as can be seen in historically controversial monuments such as Maya Lin’s Vietnam War memorial or Diego Rivera’s murals for Rockefeller center. But history tends to resolve these debates and monuments can become purely aesthetic. This process can be seen in Centre itself. Murals painted for the International Labour Office in 1930s were covered over in 1975 when the the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) moved into the building. Olivier Long, the Director-General at the time, considered them “unsuitable” for the political sensibilities of his more right-wing organization (Kuntz, 2011:11). By the mid-2000s however, the potential political power of the murals was effectively neutralized-enough that they could revealed with great fanfare.

We wished to reactivate the potential of a monument as a space for debate. We framed each proposal as monuments both textually and in their physical manifestation. Our postcards, e-mails, and visual materials described the works as a “monuments to trade.” Moreover, the three videos were presented inside in identical architectural models of the Atrium of the CWR, a space commonly used for informal meetings of

Mission and Secretariat staff and described by do Prado as the functioning heart of the organization, the WTO's agora. Each of these models was positioned on small glass-top tables in the entry to a newly-built section of the CWR, each a distinct and parallel multi-media proposal at which viewers could linger. Viewers looked down into the scale-model buildings to watch the films, a design choice intended to direct the gaze toward the "core" of the institution and its inner workings.

In keeping with the idea of monumentalizing as a process by which enduring truths are made visible, we toyed with the "enduring truth" of the WTO as a trade regime and of multilateral trade more generally through titling. The title *Trade is Sublime* asserted a possible truth, using an overblown adjective to prompt interpretation (how is it sublime? Under what circumstances might it be sublime? Is it the opposite of sublime? etc.). In addition, the subtitles of each short film (see below) qualified that overarching proposition with self-professed institutional virtues (see below). In so doing, we asked viewers to weigh in on which of these self-professed virtues should be illustrated through monument; in other words, which virtue is most true?

### *Three Dance Films*

With the specific frame of reference designed, we could begin to design the creation of the art objects. We began by researching other existing monuments to trade which were largely executed in the traditional media of stone or bronze statuary or allegorical frescos. A particular compelling example can be found in front of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in Washington, D.C. in the form of two monumental equestrian statues executed in limestone, titled *Man Controlling Trade*. The statues depict trade as a muscular stallion straining mightily against an equally muscular bare-chested man who reigns in the beast. The image suggests trade as a natural force, both beautiful and destructive, caught in an eternal struggle with an equally powerful force, and the governmental regulator as hero. Embodiment within a highly physicalized human or animal form is a strategy consistent in the classical mode of monumentality. In our context, we wished utilized the same strategy but in a

contemporary fashion. Since monumental sculpture or painting both has set visual meaning within the CWR space, we chose to translate the same intent through a different medium, that of improvisational dance recorded on digital video.

The subjects of the filmed pieces were derived from three statements found in a public advocacy pamphlet titled *10 Common Misunderstandings About the WTO*. *Misunderstandings* seeks to frame the WTO agenda in laymen's terms and was published in 2008 when the organization's anxieties were still centered around the protest movement that emerged most forcefully at the Seattle Ministerial in 1999. Tellingly, in 2012 the WTO published a similar brochure entitled *10 Things the WTO Can Do*, which reflects a shift of anxieties from accusations of nefarious global manipulation to simple irrelevance. We selected the following declarative phrases: *Everyone Has to Follow the Same Rules*, *No Decision is Taken Until Everyone Agrees*, and *Allow Trade to Flow More Freely*. The titles were displayed at each of the kiosks on small white plaques; our plaques were made in the identical format of the name plaques used in WTO meeting rooms to identify the role and country of each participant.

Each film suggested an idealized "dream" of the WTO, how it operates and the promise it holds. The films were screened simultaneously for the viewer in continuously running loops with the juxtaposed images shifting over the course of the installation due to the differing lengths of each segment. Each film contains multiple short segments presented in a non-linear specific order; in other words, segments within each film relate visually to one another, are variations on the theme of the film, and were not intended to be narrative but rather imagistic.

It would remiss not to note the importance of beauty as a goal within the design of the installation. Beauty is one of the most powerful tools of the art process because it lowers barriers to enter the work and seduces the viewer into engagement. This seduction was crucial since we were operating in a space that did not require any *a priori* commitment from the viewer, such as one would have with a theatrical performance in which tickets were purchased and a night out organized. Viewers were free to float past the installation on their way to grab a coffee. The decision to utilize



dance was tied directly to this concern for beauty. The human form, gesture, and physical contact, in combination with scenic, lighting, costume and sound elements, were deployed to create deliberately compelling and hypnotic images.

### *Everyone Has to Follow the Same Rules*

*Everyone Has to Follow the Same Rules* imagines trade as collaborative game. The WTO effectively creates a bounded, neutral space in which exchange can happen in a global marketplace where everyone has equal access. Actors who enter this space have committed ahead of time to the rules of participation that constrain individual action and choice. They function in a leaderless, cooperative utopian space in which productivity is a collective value. Liberating rules transform a disorganized, inefficient, and self-interested market into a productive zone of exchanges that benefits all participants. It is a space in which history (individual, national) has been methodically erased and carefully-balanced handicaps create a version of just order in nation-state relations. The players ability to simultaneously operate within a fixed set of rules **and** be liberated by such rules to create new and infinite combinations of exchange exposes/produces the sublime.

The movement language developed from simple task-based operations driven by a regular, modulated tempo that established simple, repetitive patterns. These patterns were then articulated using a strategy of theme and variation. The initial gesture created by two dancers entering in the space and exercising a simple transfer of a goods was extended and complicated by the use of additional trading partners, objects of exchange and the manipulation of time in the video-editing process to double or reverse events. The editing process and a minimalist sound score was used to play with the chronotope by making exchanges non-linear.

The space of exchange was a neutral four-wall grey and white box photographed largely from above. This bird's eye view emphasized pattern-making over individual movement. The dancers wore versions of international business attire (largely suits in grey and black) reflecting the dominant visual paradigm of the western european man

as a representation of neutrality, a person without gender or ethnicity.

Color was used to expand, duplicate and enhance these basic movement patterns. The all-white space was painted through the use of chromatic shadows. By projecting multiple colors of light from the same angle, direct lot objects will appear white, but shadows will fill in with complementary colors. This technique emphasized the movement of the traders by creating colorful traces of their actions. In addition, the objects of exchange were given color so that their movement across the space recorded patterns of movement and flow.

### *No Decision is Taken Until Everyone Agrees*

The second film embodied trade through the narrative of struggle. WTO was not depicted as an ordered utopia, but rather a space in which to ‘thrash out’ difference (WTO, 2008:1). As in the depictions in the FTC monuments, the struggle was romanticized. Beauty was evident in the enactment of the drama; the thrashing functioned as representation of war-making by other means. This sublimation of violent military exchange into civilized trade struggles was a primary goal of Western leaders in the Wilsonian era. They believed that global institutions like WTO could resolve tensions in geo-politics, without the great cost of human suffering witnessed in 20th century conflicts. Unlike the level playing field of *Everyone Has to Follow*, this space created new and unexpected imbalances and shifts in power. As such it was a space in which players grapple with specific histories, differences, and power imbalances; although it offers no lasting resolution trade can carry on, however tenuously. The struggle in and of itself has the potential to produce something sublime.

Creating the movement for this space began with similar task-based objects but now in with a large spatial challenge to the performers. The space was split in half and with a large mound-like incursion of black mulch bisecting its volume. This created an immediate problem for the performers. In addition, instead of attempting to work cooperatively as in the first segment, the performers struggle for dominance in the exchange process. The tempi were attenuated giving the performers more time to

negotiate each transaction. Contact improvisation, a form pioneered in the movement research of Steve Paxton, became crucial in this segment. In contact-based work two or more dancers remained in constant physical contact. Movement is constrained by the transfer weight from one body to the other. This process slows down movement even further and demands and heightens the level of 'listening' to each others bodies. The failure to maintain balance within these constraints portends total collapse. This tension is expressed well in a sub-section we referred to as 'the amoeba' in which all four performers remained in constant contact as they attempted to achieve their objective of successful exchange within and across the mulch pile. This kind of naming is a hallmark of the choreographic process in which linguistic tags are given to modules of movement. The names developed often for purposes of clarity ("lets return to the amoeba section") become self-reinforcing. The naming of a section then spurs its reification as being amoeba-like. These names provide a stability for the performers and creators in the creative process shaping and specifying the work.<sup>5</sup>

The mise-en-scène for *No Decision* shifted to reflect the thematic change in movement. In addition to the large, scenographic shift, the mulch pile, the costumes, lighting, sound and camera technique were different. The formality of business attire was eroded by removing outer-garments (jackets and ties), allowing the bodies of performers to be revealed. In casting, special attention was paid towards representing a spectrum of ethnicity in the performers. We used a two women (Japanese and European) and two men (Persian and Israeli). The lighting was more directional with strong backlight and the use of haze to isolate the figures and frame heroic gestures. The camera work became more dynamic (in contrast to the 'locked-off' shots in segment one). The use of dolly shots and handheld photography de-centered the p-o-v of the viewer bring a heightened level of subjectivity to the cinematic language. A new

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<sup>5</sup> Another key named section was called *Peacocking* was derived from descriptions of elaborate, impassioned and largely ignored speeches that delegates often made during the formal negotiation sessions, which Chung observed in 2008-2010. These tirades were often pitched towards a domestic audience and meaningless in the room. In some ways, they pointed towards a ritualistic quality in the formal negotiation sessions that obscured the realpolitik of the organization defined in private and informal meetings.

sound score was introduced, created by composer Ned Mooney, that had elements of tonality and fragments of found audio reminiscent of short-wave radio broadcasts.

### *Allow Trade to Flow More Freely*

The third film removed the performers entirely. Inspired by an analogy Chung had posited about trade as functioning ideally on an open sea, this film imagined trade as a natural process in which territorial or national aims play no role. The specific reference was Melville's depictions of the 19th century whaling economy, in which smallholders (whaling privateers) operated in an unbounded space not subject to any specific national authority (the high seas) and ordered only by the technology of the ships, the migratory patterns of whales, and the currents. This post-governance, post-national vision of trade relations is depicted in this film by commodities moving, unencumbered by humans, through across the waters by the force of wind and wave.

The footage for this film was shot outside of the studio environment on natural bodies of water, the Long Island Sound and a tributary of the Quinnipiac river. Exchange commodities retained the same form as in segment one and two, white boxes filled with colored material. These were set adrift in the current to float, eddy, and collide as the force of the currents determine. Lighting was natural and the composed soundscape was replaced with environment noise. The camera work returned to a stable, composed framing, although this time with a shorter depth-of-field to allow objects to float in and out of focus. In the editing process for 'allow trade' we made extensive use of effects that compressed and expanded time. Slowing down or speeding up the recorded footage revealed the natural patterns in the flow of goods.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This echoed strongly the aesthetics of a series of maps of international trade patterns created by geographer Patricia Seed for the project; although the maps were not displayed as part of *Trade is Sublime* they formed part of the ongoing analytical feedback loop. Viewed through a formal aesthetic lens, the maps functioned as paintings without a traditional figure-ground relationship. As in color field painting or the work of the abstract expressionists, the visual surface is treated 'all-over' with mark-making that holds a purely visual or symbolic value. In Seed's maps, the marks are indexed to a specific data field (unlike AbEx painting which whose marks index an action process or revelation of some essential truth of the painter's hand). The level of visual complexity in these maps however frustrates ones ability to read them as strictly as an analytical tool. Their beauty raises their aesthetic value to a point which rivals their scientific meaning.

## *The Open Imaginary*

Maintaining the openness of the work was a central concern during pre-production, filming and editing the work. The advantages of working in the collaborative medium of performance was clear. Live performance by its nature is a composite form in which authorship is shared by multiple agents. Each specialist (designer, photographer, dancer, etc..) has a degree of autonomy within their discipline. As noted above, communication between the core research team (Marcus, Hegel and Cantarella) and the artistic cohort was complex. Although the assembled artistic team was grounded in some knowledge of the research subject, their primary frame for decision-making was not ethnography. They instead relied on their medium-specific knowledge of form and technique fueled by the specific prompts and to lesser degree the constraints of the shooting schedule.

A structure was composed for the three segments that identified specific references and aesthetic attributes for each piece. The language for *Everyone Has to Follow* was largely derived from the collaboration of choreographer Anna Teresa de Keersmaeker and composer Steve Reich. The photographs of Gregory Crewdson and the Pina Bausch's work with Tanztheater Wuppertal were important for *No Decision*. And the final segment owes a certain debt to installations of Andy Goldsworthy. As is typical in the collaborative performance-making process, references were freely appropriated from a wide variety of sources without a particular concern for originality per se.

We chose to work in a movement-based medium because the lack of language typical in dance allows meaning to float and the narrative impulse to be suppressed. Its temporal elements are controlled not by story but by the use of formal structures such as music, pattern-making and, in the post-modern performance tradition, task-based operations. In exchange for the defined causal structure of drama, dance assembles a system of partial, incomplete or overlapping signs in what might be called an open imaginary. By presenting these semiotic building blocks, we sought to create a text that ached for interpretation. Presenting a visualization of ideal trade relationships and the

WTO as a trade regime, while eschewing a singular, subjective solution, placed the activation of the work firmly in the process of the reception.

The effectiveness of this open imaginary was assessed in observations of those viewing the installation, and meetings and informal 'coffee' gatherings with WTO personnel and at the Missions throughout the two-week exhibition period at the CWR. Assessing the reception of the work proved difficult and will be addressed in more detail in our conclusion. It was clear to the research team that eliciting and capturing response are a component of multimodal, art-based ethnographic work for which additional techniques need to be developed.

### *Dance Scores*

The crucial phase of development that required an exchange of ethnographic and aesthetic knowledge occurred in the design of the score and the subsequent structure of the shooting schedule. The term dance score derives from systematic attempts that document choreography as a form of writing. Initial approaches to give a linguistic structure to movement dating from the 16th century recorded each gestures with a specific mark with complexity notational systems for speed and quality of movement. This approach gained prominence in the early 20th century in the work of Joseph Laban who developed a system called Labanotation. This use of scoring as a writing and documenting tool has become more common in contemporary dance practice. Instead of movement being written by a choreographer and then set upon dancers in the studio, the studio has become the generative site of movement creation. With this shift, the dance score becomes a guiding schema that prompts movement language, which is then developed and solidified in rehearsal and performance.

The score as a document of prompts and task-based instruction became extremely useful in our translational process from ethnographic data to artistic product. The score could establish certain guideposts for the creative process derived from our collective analysis of prior ethnographic work. But it had to operate within the constraints of the form, most particularly submitting to a rule of danceability. Complex,

theoretical insights do not necessarily hold meaning as a prompt for movement; reduction is necessary. The score had to be comprised of simple instructions for movement, so keywords were established as the underlying thread for each section. *Everyone Has to Follow* was outlined as “neutral, orderly, smooth, equal, technically perfect, taken-for-granted and cooperative. *No Decision* was described as negotiated, calculating, unforeseen, and rife with disagreement. *Allow Trade* included “natural” rules for commodities, floating, and openness. Specified beyond these general terms were specific rules and objectives for movement laid out in a series of prompts. The prompts became the basis of the shot list during the filming. An example from *Everyone Has to Follow* is included below.

- **Prompt 1**

- *Objective: Establish order.*
- *Rule #1: Only two traders in the Interior space at one time.*
- *Rule #2: Everyone must follow.*

- **Prompt 2**

- *Objective: Exchange commodities one at a time.*
- *Rules #1 & #2 still apply*
- *Rule #3: Sand must remain in the box (avoid spilling)*
- *Rule #4: One gesture is established to be used consistently (throughout all segments) to indicate that an exchange is complete.*

- **Prompt 3**

- *Objective: Exchange commodities one at a time.*
- *Rule #5: Before the transaction can be complete (i.e., before the commodity passes from one to another trader), it must be moved clockwise around the entire room.*
- *Rule #6: Commodities cannot touch the ground. If a commodity touches*

*the ground, it must be returned and the exchange cannot be completed.*

- **Prompt 4**

- *Objective: Exchange commodities in multiples (all previous rules continue to apply)*

### *Partial knowledge and Improvisation*

A key aid in creating the dance films was the use of improvisation. Improvisation is simply creation without preparation. Final content is not pre-determined but developed based on close listening and simple feedback loops. In improvisational work, an actor makes a choice (where the scene takes place, who the characters are in relation to one another, etc.). Subsequently, another actor recognizes and responds to that initial choice and builds upon that impulse. The work is self-assembling. The supposition that underwrites improvisation is that some kind of “truth” will inevitably seep out through the constraints; in this case, a truth not written by the “experts” (the anthropologists) but by those coming at the subject sideways. Improvisation employs the productive constraint of brevity while allowing the utilization of partial knowledge.

The use of brevity in improvisation have been well-documented. Participants have no time to develop received notions of what will happen next, and the lack of time forces performers to rely on immediate impulses and somatic instincts. The deterministic logic often associated with traditional authorship is avoided. In addition, compared with a traditional rehearsal or art-making process in which preparation and repetition fix patterns and processes, improvisation operates in an open space in which choices remain novel and unexpected. Combating the stultifying effects of rehearsal and planning has been one of the main reason improvisation gained prominence in 20th century art practice across the disciplines of music, dance and theater<sup>7</sup>.

Brevity was engineered into the development of *Trade is Sublime*. The

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<sup>7</sup> Improvisation in filmmaking is a more complicated effort due to large amounts of pre-planning and expense involved in the process. *Trade is Sublime* functions more as documentation of rehearsal in process than a finished film text.



performers were selected due to the backgrounds in improvisational dance, but also because they had not worked directly together before. They shared a passing knowledge and respect for each others work that allowed a level of trust and immediate engagement. Their direct contact was limited to the two day shooting schedule. The additional artistic collaborators also limited communication, relying mainly on dialogues with the core research team. This structure for collaboration was notably pioneered in the projects of Merce Cunningham, John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg in which each partner developed their work (movement, sound and visual imagery) separately bringing them together only during performance. This method grants a high degree of disciplinary authority to each collaborative agent relying in their case in chance operations and serendipity to construct the performance text. This is marked different that the traditional model in which designated leaders (directors, authors, choreographers and composer) curated and edit drafts of work with the desire of creating a unified whole.

The utilization of partial knowledge in the improvisational mode is marked by the blending of an extant body of knowledge (carried with performers) with new discoveries. The extant knowledge takes the form of existing aesthetic or ideological frameworks that are relied upon in making performance choices. These choices become facts are under constant revision but once voiced they remain manifest in the work. This compares somewhat to the classic description of a scientific process: hypotheses, experiment and analysis but without some key differences. There is no preliminary phase of gathering background research. Knowledge is carried forth in the body. Since the process is highly iterated, the more gestures that are made, the more 'right' they seem. In addition, the analytical phase is not measured against any objective standard. As the artist Robert Irwin points out in a discussion of his collaboration with psychologist Ed Wortz, "the artist measures from his intuition, his feelings. In other words, he uses himself as the measure" (Weschler, 2008:138).

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Like other participants in this conference, we are pushing against the grain of the classical Malinowskian conception of fieldwork and the field as a place to which one goes, gathers, and returns. We posit that a broader conception of the “field” and fieldwork might be obtained by taking seriously the potentialities of multimodal investigation; in the case of *Trade is Sublime* these modalities included staged, or produced, encounters, the negotiations they may entail, and art-making/studio-based practices.

*Trade is Sublime* was designed to re-invoke the ethnographic data about the subject (the institution, its operations, and the people who comprise it) in another form as a provocation to elicit ‘tacit knowledge’ of the institutional culture of the WTO from both the researchers and the ‘subjects’, as well as to provoke a richer analytic process through collaborative design. To conclude, we’d like to lay out some problems and questions that we identify as emerging through this process.

1. **The Return:** The Return to a delimited site allowed for the creation of a highly specific art intervention and built-in access and trust. The process of bringing with work back opened up new opportunities for ethnographic query. For Chung in particular, the installation was a tangible prompt for re-initiating contacts and conversation with members of the Secretariat and those in the Missions, which allowed her to re-enter the site with renewed purpose.
  - a. **Problem/Question** - Although we thought of this a ‘second-act’, could it be considered a model for initial encounter; a designed interaction - generated from the studio/atelier - that would reveal traces or networked connections to other sites as Rabinow *et al* suggest in *Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary* (2008)? For what type of inquiry would this be most effectively used? How might a lack of connections and trust, or even familiarity, in the “field” be overcome?
2. **Productive Encounters and their Reception:** One measure of success in the

multimodal, art-based model is generating engagement and eliciting response from those with whom it seeks to engage. This is more important than objective aesthetic value or anything it is “saying”. With *Trade is Sublime*, we passively observed those viewing the installation, and also sought to tap interpretations of the piece through follow-up meetings with Mission representatives and meetings and informal coffee receptions with members of the Secretariat. These had some limited value; in one case, it opened up a particularly fruitful dialogue with someone in the publications department who both interpreted the piece from his perspective and also told a number of stories that illuminated internal hierarchies and their relation to broader problems of transparency.

- a. **Problem/Question:** Assessing reception is hard. It needs to be considered and designed into the piece from the outset. Talk-backs are often unfruitful because re-translation into language veers towards the mundane or the overly technical. So how else might we have, or could we in future, engage participants, and what other ways might response be captured? What other expressive modalities might be offered as an avenue for response? These are some examples of designing an “inevitable process of engaged reception,” which may have generative possibilities:
  - i. Exchange/Gifting: *The Brighton Beach Memory Exchange* (Artpologist Collective) is one example, where subjects participate in an explicit exchange of memories/interpretations/thoughts for a gift, object, or service that is meaningful. The memories etc. are useful ethnographically; at the same time, willingness to exchange for receipt of the gift also captures what is meaningful or perceived as having value.
  - ii. Labor: Collaborative labor tasks, such as we engaged in on the re-building of *214 Sq. Ft.*, whereby assembling the piece with groups or individuals becomes a process of interpretation about

what it means. We also dabbled in this with *Trade is Sublime* translation cards; we were interested to see how people would translate the phrase, and even if they would.

- iii. Uses of technology (i.e. i-pad or audio-recording stations) to capture casual or purposive response.

3. **Proposal:** In this piece, we used the frame of ‘proposals’ to suggest the desire and need for response as central to a hypothetical next stage. This frame is appealing because it is recognizable in some social milieux as a call for public response.

- a. **Problem/Question:** How might the ‘proposal’ frame be modified or built upon to strengthen its pull? How might it likewise be modified to be used in social contexts where people are unused to being called upon to speak to an issue due to local and global power imbalances?

4. **Gate Keepers:** The process of getting permissions to stage/install the work is a valuable site of both ethnography and art-making.

- a. **Problem/Question:** Would it be ethnographically fruitful to focus solely on permission-getting (without actually intended to gather data/conduct the project for which one is requesting permission) as part of deconstructing what the “field” might be comprised of? Could the “field” self-assemble based on where and what one is given explicit permission to do and see? Or is this already, implicitly, the way “fields” are delineated in ethnographic research?

5. **Studio Site:** The studio can be a vital site for making anthropological knowledge. It is full of complicated trajectories of collaborative thinking and thus opens up new insights.

- a. **Problem/Question:** Anthropologists want to listen to data. Artists want to listen to aesthetics and form. How can collaborations that force us to listen to/for different things than we are accustomed to help us redefine what counts as the “field” in specific cases?



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