



At the Threshold

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When I think of Sarah Oppenheimer's work I think of thresholds, transgressions, discoveries; the potential for boundaries to be crossed. I think of what Georg Simmel wrote in the essay "Bridge and Door," which I know has influenced Oppenheimer because it was she who first shared it with me. Simmel was a German sociologist who wrote at the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth on a wide range of topics that included philosophy, ethics, art, religion, and social psychology, producing more than 200 articles in both academic and non-academic publications, as well as fifteen books. The key concepts he researched that are most relevant here have to do with what he termed "sociation," that is, the pattern or form that a certain social interaction takes. His study of the nature and character of interpersonal relationships led him to insights on urban life, individuality, fragmentation, and the workings of the metropolis. I quote from "Bridge and Door": "Life on the earthly plane, however, as at every moment it throws a bridge between the unconnectedness of things, likewise stands in every moment inside or outside the door through which it will lead from its separate existence into the world, or from the world into its separate existence."¹

Simmel makes this declaration as a means of explaining the practical operation of a door and its conceptual implications within a larger discussion that takes on Gothic and Romanesque cathedral architecture. The sociologist finds that with the placement of columns and figural statuary in these built environments (in contrast to terrene experience) the structures lead the visitor "with a gentle, natural compulsion on the right way." The "right way" from the door is toward the altar, which is what cathedral architects and designers have determined by placing the columns perspectively, so that they appear to move closer together as one approaches that communal fulcrum. In a faint echo of this description, when I met Oppenheimer in the Dietrich Exhibition Gallery at the Wellin Museum on the last day of her installation process for *Sensitive Machine*, I mentioned (with just the two of us present at the time) that something about her installation made the space feel sacred to me at that moment. Perhaps.

What Simmel was getting at was a fundamental predicament of our human existence: On one hand we are discrete, individual creatures with great interest in maintaining the boundaries between ourselves and others (particularly after the onset of modernity), lest we dissipate and lose our self-possession—a state the poet Sara Teasdale (who claimed in her poem "I Am Not Yours" to actually long for this experience) described as becoming "lost as light is lost in light." Especially in the contemporary culture of the United States, a kind of monadism is encouraged—expected even—to achieve financial success and professional distinction, and to prophylactically guard against being psychologically, ideologically, or sexually colonized by others. On the other hand, we are—all of us—pro-social primates who gain our meaning, our psychic, sexual, and intellectual sustenance, our sense of purpose from our engagement with others. And there is a growing body of thought that regards our communal practices, our affective, joyous, meaningful connections to others as the actions that contribute most profoundly to personal well-being and longer, healthier, individual lives.²

Fig. 12 Sarah Oppenheimer. *N-01*, 2020. Aluminum, steel, glass, and existing architecture. Installation view, Kunstmuseum Thun, Switzerland.

The door, for Simmel, is significant in constituting the device that practically and metaphorically mediates that demarcation between separate, solipsistic existence and the “world,” which is full of others who, in my estimation, offer both ecstasy and anguish in equal measure. But for Simmel, interaction with this world is a net good. For him, the door to the home shuts away a crucial natural part of our being. At the end of “Bridge and Door” Simmel wrote, “And the human being is likewise the bordering creature who has no border. The enclosure of his or her domestic being by the door means, to be sure, that they have separated out a piece from the uninterrupted unity of natural being.” Oppenheimer is interested in this world of unity. As we stand in the gallery discussing her exhibition, she raises what she terms as the “problem” of humans being separate, and I ask her why this is a “problem.” She answers without hesitation: “In our society there is a sense that we are *only* separate.”

What Oppenheimer has constructed at the Wellin with *Sensitive Machine* is a set of prompts, or conditions through which visitors can stand at a threshold, on the verge of an opportunity to cross into overlapping worlds. There is the world of unpoliced human interaction in the museum space that traditionally safeguards against any physical interaction with the objects in its care. By physically acting on the instruments she has installed there, visitors push against and break behavioral boundaries to see what is indeed possible once (*gasp!*) one engages the sacralized art object in the museum with both hands. A visitor may also cross over into the world of social engagement, where, as I did with the artist, one partners with another to together explore how the instruments can move, what effects they have, how much force is required, how soon one can recognize the results, how the movements change the character of the gallery space, how we *feel* in all this flux.

There is also an adjacent realm, the world of play, where we delight in moving ourselves and objects without teleological intent. We play motivated by that most innocent of human feelings: curiosity. We play to discover what is discoverable, to determine how much we can do with our two hands, and then learn what other pairs of hands and their attendant intellects might add to the game. We play to find out who we are in play, and who we might want to play with us.

These are spatial, corporeal, sociocultural, and even psychic boundaries that are brought to the surface by *Sensitive Machine*'s presentation of a threshold situation. For a space that, in comparison to many other exhibitions that have been mounted by the Wellin, looks rather spare, it is actually full of hidden entrances to places just over the horizon.

What happens in practice is that visitors manually push or pull on Oppenheimer's instruments, and when they do, the lighting tracks slip down or rise upward, thus changing the angle and intensity of the luminosity of the space. At the same time the manipulation of the instruments moves subdividing walls side to side, slowly, ponderously. What I found while manipulating the objects with Oppenheimer was that for full comprehension of what happens as a result of my action, I need a *partner*. I need someone to both witness and account for what I can't fully grok on my own. In this way sociality is both assumed by and compulsory for this work. We look in tandem and we talk about what is happening, how the space is changing as a direct result of our intentional manipulation of instruments that operate almost like doors.

But more than these possibilities, Oppenheimer is also provoking a kind of self-awareness so that visitors become mindful that these boundaries exist and have some understand-

ing of what they risk and gain in crossing the thresholds of touching and manipulating the instruments she has constructed.

How is all of this even possible? Is simply moving a few instruments in the Dietrich Exhibition Gallery to be on the verge of tumbling into these dimensionally adjacent places? Yes. This is so because the visitor comes into the museum space burdened and bound by the notion that a museum is intended to be a space of quiet contemplation, of ritual enactment, a space where middle-class values are modeled and adopted. The movement of the instruments, in the words of the artist, makes “the boundary palpable while keeping it invisible.”

This awareness of unspoken boundaries is particularly crucial to enact in a museum, which has since its Enlightenment inception constituted a space that privileges bourgeois and upper-class profiles while tacitly conveying to other classes that they do not rightly belong there. There is a lengthy and deep discourse on the failure of the art museum to represent the general public. One of the researchers who has discussed the art museum as a site of implicit exclusion is Carol Duncan. In her 1995 book *Civilizing Rituals* she explains how, through architecture, landscaping, and interior design, the museum essentially writes a text that welcomes the visitor into an iconographic program that constitutes a “script” which the visitor enters and finds meaning in. This ritualized experience of following this script asks the visitor to enact and thus internalize the values and beliefs being conveyed by the particular museum, much like a medieval pilgrim would follow a biblical narrative in an ecclesiastical setting, for example, the birth and life of Christ and his death and resurrection—a fuller elaboration of what Simmel understood of the architectural design of Gothic cathedrals. Duncan argues that beginning in the late nineteenth century, the then new public art museums were used to make the residents of American cities more “civilized, sanitary, moral and peaceful.”³ The ideal citizen who participates in this ritual in the modern art museum, she contends, is the bourgeois citizen who has this identity confirmed by the aesthetics of the museum.

Tony Bennett has made a similar argument, describing the museum that descends directly from the European Enlightenment as a behavioral, discursive, and scopic disciplinary chamber where the museum attempts to exercise control over the visitor. He asserts in his book *The Birth of the Museum* that the state seeks to civilize the population and does so through mechanisms such as the public museum. The museum, as he sees it, enshrines bourgeois values in its displays and implicitly insists that visitors subordinate themselves to the knowledge of the curator and have their gaze “tutored” in viewing an exhibition in order to see and understand the coded meanings that are given in artwork and recognize their readings as valid. When visitors do this, they are rewarded with the affirmation that they are reading the displays and objects in the “right way.” Bennett argues that the state, acting through the museum, holds out the behavior of bourgeois subjects as the proper comportment for the ideal museum visitor, and thus imposes the values associated with the middle class onto those who hail from economically poorer classes.⁴

One of the most persuasive and influential readings of the museum space, which predates and influences the work of Duncan and Bennett, comes via the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu sought to understand why it was that in mid-century France most working-class people seemed to rarely attend public art museums. He sampled five countries in Europe by survey to find out what traits persisted in those who regularly attended museums. He found that the one characteristic that consistently correlated with museum attendance

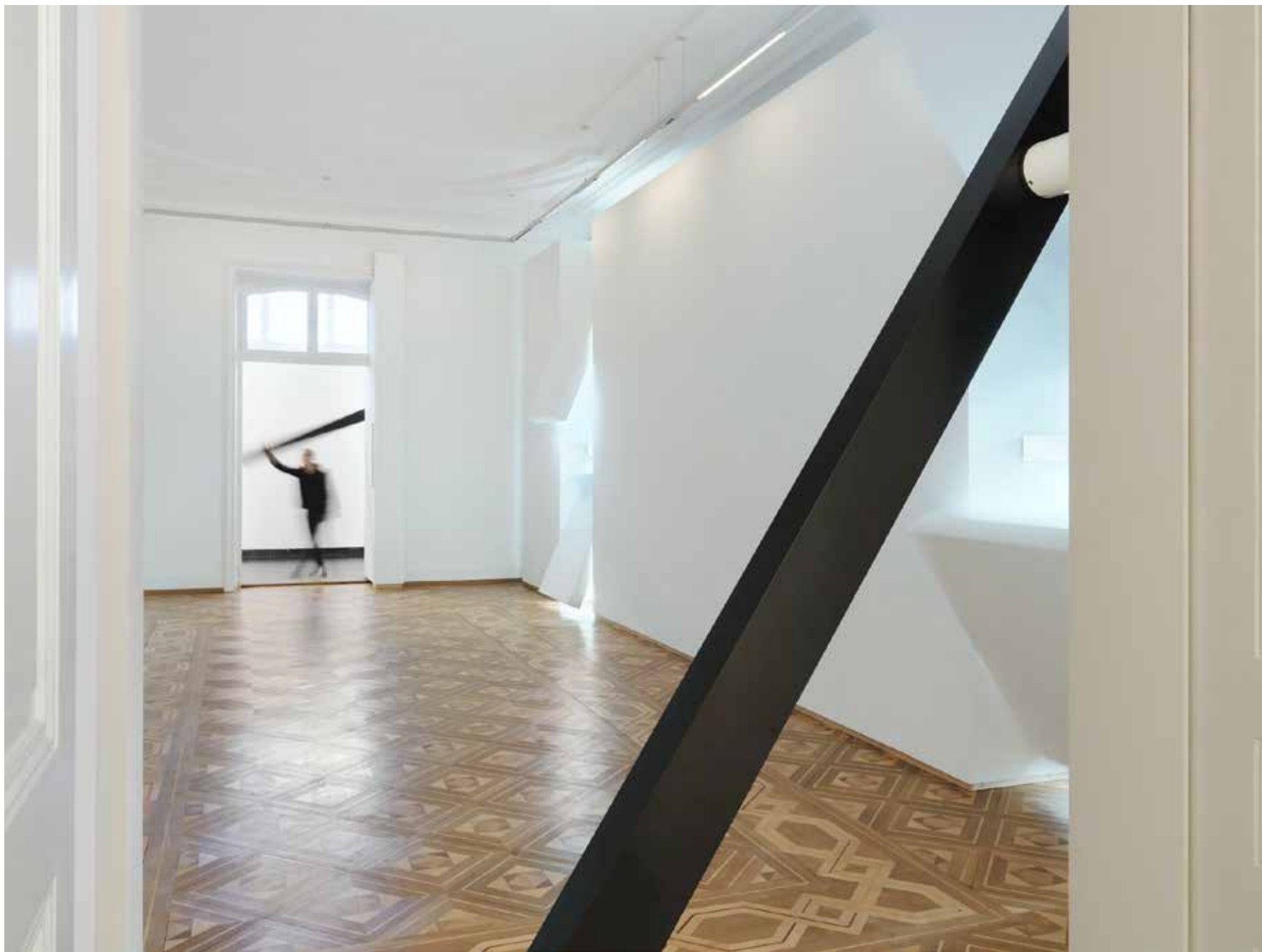


Fig. 13 Sarah Oppenheimer. *N-01*, 2020. Aluminum, steel, glass, and existing architecture. Installation view, Kunstmuseum Thun, Switzerland.

was the level of formal education. Using this quantitative data, Bourdieu and his co-researcher Alain Darbel, formulated a complex link between socialization, social, economic, and cultural privilege, a set of aesthetics associated with socioeconomic class, and the encoding of these aesthetics by and in the museum. Their conclusion was that the museum actively participates in the separation of the “barbarians” from the “civilized.” In his conception, the museum is a place of social segregation rather than connection, and his analyses undergird the current push to abolish or radically alter public museums—their administrations, missions, and visitor profiles—to become representative of and welcoming to all those who have historically felt rejected by these institutions.

These researchers, who wrote during the instantiation of a previous paradigm of museum behavior, don’t get the current contemporary art museum entirely right. But they don’t get it entirely wrong either. There is still a certain unspoken expectation of decorum from museum visitors and a privileging of the curator’s knowledge and gaze which has long obtained in museums under the rubric of preserving the collected objects for posterity, while cultivating scholarly work and educating the public. And though they are slow moving, there are radical shifts underway, ones which I’ve discussed in my own book that focuses on museum visiting as an experience that has profoundly shifted museum administration, programming, audience development, visitor research, and marketing in the last generation.⁵ *Sensitive Machine* is an intervention in an older and still dominant protocol for museum visiting and one of many signs that museums are shifting to become more focused on the visitor and more aware of the visitor as self-aware maker of meaning.

In a 2020 exhibition, at Kunstmuseum Thun, in Switzerland, Oppenheimer talked about the expectations and behavioral constraints that her work there sought to confront. These issues are very similar to those that she confronts at the Wellin. In the catalogue for *Sarah Oppenheimer: N-01*, in a conversation with Helen Hirsch, the director of Kunstmuseum Thun, Oppenheimer says, “A certain social behavior is breached ... the museum is no longer a space of restrained contemplation; it is a site of participatory collaboration.” Now, at the Wellin, Oppenheimer says to me: “As you lose inhibitions [here] your mind becomes freer, you move beyond the social superego ... your sensitivity to being monitored. Conventions of correct or incorrect behaviors become pliable This is directly related to touching things.” Put another way, the situation she describes is one in which we are habitually closing a door on ourselves, shutting ourselves up in a certain set of proscribed movements and actions, especially when we are in a shared civic space.

So here the experience is pushing open a door that permits the visitor to pass from one kind of museological paradigm to another, from one kind of museum to another, from one internal regulatory system to another kind of self-awareness that is less inhibited, from one model of sociality that reserved and associated with one’s socioeconomic class to another that is less concerned with self-representation than with playful being. Here touch, corporeal interaction, matters.

Touch is a significant element of this work, particularly because touch is a sign of our willful engagement, and our intention or consent. This can be understood by discussing a contrasting setting. In an urban context touch is often incidental or inadvertent. I may unintentionally touch the hand of a cashier who hands me a receipt; I might graze the shoulder of another pedestrian as we navigate an intersection. Particularly while using mass transit my personal space shrinks to oblivion. I am prodded and poked, bumped and tapped because

we are all corralled into a space built for efficient conveyance of people over considerable distances. But all of this touch feels like it happens without my consent. And given that the intent of touch can vary wildly, I am quite often not sure what is meant by each incidental contact.

But here in *Sensitive Machine* touch is a way to break free of the social script, overcome the disciplinary dictates, to laugh the laughter that should be encouraged in these spaces where most of the possibilities of our humanity should be available to us. Touch here is intentional and purposefully about testing the borders where my perceptions run into their inherent limitations and someone else's can pick up where mine left off. And thus, in the push and pull of elaborately tooled doors I find that I am entering a story that is bigger than myself, that is bigger than any individual. In this place I touch an object and move it to move myself into some other relationship with the gallery space, with other people present there, with a world of unity where I don't meet others with a sense of scarcity, with the need to compete for limited resources, with the urge to dominate or in fear of being dominated.

There is a reciprocity here. In acting on the instruments I am also being acted upon—that's what the threshold manifests. By pushing on the door I move, and I am moved. And in manifesting this dialectical relationship between myself and the museum object, making it palpable while I still don't precisely see it, Oppenheimer brings to the surface a profound way to think about individual and collective agency as coming into full flower in the museum experience.

Previous discourse on Sarah Oppenheimer's work has tended to focus on the technical aspects, the minutiae of construction requirements, or the philosophical implications of working with an engineering exactitude that makes a mechanism that can respond to a participant's energy and intent in ways that are reciprocal and real yet cause no harm to the built space. But these conversations haven't dealt with what this work risks by operating primarily *not* as an enthralling visual display, not a window into the artist's personal biography, and not an ostensible confrontation or exploration of a sociopolitical issue of immediate import. These modes of artistic industry are the ones in the ascendancy. They command much of the public's attention.

But *Sensitive Machine* calls out to the visitor to come to the space with arms outstretched, *feeling* their way to whatever discoveries they happen to make. It also asks that the visitor do so in tandem with others who are also (hopefully) open to whatever may happen, whatever realms they might slip into in the push and pull. Imagine yourself on a seesaw, moving your weight up and down to send your partner higher and higher into the air, just as they do for you. The thrill is in the balance and the exertion, in the heights gained and lost in every turn. You pump with your legs when you touch the ground leaping up again, thinking that this time you might actually lose yourself, and you do for a moment. And then—before you are totally lost—your partner, anchoring you with their weight on the machine, finds you and shows you the way home. ♦

1. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 11, no. 1 (1994): 5–10.

2. "The Harvard Study of Adult Development," <https://www.adultdevelopmentstudy.org>.

3. Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 55.

4. Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995).

5. Seph Rodney, *The Personalization of the Museum Visit: Art Museums, Discourse, and Visitors* (New York and London: Routledge, 2019).