

CHAPTER II

STRATEGIES OF INTERPRETATION

The artist as researcher

In 1989, Plexus was metaphorically closed into the *Black Box Box*. Then, in 1994, Dernini “reopened” *Plexus Black Box* to be scholarly analyzed. With a suspicious attitude and an “emic” behaviour, he examined *Plexus Black Box* by using the model of “the artist as researcher,” as outlined by David Ecker.

Specifically, I want to argue that artist-researchers have an important role to play in advancing living traditions in art around the world. I shall also argue that the matter is urgent because many traditional arts are dying or are already lost. However, you should ask for my credentials before allowing me to present my case. I was trained as an artist, as an art teacher, and as a researcher in art and art education. And for the last twenty years I have taught at New York University in the Department of Art and Art Education. But as you will soon discover, it is my students who have taught me what I know about the arts of many lands and many cultures. While these students come to New York University to learn how to become artists and art educators in the modern world, many of them return to their places of origin with a reawakened consciousness of their own art traditions, a strengthened sense of purpose, and a deeply felt need for cultural renewal. What they have accomplished through their field research has inspired me to create the International Society for the Advancement of Living Traditions in Art (ISALTA). The purpose of this organization is to coordinate our worldwide research efforts by sharing our documentation of those skills and performances and artistic processes that are endangered.¹

The model of “the artist as researcher” was pointed out by Ecker as an underdetermined conceptual model that depends upon its particular cultural context which determines the model’s unique features, while sharing at the same time some common features.

Models may be thought of as conceptual tools for understanding reality. But given the diversity and complexity of art traditions, we anticipate developing models that would be conceptually underdetermined so as to be context dependent. In other words, the particular cultural situation would determine the unique features of each model while all models would share some common features. The following common features have been identified in field research:

1. Concentration and purpose are the two essential dimensions of any artistic process.
2. Concentration occurs in the domain of work. It refers to the artist's ability to focus attention on the work at hand while keeping extraneous thoughts, images, and feelings in the margins of consciousness.
3. Concentration at work is conditioned by the artist's skills and

¹ David W. Ecker, “The Artist as Researcher: The Role of the Artist in Advancing Living Traditions in Art.” *First International Symposium on Living Traditions*, p. 24, 1990.

knowledge and the immediate environment consisting of the workplace, tools, and materials; other factors are the well-being of the artist's family, group, village, or community.

4. The purposes of the artist are located in a domain of meanings. These meanings are grounded in the artist's lived experiences whose structure is given by tradition. While specifically artistic purposes involve the completion of tasks or the solution of problems by means of a range of artistic processes, more general purposes include earning a living and the maintenance of personal identity or group solidarity.

5. An art tradition survives only when new apprentices continue to find meaning in learning from the masters of that tradition.²

Sandro Dernini studied this model by following, from 1986 to 1993, David Ecker's seminars and courses on *Living Traditions in Art*, at New York University. As part of his training, he learned to write narrative accounts of his experience as "an insider" following the phenomenological procedures pointed out by David Ecker in *Qualitative Evaluation in the Arts*.

Time One. Duration of consciousness of the intentional object in the phenomenal field as it appears prior to reflection....Time Two. Duration of reflection upon the experience had in Time One for the purpose of clarifying whatever qualities, meanings, and structures were perceived or had....Editing. Meta-critical analysis of phenomenological descriptions which adopts a system of marks for the sake of avoiding extensive re-writing....³

Dernini as an "insider," since the beginning of his Ph.D. study in 1986, started to learn to keep a phenomenological approach in describing the artistic process of Plexus.

First, we attend as completely and as fully as possible to the object or event presented. Second, we write out a full description of the experience we just had. Third, we edit what we have written to indicate what upon further reflection we consider to be the essential character of the experience.⁴

Methodologically, Dernini, following the model of "the artist as researcher" started as an "outsider observer" by organizing with an "etic" behaviour his research and of its field, then, as an "insider participant," he moved to an "emic" understanding, making in this way a relevant methodological shift of paradigm in conducting his inquiry.

The shift of paradigm in ethnographical inquiries was related to a crisis of description and representation, as it was pointed out by George Marcus and Michael Fischer in *Anthropology as Cultural Critique. An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*.

The two related characteristics of this crisis are, first, disarray in attempts to build general and historically comprehensive theories that would subsume all piecemeal research, and second, a widespread perception of a fundamentally changing world for which tried-and-true "base" concepts that have served empirical research, such as class, culture, the social actor, among others, no

² Ibid., p.29-30.

³ David W. Ecker, *Qualitative Evaluation in the Arts*, p. 17, 1981.

⁴ David W. Ecker, ed., *Instituting Qualitative Evaluation in the Arts*, p.14, 1981

longer work as well. The consequences for the individual scholar have been twofold. First, he has assumed responsibility for defining the significance of his own particular projects the general theoretical umbrella of justification of the field no longer adequately does this. Theory and purpose in research are thus far more personalized, and this defines the experimental quality of both ethnography and other related kinds of writing in contemporary genres of cultural criticism. And second, cultural critics focus in on details of social life to find in them a redefinition of the phenomena to be explained in uncertain times, and thus to reconstruct fields from the bottom up, from the problem of description (or really of representation) back to general theory which has grown out of touch with the world on which it seeks to comment.⁵

Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* pointed out that crises are “a necessary precondition” for new theories to emerge and challenge scientists to confront themselves with “anomalies” and to provide answers to contemporary questions raised by the cultural crisis of our times and the shifting of paradigms.

Previously, we had principally examined the paradigm's role as a vehicle for scientific theory. In that role it functions by telling the scientist about the entities that nature does and does not contain and about the ways in which those entities behave. That information provides a map whose details are elucidated by mature scientific research. And since nature is too complex and varied to be explored at random, that map is as essential as observation and experiment to science's continuing development. Through the theories they embody, paradigms prove to be constitutive of the research activity. They are also; however, constitutive of science in other respects, and that is now the point. In particular, our most recent examples show that paradigms provide scientists not only with a map but also with some of the directions essential for map-making. In learning a paradigm the scientist acquires theory, methods, and standards together, usually in an inextricable mixture. Therefore, when paradigms change, there are usually significant shifts in the criteria determining the legitimacy both of problems and of proposed solutions.⁶

Dernini as a shift of paradigm changed his methodological field procedures by moving from an “etic” perspective to an “emic” one that he considered closer to the nature of a multicultural study and in particular to his study and to his identity as an “insider.” This shift of perspective also changed his way of looking at “insider” sources.

Led by a new paradigm, scientists adopt new instruments and look in new places. Even more important, during this revolutions scientists see new and different things when looking with familiar instruments in places they have looked before. It is rather as if the professional community had been suddenly transported to another planet where familiar objects are seen in a different light and are joined by unfamiliar ones as well.⁷

Plexus “insider” accounts gave to Dernini this kind of shift of perspective, described by Kuhn, which sometimes from an outsider understanding is not understandable.

⁵ George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique. An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*, p. 118, 1986.

⁶ Thomas S. Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 109, 1970.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 111

Following this “emic” understanding, he started to become more aware of the relevance of the insiders accounts to understand the project under study as an “end,” a final result of the Plexus creative process that he perceived as a qualitative problem solving. The relevance of “insider” accounts in understanding the artistic process as a series of problems and resolutions was described by David Ecker in “The Artistic Process as Qualitative Problem Solving.”

My interest in artists’ discourse is methodological. By this I mean to indicate that my problem is one of formulating warranted generalizations about the controlled process of artistic production. These perspectives may be usefully merged. A close examination of the shop talk and the work of the studio will provide certain data about the process of constructing an art object. These generalizations will be expanded to a level of abstraction inclusive of the immediacies of any given artistic production. I will call the latter qualitative problem solving. It is my contention that careful study of what painters do when ordering their artistic means and ends, as well as to what they say they are doing, will provide the bases for significantly improving our generalisations about education in the arts. If it is possible to describe the artistic as a series of problems and their controlled resolution, the ensuing generalization may be of no small consequence to the teaching of art.⁸

The investigation of the artistic process through which originated *Plexus Black Box* was perceived by Sandro Dernini as “a problem-solution-problem continuum,” therefore as a qualitative problem solving.

By extending this analysis of qualitative relationships it is conceivable that the history of art could be viewed as a record of the highest achievements of man’s qualitative problem solving behaviour. If this conception of the art process as a problem-solution-problem continuum is warranted by the qualitative evidence of art history, much of the shop talk between artists is verbal evidence. For shop talk is largely a by product of their mutual problems of painting or sculpting. The words incorporated into this shop talk have common sense meanings, or, rather, sense common to fellow artists...The things dealt with by such language are what I choose to call the means and ends of artistic production, the *qualities* artists manipulate, orchestrate, modify, and create in solving their problems.⁹

In “Toward a Phenomenology of Artistic Processes and the Expansion of Living Traditions in Art,” David Ecker described his initial experience of an apprentice knifemaker as a controlling factors process.

By reviewing my shop notes and Woody’s detailed “chalk-talks,” and by listening to the tape-recording of our lengthy discussions, I was able to reflect upon my initial experiences as an apprentice knifemaker. What became clear is that my own concentration and purpose were the controlling factors at each stage in the process.¹⁰

⁸ David Ecker, “The Artistic Process as Qualitative Problem Solving,” *Journal of Aesthetic and Criticism* 21/3, p. 284, 1963.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

¹⁰ David W. Ecker, “Toward a Phenomenology of Artistic Processes and the Expansion of Living Traditions in Art”, p. 78, 1990.

In describing his apprenticeship, Ecker underlined also the important correlation of “subject-and-object” as well as the separation of scientific activities from artistic activities, relevant in understanding the “way of being-in-the-world” of *Plexus Black Box*.

The correlation of subject-and-object underlies all of man’s ways of being-in-the-world. Hence, to acknowledge the *human* nature of aesthetic inquiry and its domain is at once to free research in art from the false objective/subjective dichotomy assumed in Western institutions that separate scientific activities from artistic activities.¹¹

The misleading notion of subjectivity in art was stressed out by David Ecker in “Introduction: Instituting Qualitative Evaluation in the Arts.”

“You can’t research art; it’s all subjective! As with any research effort, we must begin by identifying the general problem, which arises out of the widespread belief that subjectivity defines the arts while objectivity defines the sciences. It is the question of the cognitive status of the arts disciplines and whether knowledge-claims can be grounded directly in artistic and aesthetic phenomena as we experience them. Vehement denials of the very possibility are readily found in a survey of the literature. The positivists’ dogma that “whatever exists, exists in some degree, and therefore can be measured,” represents one historical source and provides comfort to those who would equate objectivity with quantification. (A less extreme rejection was printed out on a computer card that was given to me years ago: “if it can’t be measured it’s art, and to hell with it.”¹²

The distinction between subjective and objective as insider/outsider point of view was pointed out by Marvin Harris with Kenneth Pike in the *Emics and Etics. The Insider/ Outsider Debate*.

Participants can be both subjective and objective, and observers can be both subjective and objective. But the discrimination between emic and etic modes depends strictly on the operations employed by the observer. Participants other than those trained as observers or carefully coached in etic concepts by observers cannot provide etic descriptions of their social lives.¹³

Jacques Barzun and Henry Graff in *The Modern Researcher* argued that the historical verification method of records was governed by probability which was made by subjectivity. They described an objective judgment as “one made by testing in all ways possible one’s subjective impressions, so as to arrive at a knowledge of objects.” They further argued on the need to clear up the misunderstanding on the common notion of subjectivity.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 83-84.

¹² David W. Ecker, ed., *Qualitative Evaluation in the Arts*, p. 9, 1981.

¹³ Thomas N. Headland, Kenneth L. Pike, Marvin Harris, Eds., *Emics and Etics. The Insider/ Outsider Debate*, 1990.

In loose speech “subjectivity” has come to mean “one person’s opinion,” usually odd or false; whereas “objective” is taken to mean “what everybody agrees on,” or correct opinion....This common belief is quite mistaken. “Subjective” and “objective” properly apply not to persons and opinions but to sensations and judgment. Every person, that is, every living subject, is necessarily subjective in all his sensations. But some of his subjective sensations are of objects, others of himself, or “subject.” Your toothache is said to be subjective because it occurs within you as a feeling subject....Now only the tooth is real-hence the tendency to believe that an object is somehow “more real,” that is, more lasting, more public, than a purely subjective impression. But objects themselves are known only by subjects-persons-so the distinction is not clear-cut, much less a test of reality.¹⁴

Jacques Derrida claimed a “contorted” polarity between “outside” and “inside.”

The “dialectics” of the same and the other, of outside and inside, of the homogeneous and the heterogeneous, are, as you know, among the most contorted ones. The outside can always become again an “object” in the polarity subject/object, or the reassuring reality of what is outside the text; and there is sometimes an “inside” that is as troubling as the outside may be reassuring. This is not to be overlooked in the critique of interiority and subjectivity.¹⁵

Don Idhe highlighted the relationship between object and subject as a correlation between what was experienced with its “mode of being experienced.”

In traditional philosophies, a distinction is usually made between object and the subject that knows the object. Husserl transformed this distinction into a correlation of what is experienced with its mode of being experienced.¹⁶

Following the model of “the artist as researcher” as a practical corrective strategy, Dernini started to develop a glossary of the most frequent words and concepts used by Plexus participants.

A practical corrective strategy that my students and I employ as artist-researchers in our investigations of living traditions around the world is to develop a glossary of terms in the language of the master artist/artisan/craftsperson of a particular tradition.¹⁷

Glossary

Art Opera or *artopera* is the name given in 1985 by Butch Morris and Sandro Dernini for a multi arts format based upon an improvised interaction of many art forms, made by a conducted improvisation. It is built through a modular construction process which follows a “libretto” made by one or more authors.

¹⁴ Jacques Barzun and Henry Graff, *The Modern Researcher*, p. 183, 1985.

¹⁵ Jacques Derida, *Positions*, p. 67, 1981.

¹⁶ Don Idhe, *Experimental Phenomenology. An Introduction*, p. 42, 1979.

¹⁷ David W. Ecker, “New Directions for Art and Art Criticism from a Multicultural Perspective”, p. 5, 1992.

Art Co-Opera or *art co-opera* is the name given in 1987 by Leonard Horowitz, developed with Sandro Dernini, for a multi arts format made through *Plexus compressionist art process*. It is built through a modular construction process of individual art contributions, of any kind, converging into a collective “antilibretto,” mutually made by collective understandings, imaginations and emotions.

Art Logic is the name given in 1987 by Sandro Dernini to the Plexus strategic map published in *Passport for Plexus Serpent*. It is what in anthropology is known as life logic.

Art Slave Ship is the name of a metaphorical art slave boat. It was built for the first time in 1986 as an installation on the occasion of the Plexus artopera *Eve*.

Compressionism is the name given in 1986 by Leonard Horowitz to the Plexus art process as an interactive compression and expansion of time and space, in which one plus one is equals three.

1992 Christopher Columbus Consortium is the name of a consortium established on March 10 1989 in New York among individuals and representatives of academic and cultural institutions to organize a cultural navigation program in 1992 on the occasion of the 500 years anniversary of the Columbus’s landing in the Americas.

C.U.A.N.D.O. is the acronym for *Culturas Unidas Aspiraran Nuestro Destino Original*. It is the name of a community cultural center located in the Lower East Side neighbourhood of Manhattan that has hosted Plexus events from 1985 to 1992.

Eating Art is the name given in 1986 by Sandro Dernini to the idea of relating “art” to “food.”

Elisabeth is the name of a 200 tons fishing boat of Carlo Dernini, berthed in the port of Carloforte, in Sardinia.

Haddamard Matrix is the name of a drawing of an optical device made by George Chaikin, following a mathematical configuration.

In Order to Survive is the name of an open call statement performed by William Parker in 1984, in New York, at a Lower East Side street community event.

I.C.A.S.A. is the acronym for International Center for Advanced Studies in Art.

I.S.A.L.T.A. is the acronym for International Society for the Advancement of Living Traditions in Art.

L.I.A.C.A. is the acronym for Italian League of Alternative Cultural Associations. It organized the first cultural slave market show in 1978, in Rome.

Made in the '80s for the '90s is the name of Plexus events made in the '80s to be consumed by the critic consumer of the material culture of the '90s.

Modular construction is the name given in 1986 by Willem Brugman to his facilitatory theatre process to allow individual energies to work together.

Nuraghic is the name of the Bronze Age culture of the Mediterranean Sardinian people.

Plexonian Art Money is the name of money bills created artistically in 1988 by Micaela Serino as Plexus money.

Plexus Black Box is the name of a metaphorical container conceptualized in 1989 in which it was frozen Plexus.

Plexus Boxing Ring for Freedom is the name of a large poster used since 1989 in Plexus events to collect original signatures in support to the Plexus World Art Bank project in Gorée and to defend human rights.

Plexus International Art Slavery Manifesto Group Shot is the name of the open call made in 1988 for artists group photos against the slavery of art.

Purgatorio Shows is the name of Plexus large multimedia events made in the '80s with hundreds of artists performing all kinds of art forms and languages.

The Artist in the First Person is the name given in Plexus to the artist as a cultural independent producer.

The Buddha is the name of a statuette of a Tibetan Buddha given in 1984 by Don Cherry to Sandro Dernini, at the Shuttle Theatre, in New York.

The Door of No Return is the door at the House of the Slaves in Goree Island, off Dakar, Senegal, from where African slaves were embarked to be sold in the Americas.

The Indian Chief is the name of a statuette of a Native American warrior given in 1984 by Mickey Pinero to Sandro Dernini, at the Shuttle Theatre, in New York.

The Shuttle Theatre is the name of an alternative art space in the Lower East Side that has hosted Plexus activities from 1984 to 1985.

The Voyage of the Elisabeth is the name of an I.S.A.L.T.A. project proposal made in 1990 for the survival of the masters of the living traditions in art.

Time Art is the name given in 1984 by Ralston Farina to his concept of relating art and time to gravity. It is used in Plexus to escape from gravity and to fly over the gravitational weight of Western rationality.

World Art Bank is the name of a Plexus project proposal made in 1988 for the opening near the House of the Slaves, in Goree Island, Dakar, of an international art fund, produced by the artists in the first person, outside the artworld market system.

Field Research

In Plexus events, several *Plexus Black Boxes* were used metaphorically or literally, in which case they could hold some or many objects made for various events. Sometimes a *Plexus Black Box* did not hold any items, but simply symbolized the items which after years of activities became too numerous to be contained and carried or transported to the various places where Plexus events were held. *Plexus Black Box* appeared in many places. In time it became a symbol which contained the memory of past events or the history of past events of Plexus.

Sandro Dernini as an “insider” participated in the first person in Plexus activities under the name of *Plexus 23s*. In the beginning of Plexus networking artistic development, each historical player chose an individual identification code number in order to underline the individual identity of the artist in the context of the group.

As Plexus 23s, Dernini possessed his own “stock of knowledge at hand” as defined by Alfred Schutz¹⁸ which allowed him to have access to other historical Plexus participants, and to know locations of records and relics of the project. From the beginnings of his Ph.D. study in 1986, he started to collect and organize in chronological order all available documents of Plexus. He photocopied Plexus documents in a chronological order, without any classification, and packaged them in 13 booklets, one per year from 1982 to 1993, plus another one with records related to the pre-historical cultural context from which Plexus originated.

Then, following the distinction by Barzun and Graff¹⁹ between records as intentional transmitters of facts and relics as unpremeditated transmitters of facts, Dernini organized chronologically Plexus records and relics as follows: Written records: Press releases; announcements; newsletters; pamphlets and publications; diaries and reports; catalogues; slides, photos, negatives; Oral records: anecdotes and tales; recordings in various forms (videotape, audiotape, etc.). Relics: artifacts; memorabilia, legal and business documents; letters, notes. Systematically, he applied the historical method described in *The Modern Researcher* to verify names and dates and attributions to sources. The historical method guided his contemporary “archaeological” field research and his narrative historical reconstruction of the facts related to the *Plexus Black Box*.

The historical method ascertains the truth by means of common sense. When that sense is systematically applied, it becomes a stronger and sharper instrument than is usually found at work in daily life. It shows a closer attention to detail and a stouter hold on consecutiveness and order. The exercise of these capacities turns into a new power by which new intellectual possessions may be acquired.²⁰

The complete collection made by Dernini of all Plexus editorial records such as booklets, newsletters, pamphlets, shows presentations, press releases, from 1982 to the present, was submitted to the procedures of verification and then became a source with participant’s recollections for the identification of the primary sources of the study. During his field research, Dernini proceeded as follows:

Step 1: on April 9 of 1994, at the Alfa Diallo’s House of Originals, in the Lower East Side of New York, with a group of Plexus participants from the last 1993 Plexus event under inquiry, held at the NYU Rosenberg Gallery, he opened the two boxes, collectively named *Plexus Black Box*, carried there as closing act of the Plexus event, in

¹⁸ Alfred Schutz, *Reflections on the Problem of Relevance*, p. 66, 1990.

¹⁹ Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, *The Modern Researcher*, p. 166, 1985.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

order to identify their items. His procedure was as follows: 1) Each item was marked with a white round label and numbered. 2) A name of reference was assigned to each item. 3) The list of items, their number and name was recorded by the researcher in a logbook.

Step 2: on April 10 of 1994, he sent a letter to a group of Plexus participants, following the delimitation of the study, asking for their collaboration. After few weeks, Dernini contacted them to supply a full explanation on the purpose of his request.

Step 3: He outlined his field research procedures in his notebook with time and space in which the procedure took place. He identified relevances and placed them in chronological order. Plexus participants recollections were written either recorded as interviews. In the case of the recorded interviews, Dernini took care that these were transcribed and translated from their original language. These transcriptions were approved and also re-edited, in some cases, by the Plexus participant, before Dernini could proceed further in his interpretative procedures. Within the deadline of June 15 of 1994, indicated in his letter requesting collaboration, he received few written recollections.

In November of 1994, with the assistance of a member of his Dissertation Committee, Prof. Angiola Churchill, he was able to pull off a series of sessions of oral recollections by N.Y. participants. Then, these oral recollections were transcribed from tapes. It became evident for him the infeasibility to proceed to the accomplishment of the organization of a panel discussion forum with participants, as it was stated in his letter requesting collaboration. Therefore, this step was drop out. He gave back to all participants their transcripts collected in 1994 and 1995, receiving few approvals and editing within a period of a year. Recollections by Plexus participants are fully reported in Chapter III and in Appendix A.

From 1994 to the end of 1996, Dernini travelled around various locations, from New York to Italy, (Rome, Cagliari and Carloforte), Dakar and Amsterdam, examining all available Plexus records and relics, collecting what it was possible to remove and documenting what was not possible to remove from the premises. All records examined and/or collected were not specifically related to the project under study. He studied the collection of records and relics, item by item, to determine how texts, images, objects, symbols, related consistently to the ongoing project under study. He examined Plexus records at the following sources: on board of the Elisabeth boat, in Carloforte; at Franco Meloni's computer in the University of Cagliari; at Gaetano Brundu's Plexus Storage in Cagliari; at Anna Saba's in Cagliari; at Giancarlo Schiaffini' and Fabrizio Bertuccioli's in Rome; at Assane M'Baye' and Youssouph Traore's Club Litteraire David Diop in Dakar; at Willem Brugman' and Frans Evers's in Amsterdam. At this step of the field research, Dernini had viewed 3153 pictures, 3888 negatives, 75 videotapes and 25 audiotapes. Then, he re-viewed methodologically all video tapes, conducting also an insider phenomenological experience, as follows:

In Time 1, he attended the view as well as fully possible conscious of his double identity of participant as well as observer of the recorded art experience.

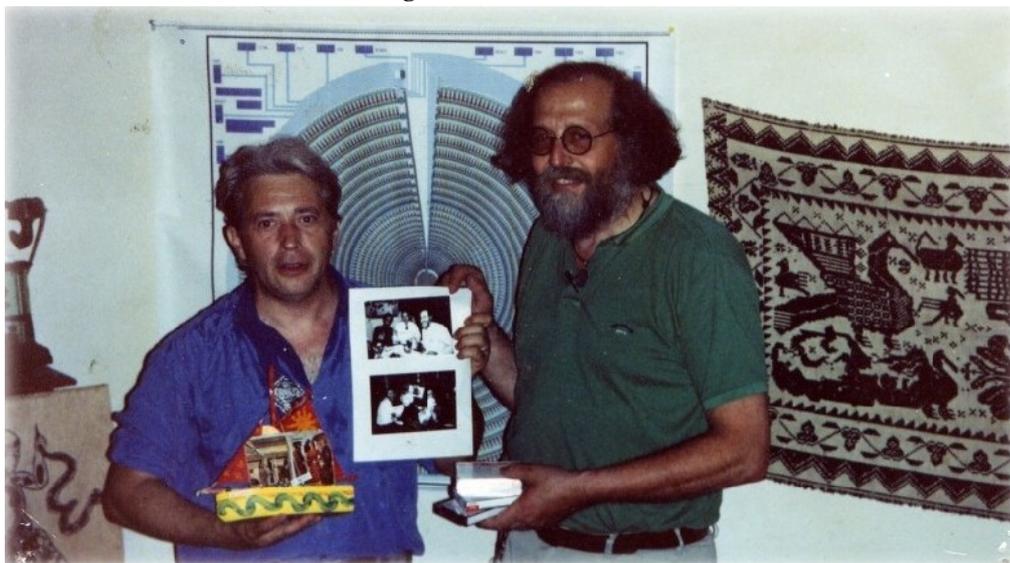
In Time 2, after few minutes of silent reflection, he wrote a description of his aesthetic experience on these screenings, tape per tape.

In Time 3, with a blue colour code for an “editing” procedure, he marked what from Time 2 in interviews or written recollections he considered to be relevant, following Schutz’s system of relevances, for his further “speed-up” description of experiences.

Editing: meta-critical analysis of phenomenological descriptions which adopts a system of marks for the sake of avoiding extensive re-writing. Speed-up: tendency or strategy of individuals in an industrial and technological society to perceive or judge human behavior in terms of the clock-time required to accomplish a specified task; e.g. the measure of productivity, intelligence, creativity, or goodness. In academic and artistic contexts the “speed-up” is operative when stipulated meanings or scientific explanations displace experiences and descriptions of experiences because they are quicker.²¹

From the fall of 1994 to the summer of 1996, Dernini completed the examination of all collected records, relics, and notebooks of his field research. Because of the huge quantity of materials, assembled over 12 years, it became on evidence that it would be totally unpractical to classify all them. Therefore, he reduced the numbering only to the items of the two boxes, A and B, sealed at the closing act of the 1993 Plexus NYU Rosenberg Gallery event. These items were considered by his stock of knowledge at hand inclusive of all other records and relics related to the study. Dernini applied in the beginning a phenomenological deconstruction approach, starting with his “close reading” of the first item of the box A, which was labelled A1 on the inventory made at the Alfa Diallo’s House of the Originals.

Close Reading of Plexus Black Box Item A1



George Chaikin and Giancarlo Schiaffini, Rome, 1991.

²¹ David W. Ecker, ed., “Qualitative Evaluation in the Arts”, p. 17-18, 1981.

A1 was a marginal photo, placed outside the box, on its covering plastic strip. It reported the image made in Rome, in 1991, at the Dernini's house, of Giancarlo Schiaffini and George Chaikin, in front to the Chaikin's *Haddamard Matrix* blueprint, while holding the *Colombina* boat, some video and audio tapes, and two small black and white photos, showing Giancarlo Schiaffini, David Ecker, Sandro Dernini and Lynne Kanter. After a "close reading" of the item A1, Dernini begun to deconstruct phenomenologically all the other *Plexus Black Box* items to identify relevant features.

Dernini was aware, for his preview scientific training as biochemist at the University of Rome, of the "troubling" relationship between outside/inside and of the interference of the observation tool, managed by the subject, in the object's examination. In 1985, in New York, at CUANDO cultural center, within the Plexus art opera *Goya Time: New York 1985*, to stress the interrelationship of the object and of the subject in art, with Greta Safarty and Butch Morris he staged 23 artists performing at the same time 23 different interpretations of the same subject-object: *La Maja*. Then, in 1986, as a performer, he started a series of Plexus *Eating Art* phenomenological performances to express his "conflictive" object/subject experiences within his Ph.D. study at NYU. Following the model of "the artist as researcher," as part of his field research procedures, he reported in a series of notebooks the phenomenological descriptions of his performances. Like the note taken from his performance *Do you think it is possible to eat Andy Warhol if you are eating a Campbell Soup Can?*, held at the Anichini Gallery, in New York, on February 18 of 1987, the same night in which Andy Warhol died.

February 19, 1987, 2:20 am, New York, 93 Avenue B.

There was half moon when I came back at home after my phenomenological experience. It was 2:10 am.

It was for me very hard to accept that bracketing out of relevance my beliefs and friends of mine beliefs was a possible reality in which I could be in the case. I did and I learned something that I refused to do within my friends and my life: to step out and to watch them-us.

Who was them-us? Who was "them?" Who was "me?"

Dernini in his notes used the hyphen between different words to underline this correlation between object and subject. The use of the hyphen between "subject-object" or between "subject-world" was pointed out by Maxine Sheets-Johnstone as a particular mode of phenomenology, in which a hyphen "indicates the primordial moment at which subject and object have not yet become separate."²² She underlined the need to search out a special language in describing a phenomenological experience in order to be able to "capture precisely the quality of the thing as it is experienced."

To arrive at essential descriptions one needs to transcend habitual formulations of the object or phenomenon; one must come to grips linguistically with the phenomenon as it gives itself in experience. This means forging a new language

²² Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, "Phenomenology as a Way of Illuminating Dance", p. 130, 1966.

that captures precisely the quality-the physiognomy-of the phenomenon in question.²³

Dernini started his field research with his phenomenological consciousness of “*being there*”²⁴ as an “insider” in the project under inquiry, by keeping reporting his experience in his phenomenological notebooks.

May 14, 1993, 3:30 pm, New York, David Ecker’s NYU Office. In 1986, in my performance “*Eating Art: A Self-Refracted Portrait*”, conceived for my first NYU phenomenological course, 23 PLEXUS friends played the role of my “social world” as a mirror through only which it was possible to see my refracted self portrait. I was a refracted vision of my social world. The horizon or context of the world places “the setting-into-work of truth” in which the work of art functions. Each phenomenological reduction or analysis of an art work has its own historical world related to the particular time and space on which the analysis is taking place. “It is true or not” was one of my phenomenological questions when on February 18, 1987, at Patrizia Anichini Gallery, 7 East 20th Street, New York, as a continuation field research of my 1986 NYU course E90.2605, Phenomenology and the Arts, I phenomenologically inquired 13 artists about “*Do you think it is possible to eat Andy Warhol if you eat a Campbell soup?*” I kept notes of my field research on “Eating Art” in a series of logbooks. These logbooks gave me the frame on which I practised the epoche’, the forestructure of my first interpretation, again and again to be phenomenologically reduced as part of my ongoing PLEXUS process of human experience.

My interpretation as an active performing act goes beyond form or syntax and ordinary language.

In 1993, in the Ecker’s NYU Phenomenology classroom, through the appreciative attitude of all participants, we tried to create an aesthetic phenomenological experience by transforming an ordinary class into an artistic environment, and then as an act of consciousness, moving back and forth through it, we performed our epoche’ in progress. At the entrance of the class, “We declare this is our/your epoche’ in progress while we-you are here” was written on the black board, on which it was hanged up a T-shirt with written “I think therefore I am fish.”

23s report n. ? + 34,

November 6, 1994, 10:25 am, Cagliari, Monteurpino.

Defining the coordinates of references of the journey. “MI-DENTRO-MI-FUORI” (MYSELF-INSIDE-MYSELF-OUTSIDE). This quote from Ciccì Borghi’s art work recalled to me the David Ecker’s paper at the conference *Art and Science Today: The Role of Imagination*: “On this experiment, we discover that neither you nor I, nor artists, scientists, psychologists, logicians--nobody-- is free to imagine, remember, depict, portray, represent, photograph, measure, or simply observe an object that is both blue and not-blue.”

I cannot see myself at the same time as a “lived insider” as well as a “lived outsider” of the project under study. Therefore I’ll be first of all, scholarly, scientifically and artistically, who I am: Plexus 23s, a “lived insider” of the living *Plexus Black Box* project. This was-is a result of my phenomenological deconstruction process in progress of the *Plexus Black Box* image A1.

10:45 am.

East-West, NYU ICASA Forum, 1986; *Micro and Macro*, NYU ICASA Forum, 1985; “from inside the horizon of a Plexus event,” I experienced my emotions’ oxide-reductions of experiencing art. “Eating Art” is-was a metaphoric concept to describe my phenomenological consciousness of artist as researcher as well as

²³ Ibid., p. 135.

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 59, 1962.

a biologist experiencing “art” as an oxide-reduction reaction. (Like a cold nuclear atomic reaction inside my lived body).

11.00 am.

“Il peso del” (the weight of) Dr. Dernini to carry the Well Being Reconciliation Project: “TOUCH-IT-DETACH.-IT” I am learning, anyway, in 8 years of phenomenology to suspend my beliefs to reduce my phenomenological experience. Therefore I’ll describe the “outside” from an “insider” point view, recalling “the Debate EMIC and ETIC,” and the complexity of the project under study within the context of the Well Being and Reconciliation project, made within my critical difficulties and personal family circumstances. Rodolfo (my 4 year old son) is protesting that he wants to use this pen that I am using, JUST RIGHT NOW! 11.47 am.

His continuous phenomenological reports from the field allowed Dernini to practice a non stop phenomenological exercise by writing notes on his experience with Plexus as well as a Ph.D. student at New York University. These phenomenological notes and logbooks, took by Dernini from 1986 to 1996, were used by him to keep an attentive consciousness upon learning to describe not only what was appearing in his experience but also how it appeared. He kept during the entire field research a sceptically suspicious attitude regarding his possibility of suspending his beliefs, while, again and again, he restarted his phenomenological reduction by bracketing out again pre-reflective meanings. His NYU graduate assistant training, before with Angiola Churchill at the International Center for Advanced Studies in Arts of New York University and after with David Ecker at the NYU Lower East Side Summer Institute of Living Traditions in Art, allowed him to become more familiar with current issues in art, which turned out to be very useful in understanding the artistic, cultural, and institutional context in which originated *Plexus Black Box* and how was positioned within the artworld.

Sandro Dernini was conscious that to place himself inside and outside the *Plexus Black Box* and to describe his ongoing-living-experience was a hard task to be accomplished, something that, at the same time, was changing his earlier perceptions by providing him with new outside and inside views, as it was claimed by David Ecker in “The Possibility of a Multicultural Art Education.”

What I have learned is that placing oneself in an artistic center of another culture inevitably changes not only one’s earlier perceptions of that culture and its arts but also provides a new “outside” view of one’s own culture, art, and art education.²⁵

By keeping his phenomenological notes, Dernini learned that phenomenology was addressed to gain results from the field of experience by describing it rather than to explain the experience.

²⁵ David Ecker, “The Possibility of a Multicultural Art Education,” p. 18, 1986.

Procedures of Interpretation

By applying the model of “the artist as researcher,” Sandro Dernini made room for suggestions and criticism by giving the transcriptions of their recollections to the Plexus participants for their approval before presenting them in this dissertation. To accomplish it, he followed the procedural field steps described by Edward Bruner in “Ethnography as Narrative.”

First we tell the people why we are there, what information we are seeking, and how we intend to use the data. We do this directly, by explaining our project and by our behaviour, by the questions we ask and the activities we attend. As the people respond to our questions, we begin the ethnographic dialogue, the complex interactions and exchanges that lead to the negotiation of the text. In the second telling we take this verbal and visual information and process it, committing it to writing in our field diaries. This transcription is not easy. There is necessarily a dramatic reduction, condensation and fragmentation of data. In the third telling the audience consists of our colleagues, who provide feedback as we prepare our materials for publication and here the story becomes even more prominent. There is, of course, a fourth telling-when other anthropologists read what we have written and summarise it in class lectures and in their own publication.²⁶

But, aware that he had to develop his multicultural inquiry by taking in consideration the community-based nature of the project under study, Dernini modified the 3rd Bruner’s field procedure by inserting in his procedural steps the “emic” move of bringing back the collected data before to their sources, in this case to the community of Plexus participants, to be “emically” validated through their verification.

Only after the accomplishment of this “emic” step, he moved forward to the Bruner’s 3rd “etic” step of bringing the data to the scientific community for their feedbacks.

Edward Bruner in “Ethnography as Narrative” claimed that an important role in reinforcing this group solidarity was played by the storytelling within the groups themselves. Bruner extended the notion of “ethnography as discourse, as a genre of storytelling.”

Stories makes meaning. They operate at the level of semantics in addition to vocabulary and syntax. Just as a story has a beginning, a middle, and an end, culture change, too, almost by definition, takes the form of a sequence with a past, a present, and a future. Our predicament in ethnographic studies of change is that all we have before us is the present, the contemporary scene, and by one means or another we must situate that present in a time sequence....when we talk of gathering or collecting the data as if it were like ripe fruit waiting to be picked, or when we talk of our special anthropological methodologies for reconstructing the past, as if the present were not equally constructed.²⁷

²⁶ Edward M. Bruner, “Ethnography as Narrative”, p. 147-148, 1986.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 140-141.

Dernini in accomplishing this field research acknowledged the coauthorship contribution offered by the “insiders” by recognizing narrative ethnographies as coauthored works between the anthropologist and his informants, as it was claimed by Bruner.

Our ethnographies are coauthored, not simply because informants contribute data to the text, but because, as I suggested earlier, ethnographer and informant come to share the same narratives.²⁸

Dernini recognized the coauthorship of all Plexus insiders who shared with him their experiences and contributed with their “emic” understanding to make feasible his multicultural study. Dealing with the question of the coauthorship and of the sharing participation between insiders and outsiders, within their “emic” and “etic” distinction, it was raised up the challenging problem of the separation of identity between the subject of the research and the research’s object.

We wonder if it is their story or ours. Which is the inside and which the outside view, and what about the distinction between emic and etic?...Some scholars make a sharp distinction between the ethnographer as subject and the native peoples as the object of an investigation. To the extent that we see the ethnographer as an outsider looking in, the privileged stranger who can perceive patterns not apparent to those within the system, then we further magnify the separation between anthropologist as subject and indigene as object. We have long recognized that it is difficult to obtain an accurate description of the object, to know the true nature of the outside world...We have recognized a problem with the subject, the anthropologist, but this tends to dissolve into details of personal bias, individual personality traits, and selective perception-after all, we are only human. We also have dealt with subject-object relations in another way, by suggesting that the object of our ethnography is constituted by a Western mode of thought, by our language, and that we have created the category of the native or the concept of the primitive.²⁹

Sandro Dernini started his hermeneutical phenomenological investigation by applying the four operational rules of Don Ihde.³⁰

First, as an artist-researcher, he fully attended Plexus events and then described his experience.

Second, he delimited the field of his experience, following Idhe’s second operational rule, by framing his focus within his “insider” describable experience.

The Idhe’s third rule was to avoid any kind of hierarchic understanding of the field of experience by the *horizontalization* of all phenomena of experiences. This procedure prevented Dernini to take too fast decisions concerning the hierarchic values of some features as more important or fundamental than others.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 148.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 149.

³⁰ Don Ihde, *Experimental Phenomenology. An Introduction*, 1979.

As fourth procedure, he looked for the invariants of the experience as essential features of the study in order to understand the directional shape of experience, “the intentionality,” the correlation of what he experienced with how he experienced it, “the mode of being experienced.”

The stratification model of the five different levels of discourse proposed by Ecker and Kaelin in “The Limits of Aesthetic Inquiry: A Guide to Educational Research” was applied by Dernini to screen and to identify all different levels of discourse in *Plexus Black Box*, looking for invariants. His procedural steps were the following: first, he experienced *Plexus Black Box* and perceived recollections of other Plexus participants as a *lived* experience of it; second, he made a reflection upon his experience and other ones, noting what was relevant following the system of relevances, described by Alfred Schutz in *Reflections on the Problem of Relevances*.

Dernini moved from the bottom of the stratification, where he placed the *Plexus Black Box*, to the top of “the ladder.” He started his interpretative procedures by underlining in his field research notes with a yellow or blue colour mark if that note was relevant for his experience, experienced as an artifact or as an art performance/event, which it is placed by Ecker and Kaelin at the bottom of their taxonomy. What he believed for his “stock of knowledge at hand” was related to a metatheoretical level, at the top of the *ladder-schema* made by Ecker and Kaelin, he marked instead with a red colour code. This procedure facilitated later the identification and understanding of Plexus invariants as overlapping meaningful underlying themes of the study.

He analyzed as topical relevances images and texts emerged during the epoché he made during his field research experience by following the system of relevances proposed by Alfred Schutz in terms of their referential adequacy. Those relevances, grounded in his stock of knowledge at hand, after verifications with other Plexus participants, were by him re-casted in order to be further investigated.

Dernini in order to *grasp as such* prevailing lived presence in his “insider” experience within his “etic” preparatory procedures, performed a series of artificial voluntary acts of reflection through which he could experience *Plexus Black Box* from more than one single horizon, looking for intrinsic relevant structures. His “stock of knowledge at hand,” as sedimentation of various previous experiences, determined his system of interpretational, topical and motivational relevances, from which depended his capacity to reflect from more than his own immediate cultural point of view.

At any moment of his interpretational procedures Dernini was conscious of his Plexus 23s prevailing lived presence. While he was performing artificially the system of relevances, he was attentive of his actual interest as Plexus 23s at the margins of the field, creating the structurization of a “voluntary” thematic center and of its surrounding horizontal margins. By giving acknowledgment to the limits of the level of his investigation, his Plexus 23s actual interest allowed him to define also the

borderline of a limited part of *Plexus Black Box* to be questioned and placed under inquiry. His autobiographical system of relevances guided his actual interest in making decisions regarding the investigation and, in turn by bringing inside marginal materials from the background, determined the horizon of the thematic hermeneutical field of the study.

He applied his “stock of knowledge at hand” in a “step-by-step analysis” to predelineate the lines of his inquiry by selecting, as his first artificial delimitation or determination of the segment of his experiences of the project under study, the lived experience of Plexus 23s, which allowed him to assume that kind of necessary “counterpoint structure” and “artificial split” of the unity of his personality, described by Schutz.³¹

The Double Reading of Plexus 23s’ Artificial Split



Sandro Dernini looking at a photo of him as Plexus 23s, New York, 1986, photos by L. Kanter.

Alfred Schutz pointed out that all questions were interrelated with the other and that there were not isolated questions, and those hidden in the margin of the field, might turn to be in the ongoing process of reflection topically relevant of the thematic center or “kernel.”

His Plexus 23s’ motivational relevances lead Dernini to learn how to act on his interpretative decisions, understood as sedimentation of previous experiences, constituted the system of his topical relevances, which in turn led the system of interpretative relevances on which he built his interpretative choice, resolving artificially his initial doubt to have a true and correct interpretation.

Having not a privileged position upon which to start to build his system of relevances, but experiencing all together and not chronologically, Dernini gained freedom from previous sedimentations by performing a continuous shifting from his initial artificial move of the deconstruction of the first item A1.

³¹ Alfred Schutz, *Reflections on the Problem of Relevances*, p. 12, 1970.

He modified gradually his horizontal interpretations, coming from each main topic chosen at that moment from the turn of his thematic kernel, which was modified continuously by his shifting system of interpretational relevances. He created in this way different observational conditions, which in turn allowed him to have new additional interpretatively relevant material. This shifting process was followed by Dernini until when, the problem at hand was sufficiently clarified, and he solved his suspicion or doubt of the correctness of his “emic” procedures.

Then, Dernini looked at collected “insider” accounts with a deconstructionist eye and performed a “double” deconstructionist strategic move by “*positioning*” himself as an “outsider” reader, following the “double writing” model of Derrida.

In Chapter III, at the left margin of the pages, he positioned “insider” recollections by Plexus historical participants, and then, he wrote in parallel his critical reading. These “double writing” and “double reading” acts merged together and in turn produced a multiplex aesthetic experience, offering the possibility to reach an “emic” understanding. Following Jacques Derrida’s deconstructionist strategy, pointed out in *Margins of Philosophy*, Dernini challenged methodologically the traditional and central hierarchical setting of Western philosophical inquiries, which assigned to the interpreter a dominant position, by placing his interpretation at the margins of “insider” accounts in order to produce his multicultural study.

By overturning the dominant position of the Western hierarchical setting of texts as a culturally context-bound position, in accordance with his “emic” paradigm shift, Dernini presented as equally relevant all “insider” understandings as significant components of his multicultural hermeneutical aesthetic inquiry.