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Artworks in Museums

This talk-essay explores what is involved in approaching contemporary art in art museums through practices. It begins by differentiating what it is to do this using theories of practices from the use of ANT to theorize this subject matter. The bulk of the essay examines what is involved in analyzing art in art museums through my own account of social life. Doing this involves (1) treating artworks as components of material arrangements and museums as constellations of such arrangements, (2) exploring the multiple meanings that works of art can have coordinate with the multiple practices in which they are encountered, (3) tending to the spatialities and locales that artworks help establish, (4) treating museums both as sites and as settings, (5) examining the different relations that obtain between practices and artwork-containing arrangements, and (6) recognizing that all artworks are material entities and that their identities lie in their material histories. The concluding section explores the contribution that artworks make to social change. It argues that artworks are notable among material entities in making little direct contribution to change. In this sense, artworks in museums are a conserving force in society. At the same time, artworks can bear great indirect responsibility for change by affecting people's ways of being. Curators and conservators orchestrate this effect.