



## Artistic practices: social interactions and cultural dynamics

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Artistic practices: social interactions and cultural dynamics**, edited by Tasos Zembylas, London and New York, Routledge, 2015, 206 pp., £26.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781138195622

*Artistic practices*, an edited volume with contributions from eleven authors, presents a rich array of theoretical perspectives, methodologies, and case studies for examining the sociology of art through the lens of practice. Tasos Zembylas defines practice as ‘configurations of cohesive activities that establish coordinated and collaborative relationships among members of a community’ (p. 1). As he argues, the study of artistic practice, in particular, can reveal the power relationships and social structures that determine how artworks circulate through fields. However, artistic practices do not merely reflect these hegemonic structures. Ideas about art are not only influenced by those in positions of power; they are also derived from internal processes of artistic practice. The concept of practices allows for a simultaneous examination of micro-level interactions and macro-level institutional structures within the sociology of art.

Zembylas elaborates on this concept of artistic practice in the first chapter, particularly exploring the idea of knowledge. He presents all knowledge as socially constituted, arguing that we could not create new works if all knowledge was symbolically available, but could also not coordinate with others if all knowledge was individual; thus, practice is rooted in social interaction and institutions, and meanings are observable and public, even if partially tacit. Zembylas claims that the theory of practice in the sociology of art reveals how individuals develop artistic knowing and skill, the role of artistic intention, emotions, and the body within the artistic process, and how artistic practices change with larger societal shifts.

In Chapter Two, Theodore Schatzki develops a theory of ‘art bundles’. Defining practices as ‘organized, spatial-temporal nexuses of doings and sayings’ (p. 18), Schatzki views these practices as tied to material arrangements, such as bodies and objects, as well as to other practices. These ‘practice-arrangement bundles’ link to one another, creating constellations. Comparing this idea of bundles to Becker’s concept of joint action, Schatzki argues that bundles are less individualistic and standardised than joint action. He calls attention to two elements of bundles, describing practical understanding as embodied knowledge and sense experience as critical to this knowledge. In this perspective, aesthetic experiences occur within bundles and as a feature of bundles. He concludes by claiming that artistic change, as a social phenomenon, is social change, and because artistic practices are self-organising, they always comprise the possibility of social change.

The third chapter extends Natalie Heinich’s claim that contemporary art is not merely a new art period, but a new art paradigm. Heinich advances this argument

through the perspective of pragmatist sociology, which uses description and analysis to reveal the social structures that enable and constrain interactions with artworks. Providing a pragmatist analysis of Marcel Duchamp's readymades, Heinich shows the importance of cultural intermediaries in creating the definition of the works as art. This exposes the shift of contemporary art, in relation to classical and modern art, in requiring the transgression of previous definitions. Artwork has a new status as not only an object, but also a set of operations elicited by an object. Moreover, the social structures surrounding contemporary art are distinct, as they involve a diversification of materials, discourse as an element of the work, heightened salience of mediations, different relationships among art world actors, globalisation, quicker trajectories of recognition, and new practices of collecting, preservation, and reproduction" (for clarity). Drawing from Thomas Kuhn's idea of paradigm shifts in the case of scientific revolutions, Heinich uses these changes as evidence of a paradigm shift in the case of contemporary art.

In Chapter Four, Marie Buscatto explores the gendered nature of artistic practices. Buscatto draws from the expansive sociology of gender literature on 'doing gender' as well as the sociology of art literature on the gendered element of artistic practices. She argues that, at amateur and professional levels, women take up artistic practices viewed as feminine, while men become involved in artistic practices seen as masculine. Individuals and institutions devalue feminine artistic practices, and, by extension, women's participation in these practices. Women enact various strategies to overcome this devaluation, for example, by asserting femininity as a positive value, capitalising on institutional opportunities specific to women artists, or making use of women's social networks.

The fifth chapter examines how filmmakers adopt and abandon artistic practices over the course of their careers. Chris Mathieu and Iben Sandal Stjerne conceive of artistic practices as self-expression, or the fusion of self and expression. For this study, the authors interviewed filmmakers in a Danish film school and established filmmakers. In film school, students learned tone (i.e. a manner of criticising), common language (i.e. jargon), frameworks of reference, and the mandate to develop a unique standpoint. Exploring Dogme 95, an aesthetic revolution in Danish film, the authors find that depending on their career stage, emerging cinematographers' artistic practices were more malleable than those of established cinematographers, allowing them to experiment with new practices, but without a firm sense of self. Different projects enabled or constrained certain artistic possibilities, and filmmakers learn to recognise and adapt to these possibilities over time. Therefore, over the course of careers, filmmakers learn to become both better team players and put more of themselves into the work, attaining authenticity through integration, rather than autonomy. Extending Schatzki's concept of 'bundles' (Chapter Two), the authors argue that we need to better understand how certain sites and individuals become bundled in particular practices.

Chapter Six draws from action theory to analyse improvisation in the cases of standard jazz and free jazz. Silvana Figueroa-Dreher characterises improvisation as involving (1) simultaneity of inventing and execution, where the temporal

criterion distinguishes improvisation from non-improvisation; (2) interdeterminateness of unprepared and unforeseen action; (3) creativity, where improvisation is a generative process, but one that is fast and not revisable; (4) spontaneity, as improvisation is unplanned and non-reflexive; (5) automatism, as improvisation relies on learned senso-motoric processes in addition to adaptation; and (6) interactive framework, involving group interactions where musicians try to anticipate one another's actions, while negotiating power dynamics and willingness to compromise. Figueroa-Dreher presents a model that uses action theory to explain improvisation as comprising (1) musical material, including memory, imagination, and senso-motoric processes, with different characteristics of music, especially its malleability, structuring the possibilities of improvisation; (2) social interaction between musicians; (3) attitude of the actors, particularly their willingness to manage unplanned musical elements; and (4) music, which is the output of the playing process and differs in degrees of predetermination.

In Chapter Seven, Chiara Bassetti draws from a multi-site ethnography of dance companies and interviews with professional dancers in Italy. The theoretical framework examines knowledge as a form of action, which is tacit, embodied, and intercorporeal (involving the interaction between bodies). The chapter examines how one learns to dance, improvises and choreographs dance, rehearses a specific piece, and performs the piece onstage. When individuals learn to dance, they embody new competencies and understandings, which influence all bodily interactions. Once individuals become fluent, they can improvise; however, as Figueroa-Dreher noted in the previous chapter, individuals still rely on particular concepts and steps, which structure potentialities and possibilities. During rehearsal, individuals learn and correct moves, negotiating their bodies together in space. In the performance, dancers become attuned to their audience, moving into sacred space. Thus, Bassetti reveals that embodiment occurs in an intercorporeal context through repeated and revised action, bodily techniques, and bodily awareness.

Tasos Zembylas' eighth chapter expounds upon his theory of practical knowing and refines the theory through the case of the literary process. Arguing for the plurality of forms of knowing, Zembylas claims that knowledge, statements arising within and mediated by symbolic language, is distinct from practical artistic knowing, which is akin to skill. Individualistic theories of action focus on knowledge, thereby ignoring the role of the body and viewing knowledge as available and transferable. In contrast, one acquires practical knowing through activity, which is tacit because individuals are not fully conscious about and cannot entirely verbalise their actions. Practical knowing can only be assumed when action is successful, but there is no objective determinant of success. Finally, there are limits to observing mental activity. These issues present methodological and theoretical challenges for studying knowing. Zembylas uses monthly interviews and diary entries of four authors to examine their processes of writing novels. He finds that (1) authors generate ideas and then struggle to direct these ideas with the final design of the work in mind; (2) over time, writers learn their strengths and weaknesses, drawing on this

knowing in revising their work; (3) writers manage their emotions in order to promote flexibility with adapting their ideas and to work under conditions of uncertainty regarding the final project; and (4) writers rely on a community of peers to critique their work.

Chapter Nine extends Boltanski and Thévenot's framework of 'orders of worth' by examining the intersection of art and politics in the case of participatory art. First, Thévenot develops an analytic framework that captures the sociology of 'engaging with the world' (p. 133) based on multiple regimes of engagement, such as justifications for the common good, individual plans, familiarity, and exploration. Individuals make these regimes of engagement common through communicating, or connecting with a common locus, and composing, or integrating different voices. He explores these regimes of engagement through a collaborative research project with artist Yves Mettler, involving a shared garden project in which the artist organised participatory art. Thévenot explains the different ways in which community members engaged with the shared garden, with tensions between the public regime and familiarly inhabited space in the ways that individuals organised plots and interacted with the garden. Individuals understood their participation through a range of goods, including 'green worth' and 'civic worth'. As Mettler organised live readings, in which participants became images to audiences as well as subjects in the space, Thévenot asks how meanings of publicness interfere. Thévenot concludes that art affords the possibility of political experiences in which individuals feel personal attachments to the world.

In Chapter Ten, Sophia Krzys Acord examines the process of mediation in the case of contemporary art curators. In contrast to Becker's art world approach, in which mediations and knowledge production result from institutional structures and shared conventions, Acord argues that artistic value and meaning reside in the combined mediations within which artists and audiences interact. Acord reveals these processes through her ethnographic fieldwork of contemporary art exhibition installations. In this case, curators install exhibits to be both visually pleasing and express certain artistic ideas by seeing the exhibit through spectators' eyes. Curators also develop ideas by physically moving works around the space, with these configurations affording different interpretations. As moments of surprise occur, the installation process creates curatorial knowledge, as curators recognise different conceptual connections among the works that may alter their original plans. In this view, meaning is emergent, as mediators and artworks mediate one another. Acord claims that knowledge, both in and beyond art worlds, is active and dynamic, and she emphasises the importance of 'pragmatic modes of action' (p. 165).

The final chapter explores how individuals learn to make street art. Drawing from interviews and studio visits with street artists, Graciela Trajtenberg explores how new street artists gain artistic competencies from their more experienced peers in the absence of formal educational training. Street artists find sources of inspiration online and in other artists' sketchbooks, called 'black books'. They practise their skills in underground graffiti spaces and in riskier locations, where they must deploy techniques quickly and learn from trial and error. They orient themselves to others with a 'participative' disposition, involving

feelings of comradeship and mutual values towards small groups of artists. Finally, they practise creating art with a 'conversational' lens, by being aware of others' work, responding to others' work, and viewing their own work through spectators' eyes.

The volume is a significant contribution to the sociology of art as well as sociological theories of practice more broadly. Taken together, the authors define artistic practices as situated, local, and negotiated. This perspective extends and improves upon Becker's art worlds approach by emphasising the flexibility and reactivity inherent in practice, in contrast to the rigidity of conventions. It also highlights the tacit and embodied elements of knowledge as critical modes of knowing in artistic practice. By examining artistic practices as not only controlled by hegemonic power relationships, but also continually reshaped within artistic practices by participants, the volume exposes art's emancipatory potential for social change. Moreover, the concept of artistic practice itself is theoretically and methodologically flexible, as it allows for an examination of practices from the micro-level and macro-level of social interaction. The volume presents a range of innovative methodologies for analysing these seemingly inexplicable practices. Finally, the authors reveal artistic practices as a 'sociological treasure chest' (p. 130) for exposing social phenomena more generally, as artistic practices provide rich cases for illuminating practices in other settings.

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