

Editors' Picks

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HOWARD S. BECKER: *Art Worlds*. Berkeley (University of California Press). 2008. 1982. 408 pp.

Art Worlds was first published forty years ago and has since become a landmark study for anyone researching the conditions and structures of how art is made and perceived in society. The book captures how culture manifests itself in the arts and has maintained continuous relevance in the field. The number of citations of the updated and expanded 25th anniversary edition of 2008 is nearly 10,000. Unsurprisingly, authors included in the current, special issue of this journal, frequently reference it. Why does *Art Worlds* continue to be of relevance today and what does it offer to contemporary researchers?

In writing *Art Worlds*, Becker was informed by three ideas: (1) the principles of collective activity, process and comparison; (2) the use of storytelling and illustrative case studies and (3) the creation of his personal methodology, drawn from his own experiences and the empirical knowledge of friends and colleagues, as well as people he had never personally met, only read about. These motivating factors, characteristic of his work, present a contemporary and familiar set of arguments that operate, in Becker's sense, as conventions suitable for presenting his ideas in book form, but they work equally well as methods for researching contemporary creative practice.

Regarding the first, Becker upholds the idea that the underlying principles informing his understanding of art world conventions are based on the collective activity of people and their division of labour while engaging with art. To Becker, the interactions of people and how they operate, adjust and link ideas with actions, are expressions of art in multiple, ever-changing worlds. Guided by the choices art workers make, Becker's analysis focuses on art processes, ranging, for example, from developing photographs to learning and playing a musical instrument. Forty years on, we speak of practice as a general term when researching processes,

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for example analysing intersectional work, equity and precarity in day-to-day operations and routines of creative practitioners.

Becker collected materials for his book over many years, and the second half of the 20th century saw an increased research focus on analysing the experiences of people in the arts in many university departments in Europe and North America. Seeking alternatives to the grand narratives of economic importance, Becker comes across as worldly and open, contrasting sharply with art worlds defined by gatekeepers and closed borders—a point noted by reviewers who raised criticism about Becker’s book. He did not interpret the experienced world as “spatial” (379) or geographically defined. His interpretation of world, as a concept, compares with Pierre Bourdieu’s more philosophical interpretation of field as a location of structure and rules or Erving Goffman’s performance approach of maintaining front and backstage identities ([1959], 2021). For Becker, cooperation mattered, and he was curious to know what it takes to agree on the best possible collective outcome reaching beyond space, location and borders. In the Editorial Conversation for this issue, we see Greig de Peuter’s research on collective solutions taking Becker’s ideas further by advocating collective action as a learning capacity that is applicable internationally. The idea of learning through comparison runs through all of Becker’s writings. In *Art Worlds*, he presents a wide range of cases illustrating that the specificities of art forms are no hinderance to showing the conventions that can be applied to all art forms, institutions and people’s occupations.

In reference to the second idea, the book is structured as a comparison, and Becker walks gently through art. He sets people, content and context on an equal footing, comparing conventions, resources and distribution aesthetics of art. In telling stories, he reveals the intricacies and complexities of art worlds, concluding with a plea for investigative research. In his stories, he compares assumed conventions against the experience of people who don’t follow them or don’t fit into typical moulds. This approach permitted him to work out what conventions are really at play. For example, he analyses the complaints, ranging from aesthetic judgment to financial control, of people who work in and around art organisations, which includes artists, craft workers, critics, gallerists, as well as support staff: the family members, receptionists and drivers who all contribute to the piece of work via their engagement. The book disentangles people’s relationships with art and, at the same time, Becker highlights their connections to materials, tools and processes. Becker

assembles, through personal stories, an understanding of ideas and the fields that we find today under the wider remit of creative practices.

The third and final idea that governs *Art Worlds* relates to Becker's own experience as a musician. As an accomplished piano player, Becker argued that through listening, improvising and performing on and off stage, he was able to draw multiple and various storylines together with academic analysis. In the epilogue chapter of the 25th anniversary edition of *Art Worlds*, Becker (2008) quotes his mentor Everett C. Hughes, who emphasised the role of the sociologist as someone who learns from being fully engaged in what they do. Becker practised art and analysed art worlds, embracing messy, open and adaptable connections. In the preface, he apologises for the minimally planned field work for this book, hinting at a lack of conventional evidence. Once more, he denies that assumptive conventions have taken hold, instead delivering insights into the diverse worlds of art that have been discussed for forty years. Can books be timeless? *Art Worlds* is well on its way to proving that they can be.

ALISON GERBER: *The Work of Art: Value in Creative Careers*. Redwood City (Stanford University Press). 2017. 192 pp.

The first words of the title of Alison Gerber's book *The Work of Art* prompt instant associations with Walter Benjamin's 1935 essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, although Gerber's subtitle, *Value in Creative Careers*, makes its distinction clear. Gerber indicates that the similarity might be nothing more than a playful association, providing a different direction that moves away from Benjamin's discussion about the aura of objects. Instead, following the tradition of American contemporary economic sociologists, Gerber shows, through historical accounts, how artists moved from an object-oriented focus in the 1950s and 60s to the role of service providers for institutions and art organisations from the 1980s onwards. As a result, art became work, and the language changed from making art objects to practising art. Gerber presents this changing logic of instrumental value by discussing the everyday life of artists' work in relation to value, in particular how work is valued and what valuation means for artists throughout their careers. She asked how artists determine what something is worth and where the boundaries of professionalisation and amateur careers are, which remain entangled in the complexities of practising art for fun and the need to earn a living. In doing so, she questions the old rivalry of love and

money in careers and demonstrates how intertwined they have become in artists' daily social interactions. Gerber foregrounds artists' voices, working out similarities and differences in analysing their individual stories. Guided by the Weberian ideal type logic (WEBER 2016), Gerber puts forward four narratives that, in their pure form as accounts of values, don't exist but can be helpful as a mental construct to discuss the complexities of artists' behaviours and actions, and their meanings. The first two, the pecuniary and credentialing accounts, cover straightforward rationalisations of money. In the pecuniary account, artists focus on price and sales, calculating time, materials and other social costs as a measure of value. The credentialing account follows the same logic, but extends to a life-long approach, taking career choices into account. An example of this could be artists supporting their artistic work through side jobs (teaching art) or other commercial work (working in exhibition design). In the vocational and relational accounts, cultural values are discussed that cannot be expressed sufficiently through figures and numbers. The vocational account addresses value creation by focusing on things artists do because they love their jobs. Relational accounts convey that artists become embedded into communities. Such accounts address values that relate to artists' roles and functions in civil society.

Gerber interviewed 80 artists from the USA, Canada and Sweden, drawing from an impressive variety of individual accounts. In the chapter "This Way be Monsters" she discusses the interrelations of the four value frames in artists' careers. Gerber argues that a money-orientated way of life can mask the fact that a love of art conditions values into becoming more focused on money. Gerber introduces the concept of decommensuration, comparing the unequal or non-reciprocal process of artists resisting the rationalisation of their work—as is common in other professions—such as academia. In the chapter "Doing Things with Words", Gerber positions herself as a former artist and academic. She recognises that being accepted as a fellow creative supports and strengthens her quest among artists, as they can bond through shared values.

Like Becker, Gerber tells individual stories through case studies but, in her book, she saves the most comprehensive account for the last chapter when the binary of money and love of art is illustrated in practice. She introduces Venus, a respected artist leader with years of experience who goes through the excruciating ordeal of a tax audit in the State of Minnesota. As a result of a mismatched interpretation and understanding of what artists do, Venus's work activities are classified as a hobby, because she was unable to demonstrate a business-oriented approach or

profit motive, both necessary conditions under US business law. This is particularly disheartening for Venus, who had to face the arrogance of the tax system and the lack of recognition of a career in the arts. She had to endure a lengthy legal battle, which she eventually won, but at personal and professional cost. Readers are confronted with the full force of an emotional case study that dramatically summarises what this book does best, oscillating between stories, personal accounts of artists' work and the concepts and level of analysis that inform the valuation process. This case highlights the conflicts over values and shows the diverging perceptions of art and money that artists must negotiate throughout their career. Gerber demonstrates that perceptions of value change and artists circle around and shift within a spectrum of love of art and money, foregrounding relational lines of valuation.

The book was published five years ago and has since been increasing in importance. Today, issues of values and valuation and their practicalities in art continue to push research agendas in cultural policy. Gerber's insightful and sensitive approach allows us to absorb the practicalities of values in artists' careers as a matter of significance without compromising the playfulness that she portrays in the everyday life of artists. Gerber goes back over the original interview at the end, reflecting that, although not all voices could be equally represented in the book, she is nonetheless very grateful for the time these artists took to tell their stories. This goes beyond a polite thank you, as she highlights how research relies on the generosity of artists, a value which cannot be emphasised enough.

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CHANNON GOODWIN (Ed.): Permanent Recession: a Handbook on Art, Labour and Circumstance. Eindhoven: Onomatopee 169. 2019. 448 pp.

This book is a varied and distinctive collection of pieces about artists and artist-run initiatives (ARIs) in the visual arts sector in Australia. It is edited by artist Channon Goodwin, whose organisation—of which he is director—is a founding member of All Conference, the network of Australian artist-led organisations that is the progenitor of the book. The volume is unusual in the variety of forms of contribution it con-

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tains, being made up of essays, a research report, case studies and four edited panel discussions. This content encompasses personal stories, historical accounts, philosophical and ethical reflections, analysis, and theoretical explorations.

The aforementioned panel discussions come from a series of events with live audiences, organised by All Conference in 2017 and 2018. Each takes a theme, which is then followed in the book by five essays on the same topic—a few specially commissioned, but a large number re-published from several of the ARIs' magazines, and other publications, that are a key part of the terrain of these artist-led venues and projects. There are also reprints from exhibition catalogues and, in one case, an academic journal. This re-publishing feels a worthwhile exercise to bring the essays to a wider audience. Hence, together with the contributions that specifically recount and explore the history of ARIs and other artist-led ventures, there is a constant sense in the book of the past as well as the present, of artists' collaborations, discussions and self-organisation. Equally, references to the actions of artist-led groups in other countries indicate the international connections that have contributed to artists' learning and practice, including in ways of organising together.

The authors are a stimulating mix of artists (not only visual artists but also writers and performers), curators, producers, directors of arts organisations and venues, editors of arts magazines, academics and other associated professionals. And, as so often is the case in the arts where people combine—through choice or necessity—several occupations, many of the authors hold two or more of these designations.

A note on the book's flyleaf explains that the title *Permanent Recession* comes from a reference to the precarious working conditions of artists in the 1970s and 80s. These continuing circumstances and struggles are a thread that winds through the volume.

The first part of the book consists of some context-setting pieces. First, an essay by artist and curator Léuli Eshrāghi provides a strong reminder of a different perspective to the European/Anglo-Saxon view of the world, with a focus on First Nations and the decentring of European "knowledge systems" (ii). Eshrāghi concludes his piece with a call to "decolonise our languages, our conceptions and our practices [...] to redress the colossal weight of continuing intersectional oppressions" (iii). This perspective is present through much of the book: sometimes as the prime focus of an essay and elsewhere as a concern within, or an aspect of, another topic. After a preface by Goodwin and an introduction by curator, producer and artist Georgie Meagher, the last contribution to the

context-setting part of the book is the previously-mentioned research report, commissioned by All Conference, into the ARI sub-sector of Australian visual arts. Written by academic and journalist Ben Eltham and artist, writer and performer Catherine Ryan, it examines the position and contribution of ARIs within the wider visual arts sector; the policy environment they operate in; organisational issues they face and their structures and characteristics; and the experiences—both productive and difficult—of those involved in them. It concludes with recommendations to policy-makers on funding, training and marketing for this sub-sector that is, as the report presents in its findings, often under-valued yet plays an important and culturally productive role in the wider visual arts sector.

The subjects of the following four themed sections are Labour, Advocacy, Place, and Community. They explore in rich detail the terrain and experience of artists' work and the conditions of their labour, using in part the idea of speculation to consider the personal risk and investment that artists undertake in their careers (78-82); and they discuss "strategies for solidarity" (86) that are created by artists in response to these circumstances. Such strategies include artist-led galleries, exhibitions and projects, as well as campaigns and advocacy organisations. The four panels and accompanying essays provide a range of historical accounts, reflection, debate and analysis of these collaborations, including the development and operations of particular ARIs. Women's work in the arts is examined, drawing attention to the "visible, calculable pay gap, and the invisible, unaccounted for labour that keeps this luxury market afloat" (ROBINSON 2019: 97) and exploring histories of women artists and feminist arts organisations. In one essay, Tian Zhang makes a forceful argument that it is not enough to have Asian artists' work displayed in the predominantly white world of visual arts, without people of colour also reaching influential positions as curators and leaders of arts venues. A similar stance is taken in Anne Marsh's article on women in the arts, which discusses the knotty dilemmas of what kinds of strategy are needed to bring about more than tokenistic change.

Meagher's introduction to the book pre-emptly some criticisms. She points to "gaps" and "blind spots" in the volume, including its concentration on Sydney and Melbourne and a limited focus on First Nations ARIs (MEAGHER 2019: 14). Some of the essays seem a little inward-facing for a non-Australian reader, referring to local places and events in ways that assume readers' familiarity with them; and, inevitably in a volume of this breadth, different readers will find articles of more or less interest,

or relevance, to themselves. Nevertheless, this is a valuable contribution to the growing literature about, and emerging from, artists' narratives and policy interventions. Moreover, in its hybrid construction and varied content, giving a platform to arts practitioners' own viewpoints and stories, it could surely act as a model or stimulus for comparable handbooks in other countries and covering other art forms. As Goodwin urges in his preface to the book, it should be seen as a "living contribution to current thought. [...] It should be used!" (GOODWIN 2019: 12).

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