

Zembylas, T. (Ed.). (2014). *Artistic Practices. Social interactions and cultural dynamics*. Abingdon: Routledge, 206 pp.

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### BOOK REVIEW

This book aims to delve deeper into the (creative) processes behind works of art in a way that illuminates different approaches to studying those processes as well as giving examples of research on artistic practices.

It is comprised of two parts: firstly, theoretical examinations of the terms used in this book, including two explications of more general ideas that are not genre specific; and secondly, a collection of case studies looking at a variety of different arts and their artists more closely in relation to the processes that are required. The theoretical first part provides the necessary information to understand the practically oriented second part, while the latter gives a vivid insight into different practices that range from ballet dancing to street art.

In the first chapter, Zembylas looks at the term "practice" throughout the history of philosophy, referencing Aristotle, Wittgenstein, and Bourdieu amongst others. His concept of artistic practices concentrates on the creation of arts and he writes that artistic practices are possible, because "knowledge [...] is socially constituted" (p. 9). Then he goes on to explain this concept and where it came from. The idea behind this chapter is to add to existing theories and show a "complementary approach to provide access to new themes for the sociology of the arts" (p. 3).

Schatzki introduces the concept of "artistic bundles", which are bundles or "part of bundles of practices and material arrangements" (p. 18), e.g. a classical concert is a bundle of all the actions needed to set up the stage, prepare for the performance, sell the tickets, goals to be reached through attendance of the concert, and many more, while the classical concert itself might only be part of a bundle called "playing a

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classical instrument" and this again part of an even bigger bundle and so on. Schatzki then compares the idea of "artistic practices" with Becker's (2008 [1982]) "art worlds" and concludes with the remark that any changes in the arts can be seen as social changes, because arts are social practices.

The third chapter consists of a defense of the idea that contemporary art is not just a logical next step in the history of the art, but a completely new thing, a paradigm. Heinich establishes this by first differentiating between classical, modern and contemporary art, with contemporary art being defined by its transgression of boundaries. Contemporary art is not just the object itself, but "the whole set of operations, actions, interpretations, etc., brought about by this proposition" (p. 35) (italics by Heinich) which makes it difficult to understand without any further information. For this reason there have to be mediators who explain it. Furthermore, since contemporary art comes in new dimensions and materials, it needs completely new ways of transportation, storage, and exhibition, creating new jobs along the way. All of these are the reasons Heinich uses to justify that contemporary art deserves the term "paradigm".

The fourth chapter is about the strategies used to overcome gender obstacles in different artistic practices. Buscatto starts her illustration by explaining that some artistic practices are seen as having more feminine traits and others more masculine qualities. Women in masculine arts therefore have to overcome certain biases in order to be successful. The author then goes on to show three ways of doing that: "mobilizing specifically 'feminine' types of capital; taking advantage of state and public resources; and taking individual and collective action" (p. 48).

Mathieu and Stjerne present their case studies about artistic practices in film-making in the fifth chapter. They start with their definition of artistic practices and point out different directions a film-making career can take. Then they focus on the importance of sharing values and ways of expressing oneself in order to work more efficiently in the film industry, since working together with different people for every film means needing standardisation of some kind. In their research the authors concentrated on the highest ranking positions in the different film departments, because they come with the authority of creating their own artistic practice and not just taking part in someone else's. Mathieu and Stjerne conclude that every part of artistic practice fluctuates throughout a film-making career, apart from learning what fits a situation which gets better with practice.

In her chapter Figueroa-Dreher looks at jazz improvisations and comes up with her own model of improvisation. First she explains the characteristics of jazz

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improvisation; she then details all the different parts of her improvisation model, e.g. the musical material, the emerging music, and the interaction between the players. All these dimensions of the model work together and influence each other during jazz improvisation.

Starting from the point that the body is very important in all artistic practices, Bassetti focusses on the body-in-action in learning and doing art by studying dancing. This seventh chapter illustrates the pathway of becoming a proficient dancer and highlights the importance of the audience for a good performance. Here Bassetti indicates that it is necessary for the audience to attune to the performers, and that performers can reach a flow only in the presence of an audience.

In the eighth chapter Zembylas studies novelists and what is required for them to finish a manuscript. He shows that practical experience is necessary for a more efficient and effective workflow, but that it is vital to break out of the routine from time to time in order to stay creative. Zembylas points out the importance of opening and closing oneself to stimuli during the writing process and knowing when to get feedback from whom.

Thévenot, in the ninth chapter, looks at participatory art projects and how they work and engage people. The author develops a tool – “a sociology of ways of engaging with the world and with others” (p. 133, italics by Thévenot) – and uses the example of a shared communal garden in Paris to explain four different possible ways of engaging with the world. Alternative ways of living and showing one's political opinion are becoming increasingly popular and since arts are a big part of that, Thévenot concludes that the tool illustrated here will be able to explain this phenomenon.

The tenth chapter is used to analyse the installation process of exhibitions from a curatorial perspective. Krzys Acord highlights the importance of curators as mediators who present the pieces of art in a way that helps visitors understand them. One of the findings is that curators have and need the knowledge to create an external structure, a context, which assists people to grasp the underlying structures, the pieces of art and their potential meaning.

In the last chapter Trajtenberg shows how artists became street artists and how knowledge is transferred in that particular artistic practice. She points out the way the internet enables artists to share and learn knowledge across boundaries, and which circumstances street artists work in. Since they work together in groups, shared meaning has to be created, as well as trust.

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Howard S. Becker's book "Art Worlds" (2008 [1982]) is referred to by several authors in this book and the connection is evident. Becker subscribes to the idea that art is not something that can be created individually, but needs other people to participate in the process – “Art worlds consist of all the people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well, define as art” (ibid., p. 34). This idea is taken up and developed in the present book. The authors, especially Schatzki, who contrived the concept of “artistic practices”, generally agree with Becker, however they go a step further in relaying that it is not just the material aspects and the collective actions of people that are important when studying artistic processes, but that the creation of knowledge, its distribution and acquisition are especially relevant when trying to understand patterns and motivations behind artistic practices.

This book is a piece of art itself – a collage of different artistic practices and approaches to studying them. As such it contains information that is relevant for various kinds of people: the researcher who wants to find new ways of studying arts, the art practitioner who wants to understand more about what he is doing and why, and the student who wants to get an overview of what is possible in the field and how to approach it. In addition to new perspectives the reader will also get the chance to fulfill their curiosity and learn about things like the working process of authors, what curators have to do to put up an exhibition, and what happens behind the scene of street art. Since all of these studies give a voice to the studied artists, it makes for an interesting and varied read.

## **REFERENCES**

Becker, H. S. (2008 [1982]). *Art Worlds*. (25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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