



Qualitative Sociology Review

Volume III, Issue 3 – December 2007

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.3.3.01>

Howard S. Becker and Marie Buscatto

Editorial introduction: Special Issue “Ethnographies of Artistic Work”

Many sociologists have picked their research topics - sometimes those which occupied them for their entire career - because of some experience, something in their background which gave them a more detailed knowledge of a topic than is available to most other people. You might belong to an ethnic group whose distinctive culture appears interesting to you once you have acquired the sociological ideas that give it that interest. You might have participated in a political group or activity and now feel that the conventional accounts you read of such political actions don't square with your experience. You may have worked in a factory or office whose culture, which seems so banal seen from the outside, takes on great interest once you learn the sociological way of thinking about it. And you might, like the editors of this issue of the *Qualitative Sociology Review* Journal, have practiced one of the arts, performed in musical groups before a public, and learned what such performances require of you, what the "real" problems of being an artist of that kind are (as opposed to the problems some theory might suggest you will have), and learn the real world contingencies that govern the eventual form art works of that kind take.

When you study an art you practice yourself, you know from what you have done and what has happened to you the problems, large and small, people who do that kind of work confront. You know how the work requires you to cooperate or compete with people in a variety of other statuses, and how what they do affects what you can do. You know how recalcitrant the physical materials you work with can be, how they can refuse to act as you expect them to. You know how the audience for the work you and your colleagues do can react, what you have to fear from them and how you will shape your work to avoid those problems. You also know that creativity, even if often experienced as a very intimate and subjective process and presented as a solitary experience, is also shaped by the artist's past experiences, technical constraints, collective arrangements and larger social realities. Two articles presented in this special issue wonderfully illustrate such points. Having studied computer music at a professional level before starting as a PhD candidate in Chinese studies, Basile Zimmerman felt prompted to study “*music creation involving technical objects*”. Observing the work of Xiao Deng, a chinese disc jockey in 2003 and 2004, Zimmerman could show the agency of objects which intervene in the process of this artist's musical creativity. He can thus describe, through very specific examples, how the DJs' creativity is, in several ways, technically, physically and socially influenced. Erin O'Connor, in order to understand glassblowing practices better – from problem-solving to personal style – decided to learn how to blow glass in diverse contexts, not only to reproduce existing forms, but also to develop original works of art. As a result, she can show, through her own experiments, how the artist's “*embodied history*,” as

well as the “*place, or situation, of embodiment,*” affect how individuals blow glass *in situ*. Only daily, careful, precise observations, based on a quasi-professional knowledge of artistic production, enabled these two researchers to understand how artistic creation occurs over time. They show how artists, confronted with difficulties, failures or disappointments, find solutions deeply ingrained in the social context they come from and/or are part of.

When you study an art you practice yourself, you also know how the artist's physical appearance may affect how things are done, and your own participation in artistic activities. Being a woman, an old man, a young foreigner, or a local affects what you or others create as artistic products. That happened to Marie Buscatto. As a female amateur jazz singer, she could not only identify the marginalized situation of females in the French jazz world, but also observe all those ordinary situations (musical or social) where this gendered marginalization was “naturally” produced, elaborated and legitimated. Only through repeated observation of concerts, rehearsals, jam sessions or private gatherings could she progressively identify how jazz professionals, men and women, singers and instrumentalists, created “*the arrangement between the sexes*” (to borrow Goffman's powerful concept).

Being part of a “world of art”, you also learn to be skeptical of any account of an art work that assumes that the work represents the cumulated choices of one person, the “artist,” whose “intentions” it therefore embodies. You know, instead, that the work results from the choices of many people whose work is conventionally seen as auxiliary but which in fact exercise as determining an influence on what audience members get as the artist's intentions. You also learn that people will find ways to communicate and interact, verbally and through gestures, to get things done, one way or another. Using videos of Bombay film makers at work which he shot as an assistant director, Emmanuel Grimaud shows how “*film making gestures*” enable the people on a film set to coordinate their activities. The crowd of people on a Bollywood set may not even know what the film they are working on is about. But they know how to do their jobs and, through simple film gestures, cooperate to produce a “coherent” work of art. The way they interpret those gestures, the habits they have developed as professionals, thus affect the content of the final movie.

But, of course, you don't have to be a “real” practitioner of the art you study, though that helps you grasp nuances more easily. You can achieve the same sort of intimate knowledge by offering yourself as a volunteer willing to do the chores others will be glad to hand over to you. Theaters can always use people to do the hundreds of things, not all of them requiring professional skills, putting on a play requires. That's what Celia Bense did with the Circle Theater in order to study all the activities--artistic, administrative, technical and aesthetic-- and all the social roles necessary to the production and distribution of a dramatic work. She can then account for the “*cooperation modes*” in theater activity as well as the “*motives*” that lead participants to cooperate so that the theatrical organization continues to operate.

You may also get access to people who act as artists in very closed areas without doing anything, without helping in any way, even if this makes it more difficult to observe what needs to be observed. This is what Sabine Chalvon, in French television, and Marie Gibert, working with Yemenite dance companies in Israel, have done. Chalvon studied “*literary adaptations for French television.*” She simultaneously analyzes the works and the context in which they are produced in order to relate the “*moral configurations that emerge in the stories*” to activities carried out by identifiable persons, in specific, empirically observable circumstances.

Through an analysis of the processes of writing and producing televised works of fiction, she studied how television characters acquire a moral nature. She finds that the moral landscape these characters are located in is neither stable, autonomous, transparent or consensual. It is, rather, shaped by material logics, constrained by temporal dynamics, dependent on professional coordination. Marie-Pierre Gibert focused on the work of Yemenite “ethnic” dance companies in Israel, seeking to understand how this artistic activity helped produce a “Yemenite identity” in relation to an “Israeli” sense of belonging. Her detailed analysis of “Yemenite” dance repertoires in Israel, combined with a classical ethnography of dance practices and their context of performance, led her to identify the “*dynamics of self-positioning of the Yemenite group*” within the surrounding Israeli society. Her careful description of how choreographers, dancers and audience develop specific dance forms shows how those dancing Yemenite-Israeli compromises enable people to both “feel” Yemenite and Israeli.

All these researchers have thus been there when IT is happening, when the work of putting together the play, the musical performance, the film, the scenario, the dance choreography or the glassblowing was done. They combine a description of the artistic work and its context with a careful analysis of the work of art itself--its content, its form, its moral components and its technical realities--in order to connect WHAT is done with HOW it is done. Being there means you needn't depend on second-hand knowledge, on what someone tells you about what happened. We can't always be there, but if we have been there at least some of the time we can ask meaningful questions we wouldn't otherwise know enough to ask. Because we know how these cooperative activities usually take place, we recognize meaningful departures from routine and can look for and ask about other changes in cooperative patterns that may have produced these unexpected results.

This is, perhaps, only to say that it is better to know than to guess, better to have seen than to speculate, better to have experienced the realities of art making than to accept idealized stories about Art. You can then combine what artists produce as works of art and how they produce them in a more rigorous, complex and lively way. Because so many social scientists have accepted this challenge, Marie Buscatto could co-organize a conference at La Sorbonne in Paris in 2006, at which more than fifty researchers analyzed and reported on this kind of research experience in several art worlds: music, dance, visual art, glassblowing, circus, theater, graffiti, textile design, cinema, internet art, architecture, story telling or television. Some of the papers are published in a special issue of the *Ethnologie française* Journal, “L'art au travail”, beginning of 2008. Some of them, profiting from on line publication, are found in this issue of *Qualitative Sociology Review*.

Citation

Becker, Howard S. and Marie Buscatto (2007) “Editorial introduction: Special Issue - Ethnographies of Artistic Work.” *Qualitative Sociology Review*, Vol. III Issue 3. Retrieved Month, Year
(http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php)