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Eduardo de la Fuente  
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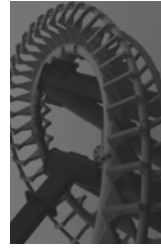
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## The ‘New Sociology of Art’: Putting Art Back into Social Science Approaches to the Arts

■ **Eduardo de la Fuente**

*Monash University, Australia*

### **ABSTRACT**

This article maps recent developments in social science writing about the arts and argues for seeing this work in terms of the label the ‘new sociology of art’. It considers four major lines of re-assessment being carried out by sociologists studying the arts: firstly, a reconsideration of the relationship between sociological and other disciplinary approaches to art; secondly, the possibility of an art-sociology as against a sociology of art; thirdly, the application of insights from the sociology of art to non-art ‘stuff’; and, fourthly, the sociology of the artwork conceived as a contingent social fact. The argument is made that these developments represent an advance on the tendency to limit sociological investigations of the arts to contextual or external factors. The ‘new sociology of art’ is praised for framing questions about the aesthetic properties of art and artworks in a way that is compatible with social constructionism.

### **KEY WORDS**

‘art’ and ‘society’ / aesthetics / artwork / social constructionism / sociology of art

## **Introduction**

‘Art is not needed for the creation or for the survival of a social order. And all the classic claims about the social determination of art or the artistic representation of “reality” suffer from almost insurmountable problems of philosophical consistency.’ (Graña, 1994: ix)

**T**he sociology of art is at an interesting crossroads. Neglected for the greater part of the last century, it is now a well established ‘sub-discipline’ of sociology. In a short period of time, the field has produced its own ‘classics’,

fostered professional associations and regular conferences, and sociologists studying the arts have shed the image of being eccentrics or intellectuals rather than 'real' social scientists.

But with the consolidation of the field has come some interesting self-questioning. Is the sociology of art fundamentally different from the approaches of art history and philosophical aesthetics? Can the sociological investigation of the arts afford to ignore the artwork and focus primarily upon contextual factors? What I am calling, in this article, the 'new sociology of art' has addressed these and other issues to do with the proper domain of the sociology of art. While the sociologists whose work I will be reviewing are theoretically and methodologically too diverse to be seen as a 'school of thought', they nonetheless exhibit similar characteristics. One of these is the felt need to grapple with the aesthetic properties of art, including re-examining the vexed question of the work itself. This doesn't mean that the 'new sociology of art' aims to return the field to un-sociological assumptions. The new work continues to reject the kind of 'essentialism' that sees artworks as special kinds of objects or artists as 'gifted' individuals with unique visions. My argument will be that the 'new sociology of art' aims to say something meaningful about art without succumbing to the problems Graña identified with older approaches to art: namely, the tendency to inflate the status and importance of art; and the propensity to make imprecise and vague statements about the 'social determination of art' and 'artistic representations of reality'.

## The Road to Disciplinary Specialization

Until quite recently, as Vera Zolberg (1990: 29) has documented, sociologists 'have not incorporated them [i.e., the arts] into the centre of their intellectual concerns' (Zolberg, 1990: 29). For a long time, sociologists avoided questions of art and aesthetics, and tended to 'relegate to the realm of philosophy, literary criticism, or political ideology much of the work of Central Europeans such as Simmel, Lukacs, Benjamin, Adorno, and others' (Zolberg, 1990: 35–6, 37). Zolberg (1990: 42, 51) claims that the attitude towards the arts hardened as 'sociologists chose a scientific model to unite its members in a community of scholarship' and that, during the period of the discipline's consolidation, 'few scholars' in the field of the sociology of art 'were likely to be published in prominent, mainstream journals'. Her conclusion is that, prior to the 1970s, most sociologists who dealt with the arts were 'viewed as intellectuals in a broad sense or as radicals, but not *really proper* sociologists' (Zolberg, 1990: 51).

The disciplinary status of the arts shifted radically with the founding of professional associations dedicated to the social science study of the arts<sup>1</sup> and the publication of two seminal texts: Howard Becker's (1982) *Art Worlds* and Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) *Distinction*.

Becker's *Art Worlds* can be considered a 'foundational text' for both American and European sociologists currently working on the arts. It advances many of the major orthodoxies that have come to characterize the field. In the

'Preface' to *Art Worlds*, Becker differentiates his own approach from that of an earlier tradition that tried to decode the social content of 'great' works of art:

[My approach stands] in direct contradiction to the dominant tradition in the sociology of art, which defines art as something more special, in which creativity comes to the surface and the essential character of the society expresses itself, especially in great works of genius. The dominant tradition takes the artist and art work, rather than the network of cooperation, as central to the analysis of art as a social phenomenon. (Becker, 1982: xi)

Becker (1982: xi) adds that his approach to the arts 'is social organizational, not aesthetic' and that he would not 'quarrel' with those who accuse him of not being a sociologist of the arts but rather a sociologist of 'occupations applied to artistic work'.

However, the significance of *Art Worlds* for the emerging field cannot be overestimated. It announced a conceptual shift away from, in Tia DeNora's (2000: 1) words, the 'grand but imprecise manner of associating styles of art with styles of social being and with patterns of perception and thought'. Against this 'grand tradition', Becker 'helped to specify many of the ways that art works were shaped by social organizations, interests, conventions and capacities available within their realms of production' (DeNora, 2000: 4). DeNora suggests that Becker's art worlds approach is similar to those sociologies of science that have studied the laboratory as a social product, a concrete instance in the production of scientific knowledge (Latour and Woolgar, 1986).

An important component of the growing disciplinary specialization of the field is that sociologists of art came to see themselves as 'unmasking' the assumptions, values and ideologies implicit in art world practices. Becker's (1982: ix, xi) *Art Worlds* claims to be based on the author's 'congenital antielitism' and sees itself as operating within a 'hearty tradition of relativistic, skeptical, "democratic" writing about the arts'. Interestingly, Becker (1982: x) claims that the concept of an art world simply reinterprets what is commonplace knowledge about the arts: namely, that this is a social world involving 'fashionable people associated with those newsworthy objects and events that command astronomical prices'. He adds: 'I think it generally true that sociology does not discover what no one ever knew before... good social science produces a deeper understanding of things that many people are already pretty much aware of' (Becker, 1982: x).

The same could not be said of Bourdieu's sociology of art. Its commitment to unmasking illusions and false beliefs runs deeper. Thus Bourdieu (1984: 11) claims that sociology is akin to 'psychoanalysis' in its approach to the field of art and aesthetics, and that when it comes to artistic creation and consumption 'the sociologist finds himself in the area par excellence of the denial of the social'. The kinds of illusions found in the field of art include, on the side of artistic production, the 'ideology of charisma' and, on the consumption side, the notion of the 'pure' or 'disinterested' gaze. Bourdieu attacks both of these tendencies for ignoring the social, economic and political factors that intrude

into a supposedly 'pure' or autonomous activity. According to this perspective, the denial of extra-aesthetic factors is central to the art system's mode of operation. Artists do not want to admit that fame or fortune influences their creative decisions; and consumers don't want to recognize that seeing artistic contemplation as a spiritual and disinterested activity is a class-based form of snobbery. As art is plagued with these kinds of ideological illusions, Bourdieu (1993: 139) claims: 'Sociology and art do not make good bedfellows'.

In summary, the orthodoxies that have characterized the sociology of art since the 1970s include the tendency to see it as: different from an older philosophical decoding of art; a preference for studying the concrete networks of artistic production and consumption; and a skepticism towards the worldview of artists and the art worlds they inhabit. In what follows we will see that the 'new sociology of art' has come to reinterpret some of these key assumptions.

## The Sociology of Art and Other Disciplines

One of the key features associated with the growth of the sociology of the arts over the last three decades has been, as argued above, a degree of disciplinary specialization. Disciplines such as philosophical aesthetics and art history have been seen by sociologists as insufficiently critical of the ideologies one finds amongst artists and the institutions of high culture.

Recent publications in the sociology of art have been more cautious in dismissing the approaches of other disciplines. A good example is Jeremy Tanner's (2003) collection *The Sociology of Art*. Tanner (2003: ix) tells his readers, that '[a]ny selection of readings in a particular discipline, whatever claims it may make to being representative... is also programmatic'. Tanner's collection seems to be making two programmatic points: it challenges sub-disciplinary specialization by including contributions from sociological theorists who have written on art, such as Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, Mannheim, Parsons, Elias, and Habermas; and it challenges the boundaries between sociology and art history. With respect to the latter, Tanner (2003: ix) defends the programmatic vision on these grounds: 'the best art history is, implicitly at least, sociologically informed, and the best sociology of art places questions of artistic agency and aesthetic form at the core of its research'.

The attempt to re-establish a dialogue between the sociology of art and art history is based on the observation that 'Both art history and sociology were cultural discourses or genres of writing constructed and "institutionalized"' during a similar period – 'from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century' (Tanner, 2003: 1). In a novel reading of the history of the two disciplines, Tanner proposes that the discourses of art history and sociology both emerge out of the 'differentiation of the spheres' that modernity produces. Just as art history and philosophical aesthetics emerge at a moment when art loses many of its overt political or religious functions, social thought had to contend with the problem of the 'social' as civil society became differentiated from the state. Indeed, the

overlap between the two discourses was, at least for a century, quite significant in that salons and intellectual clubs provided many early social theorists with the 'model of a society of equals' and much of the writing that anticipates the 'key concepts of what was to become sociology' had the 'largely literary and essayistic character of salon culture' (Tanner, 2003: 3). As Wolf Lepenies (1998) has shown in *Between Science and Literature*, the battle to define sociology, including whether it was part of 'scientific' or 'aesthetic' culture, was still being waged during the period in which Weber and Simmel were writing.

It is only in the middle decades of the 20th century that sociology and art history become completely differentiated 'specializations'. Tanner sees Mannheim's engagement with the writings of art historians as something of a last ditch effort to sustain the dialogue between sociology and art history:

Panofsky's essay on the methodology of iconographic and iconological interpretation and Karl Mannheim's introduction to the interpretation of *Weltanschauungen...* were originally written in response to each other, and are much better understood in relationship to each other than in the disciplinary isolation in which they are normally read today. (Tanner, 2003: viii)

The details underpinning Tanner's (2003: 10) reading of Mannheim's work through the prism of art historians such as Panofsky, as well as Alois Riegl, are complex but the basic point is that the great sociologist of knowledge 'saw art history as a special case of a cultural science of interpretation' and borrowed concepts from the former in constructing the latter. Thus, in the selection included in Tanner's reader, we find Mannheim (2003: 218) invoking Riegl's concept of 'artistic volition' to suggest how 'individual fields' such as language, literature, religion, the economic and social, possess a 'common life' and 'move in a common direction'. If '[a]rtistic volition refers to the tendency operating unconsciously in the creative artist which impels him [sic] to move in the direction of the dominant style even in his most spontaneous expressions', then Mannheim (2003: 218) suggests a cultural science of interpretation might employ the term 'social volition' to account for the 'unity of style' that a community shares.

While such overlaps between art history and sociology may be of interest to those wishing to re-frame the genealogy of the two disciplines, it is another thing to suggest that terms such as 'artistic volition' will be readily embraced by contemporary sociologists of art. It is also noteworthy that the only art historian included in Tanner's anthology is Arnold Hauser, who hardly represents the latest word in the social history of art. A more obvious choice would have been Michael Baxandall (1974), whose *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*, has informed the work of social scientists such as Howard Becker (1982: 15–16) and Clifford Geertz (1983: 102–9).<sup>2</sup> Baxandall's contribution to art history has very solid sociological credentials, and begins with the following declaration:

A fifteenth-century painting is the deposit of a social relationship. On the one side there was a painter who made the picture, or least supervised its making. On the other side there was somebody else who asked him to make it, provided funds for

him to make it and, after he had made it, reckoned on using it in some way or other. Both parties worked within institutions and conventions – commercial, religious, perceptual, in the widest sense social – that were different from us and influenced the forms of what they together made. (Baxandall, 1974: 1)

Baxandall (1974: ‘Preface’) also invokes Durkheim’s notion of ‘social facts’ in proposing that in a given society we see the ‘development of distinctive visual skills and habits: and these visual skills and habits become identifiable elements in the painter’s style’.

A different, and largely more successful, attempt to address the question of the sociology of art’s relationship to other disciplines is provided by David Inglis and John Hughson’s (2005a) recent collection *The Sociology of Art: Ways of Seeing*. The essays in this collection cover a range of case studies in the sociology of art, including Victorian painting and its depiction of ageing, women’s art, opera, ballet, World Music, ‘art house’ cinema, contemporary architecture, and the ‘aesthetics’ of everyday living. While Bourdieu is of central theoretical importance to a number of the contributions, especially his concept of the ‘field’, the book also covers the theoretical perspectives of a ‘sociological aesthetics’ or semiotics of aesthetic perception, cultural studies, art history and architectural theory. The variety of subject matter and theoretical perspectives is matched by the methodological pluralism of the collection, which ranges from ‘ethnography’ and ‘analysis of historical documents’ to ‘sociologically informed “close readings” of particular texts’ and the ‘empirical analysis of the responses to specific texts by critics and lay audience members’ (Inglis and Hughson, 2005b: 1).

There is an interesting balancing in this collection between working within the now established assumptions of the sociology of art and *recognizing* the need to push the field further. In many respects, these texts provide good evidence of the trend I am calling the ‘new sociology of art’. The editors have learnt the lessons of the prevailing social constructionism of the last three decades and begin their ‘Introduction’ by highlighting the contestable character of the label ‘art’:

What does the word ‘art’ mean to you? Does it conjure up images of paintings and sculptures in galleries, or orchestras playing Beethoven and Mozart? Does it express works by great geniuses or pretentious bores? Does it suggest to you pictures by John Constable and Claude Monet, or ‘installations’ by Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst? Does it make you think of enjoyable evenings out, or nights of interminable boredom? Does art excite you or turn you off? Do you prefer Schwarzenegger films to ballet performances, or Bridget Jones to Jane Austen? (Inglis and Hughson, 2005b: 1)

Echoing the anti-elitism that pervades the field since the publication of Becker’s *Art Worlds*, they add: ‘the sociological study of art is emphatically *not* just a specialized academic exercise, which studies esoteric things that are of interest only to a special few’ (Inglis and Hughson, 2005b: 2).

So how do the essays in the collection seek to extend the orthodoxy of the field? Arguably, the theoretically most challenging of the essays are those that ask sociologists of the arts to question their own tacit assumptions. In ‘Cultural

Studies and the Sociology of Culture', Janet Wolff (2005: 92–3) argues that 'most sociologists of culture and the arts base their work on pre-critical, sometimes positivistic, premises' which, despite references to the so-called 'cultural turn', often have 'nothing at all to do with language, semiotics, or poststructuralism'. Her basic point is that much of the sociology of art has not engaged in the kinds of questioning of power, representation and subjectivity, of the sort we find in cultural studies. Robert Witkin's (2005) 'A "New" Paradigm for a Sociology of Aesthetics' proposes heading in the opposite direction (a position closer to Tanner's) by reconnecting the sociology of art to sociological theory and art history in the 'grand tradition' of authors such as Hauser and Gombrich. He proposes that "[s]tyles" of art are held in place by the "demands" made by societies to think their key values at a level of abstraction appropriate to their principles of social formation' (Witkin, 2005: 59). He discerns three major paradigms for seeing painting as a form of perception: the 'haptic' (which bases perception on 'touching' and 'grasping'); the 'optic' (which sees objects at a 'distance' and favours linear-perspective); and the 'somatic' (which sees colour, texture and shape, as purely 'visual qualities' rather than an actual representations of reality). This rapprochement of the sociology of art and art history via the history of 'perceptual paradigms' is not likely to please everybody; but, as in *Art and Social Structure*, Witkin (1995, 2005: 72) makes a strong argument for seeing 'aesthetic styles... as integral to social formation'.

There are three essays in this collection that are particularly challenging to the conceptual premises of the sociology of art. The first is Paul Willis' (2005: 74) 'Invisible Aesthetics and the Social Work of Commodity Culture' which claims that the sociology of art 'helps reproduce the fallacy that "aesthetics" is synonymous with "art"... in denying a living content to aesthetics, sociology fails to locate "aesthetics" (without the shell) as a characteristic of *ordinary* and *everyday* social contexts'. In neglecting the aesthetics of everyday cultures, in its current form, 'the sociology of art differs little from other academic forms of comprehension such as art history in its privileging of official "art" spaces and practices' (Willis, 2005: 85). The second challenging essay, is David Inglis' (2005) 'The Sociology of Art: Between Cynicism and Reflexivity'. It argues that the 'animating drive behind most forms of the sociology of art is one of *exposure*' (Inglis, 2005: 98). If Willis is criticizing the boundary that the sociology of art sets up between art and non-art, then Inglis is more concerned with sociological imperialism and the denigration of competing experts, such as aestheticians and art historians. He suggests that '[a] less dogmatic future is possible in social scientific analyses of art, if sociologists now do to themselves what they hitherto been doing to "art" and other academic disciplines, namely relativising, historicizing, and laying bare tacit assumptions' (Inglis, 2005: 109). The third challenging essay offers a similar questioning of the discursive separation of sociology from other art discourses. Janet Stewart's (2005) 'Sociological Approaches to the Rebuilding of Berlin' raises a very interesting dilemma: what do we mean by the sociology of architecture when, in an era of 'post-' and other hyphenated 'modernisms', architectural and social theory

borrow from each other? She highlights a growing recognition amongst social scientists that the boundary between the academy and the artistic practices being analyzed are porous. In the case of contemporary architecture, Stewart (2005: 187) suggests, 'the actual complexity of the relationship between architectural discourse and sociological discourse... is influenced by the interplay between exhibition value, exchange value and use value that characterizes any given architectural object'. Sociology is simply one of the many elements that plays a part in the cultural production, criticism, and reception of the arts.

## Sociology of Art or Art-Sociology?

Tia DeNora has been at the forefront of a very exciting revitalization of a sub-field within the sociology of art: the sociological study of music. Her most recent contribution to this area, *After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology*, poses a significant challenge to the notion of a sociology of art. It advocates what might be called an 'art-sociology'. DeNora (2003: 151) claims that '[t]o speak of the sociology of music is to perpetuate a notion of music and society as separate entities'. She outlines early on in the book that one result of sociologists advancing a sociology of music was that 'the medium of music was implicitly downgraded; its status shifted, from active ingredient or animating force to inanimate product (an object to be explained)' (DeNora, 2003: 3). DeNora's most recent book is designed to counteract this tendency to treat music as 'object' rather than as an active force in social life. Interestingly, she chooses a dialogue with the sociological writings of Theodor Adorno as a way to achieve her goal.

DeNora tells us in the 'Preface' to *After Adorno* that her journey back to Adorno has taken over twenty years:

[B]y the mid-1980s, in the second year of the Sociology Ph.D. programme at University of California, San Diego (UCSD) I had – or so I then assumed – 'finished' with Adorno. Tuning in to a curriculum that emphasized socio-linguistics, ethnomethodology, and action theory, and reading Becker's *Art Worlds* (then something of a watershed), I became less interested in what I began to see as 'impossible' questions [in Adorno's work] about music's link to consciousness and domination... It has taken over twenty years working as a music sociologist to return to Adorno... In what follows, my aim is to connect Adorno with action-oriented, grounded music sociology. (DeNora, 2003: xi–xii)

Re-tracing DeNora's steps back to Adorno is instructive. Her doctoral research at UCSD culminated in what is now recognized as a 'classic' within the art worlds or production of culture paradigm: the book *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius* (DeNora, 1995). It was an ambitious attempt to explain, sociologically, one of the central myths of Western so-called 'classical' music: namely, why Beethoven and his music came to be seen by both his contemporaries, and future generations of musicians, critics and audiences, as the very embodiment of musical 'genius'. In keeping with the paradigm within

which she was then working, DeNora (1995: xiii) set out to show that '[g]enius and its recognition require social and cultural resources if they are to be cultivated'. Her sociology of Beethoven's musical genius de-mystified the phenomena by demonstrating the agency and institutional factors involved in the composer obtaining that recognition, as well by showing that 'it could have been otherwise' (DeNora, 1995: 190).

While this work was empirically rich, and is a great example of what can be achieved within an 'art worlds' or production of culture framework, it failed to deal with music as music. DeNora's (2000) subsequent book, *Music and Everyday Life*, shows her moving towards recognizing the structuring properties of music in social life. The book is based on what the author calls 'ethnographies of music "in action"' in places such as 'aerobic exercise classes, karaoke evenings and music therapy sessions... [and] music in the retail sector' (DeNora, 2000: xi). *Music and Everyday Life* was designed to tackle the paradox that, in contemporary societies, music is accorded the power to move us and make us feel in particular ways, but since it is less explicitly connected to religion, work or politics than in traditional societies, its links to social life remain invisible. DeNora proposes, in *Music and Everyday Life*, that music's role in mediating social actions ought to be studied through 'grounded ethnography'. Thus, the chapter on 'Music and the Body' takes us empirically from the 'neonatal clinic', and observations about how the music we first hear in the womb links the body to rhythm, to the aerobics class where music is 'used to facilitate and/or hinder the body's passage through the components of aerobic order and its grammar, from warm-up, to core, to cool-down' (DeNora, 2000: 93).

This is the background to DeNora's return to Adorno, in a grounded way. But why Adorno? He famously wrote in his *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*:

[T]he sociology of music tends to atrophy one or the other of the elements that went into its name. Sociological findings about music are the more assured the farther they are from, and the more extraneous they are to, music itself. Yet as they immerse themselves more deeply in specifically musical contexts they threaten to keep growing poorer and more abstract as sociological ones. (Adorno, 1976: 195)

DeNora seems to be partly agreeing with Adorno. It is important to treat music as music. However, while Adorno advanced a sociology of music that sought to show how even musical technique and the listening experience were socially mediated, he arguably didn't see music as a social construct, in the sense that DeNora is advocating. The 'After Adorno' in her title, therefore, refers to a sociology that leaves behind the 'level of generality' found in Adorno's thought and which specifies just how musical practices are social in character (DeNora, 2003: xii). Following Bruno Latour's notion of 'doing things with science', DeNora (2003: 39) advocates a music sociology in which there are no a priori categories and both 'music' and the 'social' are shown to be 'co-produced'. In this respect, she fears that both the sociology of music and musicology share the unfortunate tendency to reify their objects; and, furthermore, that what is labeled the 'new musicology' tends to posit 'social structure as a backdrop or

foil for detailed musical analysis... we never [actually] see music *in the act of* articulating social structure or as it is mobilized for this articulation' (DeNora, 2003: 37). While the new musicology may seem an advance on formalist musicology in bringing gender, race, and ideology to the forefront of musical analysis, it mirrors the reductionism of the sociology of music. This is why the notion of the 'co-production' of music and the social is a necessary corrective:

Latour's notion of co-production offers lessons for both the new musicology and for music sociology. For the former, the lesson is that, on its own, the analysis of the discursive properties of texts is not enough. It leaves in shadow the actual workings of 'society'... For music sociology, the lesson is that... [m]usic is not simply 'shaped' by 'social forces' – such a view is not only sociological, it also misses music's active properties and thus diminishes the potential of music sociology by ignoring the question of music's discursive and material powers. (DeNora, 2003: 39)

Passages like these make it clear that *After Adorno* is much more than a re-reading of Adorno; indeed, the work doesn't fit easily into the genre of Adorno-scholarship. Its central concept is also not, as in the case of Adorno, 'mediation' or 'negative dialectics', but rather the notion of the 'Musical Event': 'an indicative scheme for how we might begin to situate music as it is mobilized in action and as it is associated with social effects' (DeNora, 2003: 49). In advocating a 'programme of grounded, actor-oriented research, focused on the key concept of the Musical Event', DeNora's (2003: xii) brand of music sociology epitomizes what is best about the new sociology of art: namely, a desire to speak about the aesthetic properties of art but to do so in a manner that is congruent with social constructionism and which avoids unnecessary 'essentializing' of what we mean by art.

### The Sociology of 'Stuff'

It may appear odd, in an article reviewing recent developments in the sociology of art, to include a book on the sociology of consumer goods. However, the central premise of Harvey Molotch's (2003: 10) *Where Stuff Comes From* is that '[t]he specific "feeling" an object gives off helps to constitute what indeed it *is* in social terms' (Molotch, 2003: 10). Molotch's ethnography of product design and designers could be seen as contributing to what I am calling the 'new sociology of art' in a very important respect: it tries to show that the sociology of art is not so different from the sociology of consumer goods. He claims, '[i]t is the mode of form-function combination that makes something more or less' compelling and aesthetically satisfying, practical and economically successful (Molotch, 2004: 372).

Molotch's brand of sociology is a combination of Romanticism and social constructionism.<sup>3</sup> He wants to assess why there are so many barriers to seeing the aesthetic character of goods and what this tells us about the social construction of art: 'Just how, in the contemporary world, can we imagine aesthetics, fun and spirituality as entering into goods given all the resistance to seeing it

there?’ (Molotch, 2003: 15). Molotch notes, for example, that product designers themselves have difficulty reconciling art and commerce, form and function – in general, what we might term the ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ dimensions of human creative action – and employ these binaries in legitimating their own work, and in denigrating that of competitors. In addition, there is the broader cultural tendency to divide labour tasks such that ‘the making and appreciating of art goes to those who take up the unessential tasks, women and effete or neurotic men’ (Molotch, 2004: 343). Ornamentation, and by association art and design, are feminine preoccupations.

However, the tendency to construct art and aesthetics as ‘soft’ and to cast them in opposition to the ‘hard’ factors of economy, technology and science, is evident also in sociology and social theory. Molotch (2003: 14) contends that one of the obstacles to a sociology of how design works is that the social sciences have tended to treat ‘post-tribal and post-medieval societies as virtually defined by the break with spiritual motivation, communal sentiment, and sensuality’. Anthropologists, on the whole, have not been saddled with the thesis of ‘disenchantment’ or rationalization, and have been more alert to the ways in which ‘[a]rt and spirituality are endemic to economic activity, rather than superfluous or in opposition to it’ (Molotch, 2003: 13).

Molotch’s conception of art also challenges some of the reigning orthodoxies in the sociology of art. Against the tendency to regard statements about art as inherently suspect, the author felt the ‘need to make the case for art so as to get it out of the production doghouse’ (Molotch, 2004: 343). He agrees with those who say that the artfulness of art does not lie in the ‘thing itself’. This would make an explanation of why good design works too easy. Molotch advances the argument that art entails objects (or situations) that have the capacity to draw upon ‘social-psychological associations’ which are heavily compressed and give that object (or situation) an air of ‘transcendence’. Art transcends mundane and routine perception, by compressing experience in the following manner: ‘the magic of art is in the way complex social and psychological stimuli are made to conjoin, a kind of *lash-up* of sensualities’ (Molotch, 2004: 344). This is not relegated to the so-called fine arts, as such a social-psychological compression of sensualities, in time and space, can occur in the consciousness of ‘stormy nights, sexual thrill, a flowerpot, eating rice crispies, coming home from school... and all other art one has ever seen before’.

Lest he be accused of being all Romantic, and no social constructionist, Molotch (2004: 345) concedes that ‘[m]ounted on top of all the human sensing... [there] are institutional mechanisms’ (Becker’s point in *Art Worlds*) and that various ‘plots, nefarious and otherwise’, exist in the realm of art, as ‘social classes and cultural groups advocate their versions’ (Bourdieu’s point in *Distinction*). However, he does not back away from the importance of seeing art-like qualities in mundane objects and in their making. Any good can work, or function, as art if it carries the kind of ‘charge’ described above.

However, it is in the application of concepts from the sociology of art to non-art markets that Molotch’s sociology of design may be considered most

radical. In a crucial chapter of *Where Stuff Comes From*, entitled 'Form and Function', he lists the following art-like properties of conceiving, manufacturing, and adopting, any type of good: (1) 'art as representation' (for e.g., plans, maps, diagrams, images of the good); (2) 'art as pioneer' (where the aesthetic conception prefigures the mechanical or industrial process); (3) 'building markets' (where aesthetic creation or innovation create a market through making 'people want things'); (4) 'fulfilling basic needs' (for e.g. the design and aesthetic intent that goes into food preparation or furniture); (5) 'leaps and visions' (the way in which industrial design and production resemble the avant-garde invention of the 'new'); (6) 'fine art' (the role of actual art in promoting everyday things through association in advertising and the mass media, and by inclusion of ordinary objects in museums and galleries); and (7) 'the semiotic handle' (the design grammar that makes a thing attractive and specifically useful).

Molotch's account also shows the impact of design professionals and industries on the 'feel' of a place like Los Angeles. This goes significantly towards bridging the gap between the sociology of art and recent discussions of the 'creative economies' in geography and urban planning (Scott, 2000; Florida, 2003). However, I would claim that the most compelling message of *Where Stuff Comes From*, for sociologists of the arts, is that objects are both aesthetic and social. As with DeNora's notion of the 'co-production' of the music-social, Molotch (2003: 88) argues that, when trying to understand why some objects are successful, we need a 'chicken and the egg' approach: 'We are, with form and function, with art and economy... There are no independent variables in this henhouse'.

## The Work Itself

The surest sign that something is changing in the sociology of art is that leading sociologists associated with the 'art world' or production of culture perspective have recently published a book collection, together with an economist, a cultural theorist who works in a performance department, and several humanists and creative artists, addressing the issue of the artwork itself. *Art from Start to Finish* includes contributions from Howard Becker, Pierre-Michel Menger and Robert Faulkner and was prompted by the fact that 'There has always been a blind spot in the sociology of art: any discussion of specific artworks' (Becker, Faulkner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006: 1). The editors suggest the collection poses a challenge to the deterministic readings of the production and consumption of art that sociologists have sometimes gravitated towards:

An analysis that simply invokes class, race, organization, or any other of the commonly summoned 'social variables' does not get to the heart of what social science can contribute to understanding art. That way of working sets the artwork apart from, places outside of, the social process... Art is social not because social variables affect it but because it is the product of collective work... [which] produces the result that is eventually taken to be the artwork itself. (Becker, Faulkner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006: 3)

There are echoes here of DeNora's music-sociology which sees 'art' and the 'social' as co-produced. To conceptualize the social as a pre-given set of 'variables' is to render it 'mysterious' and unexplainable, when in fact all 'social process' refers to, in the making, valuing and consuming of art, is 'people doing things together' (Becker, Faulkner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006: 3).

*Art from Start to Finish* involves a significant re-working of the 'art world' thesis. First, it recommends that we should take the 'work' part of 'artwork' seriously. The 'grubby', mundane details of artistic production are important. Artistic work involves making all kinds of choices and these are shaped by all types of 'recalcitrant physical, social, and economic realities... the attention to organizational constraints, collegial pressures, and career interests' (Becker, Faulkner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006: 3). Essentialist and idealistic understandings of the artwork like to bracket these out and therefore fail to contribute to our knowledge of the artwork as work. Second, most of the participants in *Art from Start to Finish* share the sense that the 'artwork is one of the actors involved in the drama of its own making'. The editors propose that the artwork, in the 'language of Bruno Latour, ... is an *actant*'. Third, all the papers arrived at a similar conclusion, the editors tell us, regarding the artwork being the result of 'process'. Social science is uniquely placed to help us understand the artwork by studying the 'observable fact that they [i.e., artworks] have lives and careers, that they go from here to there to somewhere else and that these movements in time and space affect what they are and what they can be made into' (Becker, Faulkner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006: 6).

How an artwork comes to be considered 'finished' is the central object of investigation of all the papers. The editors summarize the general conclusion reached by the contributors: "[f]inishedness" is an empirical problem whose investigation shows us the process at work in the invention, making, communicating, and preservation of art' (Becker, Faulkner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006: 7). As such, the volume contains two interesting and complimentary essays on jazz that trace how, within an artistic form based around improvisation, the musical work comes to be 'finalized'. The chapter by Faulkner (2006) focuses on the processes by which an instrumentalist 'learn[s] repertoire, learn[s] songs, play[s] musical lines over and over again, get[s] scales and arpeggios under ... [their] fingers' – a cultural practice he terms 'shedding'. Shedding precedes actual performance but Faulkner shows that without it there would be no improvisation, 'on the night', as joint creative activity. If Faulkner studies what he terms 'downstream' factors in the creation of jazz as a work of art, then Scott Deveaux's (2006) analysis of the Sony Rollins tune 'This is What I do' looks at 'upstream' factors that complete the work and give it some degree of stability over time, such as the recording of a performance in San Francisco during the 1970s that comes to stand as a 'document' of the saxophonist's work. Another artistic genre that is covered in the volume is that of the 'unfinished work'. Menger (2006: 31) suggests that the sociology of the artwork can benefit from studying the history of unfinished works: 'Sculptures by Michelangelo or Rodin, canvasses by Leonardo de Vinci, Turner, or Picasso, symphonies by Schubert,

Bruckner or Mahler, operas by Berg or Debussy, novels by Kafka, James, or Musil'. The notion that 'interrupted creation' doesn't stand in the way of something coming to be valued as art suggests a fascinating field of empirical inquiry. Becker goes one step further suggesting that the scores of the maverick American composer, Charles Ives, who had such low expectations of being performed that he either did not keep his scores in good shape or continued scribbling on those that were in fact 'complete' or already published, should perhaps be considered the norm in the sociology of artworks:

I think it is better not to treat Ives as an oddity who we needn't worry about, but rather to make the unfinished character of what he did represent what would be the general case if some set of social arrangements didn't intervene to declare works 'done'. (cited in Becker, Faulkner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006: 17)

One could respond with less surprise than the authors of the volume might have wished for in that the 'indeterminacy of the work' is a commonplace argument in much aesthetic theory of the last forty years. However, lest the empirical bent of *Art from Start to Finish* be lost on the reader, one of the authors differentiates the sociology of the artwork being proposed from poststructuralist or postmodern theory: 'what a sociology of the work must propose (other than an aesthetic ontology, however deconstructive) is exactly the analysis of... the production, definition, evaluation, and commercialization of works, in their various possible states of uniqueness and multiplicity, of being finished and unfinished, of being "produced" versus being "reproduced"' (Menger, 2006: 58). In short, the indeterminacy of the artwork is an empirical and historical fact rather than a primarily ontological and philosophical one.

One of the truly novel aspects of *Art from Start to Finish* is its methodology. I am not referring here to the methods of data gathering that individual researchers relied on such as observation, analysis of historical archives, interviews and autobiography – these qualitative techniques are common enough in sociology. The truly innovative method lay in the approach taken to framing and producing the text itself. In keeping with the emphasis on 'process', the authors of *Art from Start to Finish* take us step-by-step through how they arrived at their individual and collective findings. The book stemmed from a conference, which itself was guided by preliminary 'provocations', and it was only after achieving some degree of consensus about the important topics that the writing began. Each of the chapters refers to the others, keeping the dialogue alive. In this, and many other respects, *Art from Start to Finish*, could serve as the model for a 21st century sociology of art. In its architecture and thematics, it highlights the contingent character of intellectual work. But, as sociologists of the arts broadly share the assumption that art is a contingent social fact, why shouldn't this recognition of contingency become the ground for consensus as the field opens up new questions for investigation?

## Conclusion

This article has attempted to map certain recent tendencies in social science writing about the arts that could be labeled the ‘new sociology of art’. It reflects the consolidation of a distinctly sociological approach to the arts, but, at the same time, involves the recognition that sociologists studying the arts have produced their own blindspots: for example, a blindness to the concrete work that aesthetic factors perform in social life (DeNora, Molotch); and a blindness to the artwork itself (Becker et al.). The ‘new sociology of art’ also seems confident enough to begin dialogue with other disciplines, such as art history and cultural studies, if and when these discourses share the assumption that art is a social construct, and that its production and consumption are thoroughly social in character. Other forms of ‘reflexivity’ have recently included the claims that sociologists of the arts need to check their own assumptions (Inglis, Willis) and that sociological discourse doesn’t exist in a vacuum in a world of growing intertextuality (Stewart). These developments suggest that the field is in very good shape and that there is very much, for those interested in the sociology of the arts, to look forward to.

## Notes

- 1 One might point here to the founding of the Social Theory, Politics and the Arts conferences in 1974 and the establishment of the Culture section of The American Sociological Association in 1987; in 1999 the European Sociological Association Research Network on the Sociology of the Arts was created.
- 2 Tanner (2003: 18) discusses Baxandall’s work briefly in the ‘Introduction’ but does not include a selection of the latter’s work in the reader.
- 3 On the lasting influence of Romanticism upon cultural sociology and the sociology of the arts, see de la Fuente (2007).

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## Eduardo de la Fuente

**Eduardo de la Fuente** teaches in the Communications and Media Studies program in the School of English, Communications and Performance Studies, Monash University. Since 2005, he has been a Faculty Fellow of the Center for Cultural Sociology, Yale University, and Co-Convenor of the TASA Cultural Sociology Thematic Group. He has published articles on the sociology of art, aesthetics and social theory, Romanticism in the social sciences, and has a forthcoming monograph (Routledge) on twentieth century music and the question of cultural modernity.

Address: Communications and Media Studies, School of English, Communications and Performance Studies, Faculty of Arts, Monash University, PO BOX 197, Caulfield East, VIC 3145, Australia.

E-mail: [Eduardo.delaFuente@arts.monash.edu.au](mailto:Eduardo.delaFuente@arts.monash.edu.au)