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Bennett M. Berger
University of California, San Diego

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Becker: Art Worlds

Reviews and Discussion

Howard S. Becker. *Art Worlds*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982. xiv + 392 pp. \$29.95 (cloth).

Reviewed by Bennett M. Berger
University of California, San Diego

... and I should have shown that while the scholar seeks, the artist finds; that the man who goes deep gets stuck, gets sunk—up to his eyes and over them; that the truth is the appearance of things, that their secret is their form, and that what is deepest in man is his skin.

—André Gide, *The Counterfeiters*

I quote this passage from *The Counterfeiters* because I think that artist-scholar Howard Becker might find in it an apt epigraph for his book. In *Art Worlds* Becker has written what at least some culture guardians will think of as a skin-deep book, an opinion not entirely without some merit, given Gide's view of the matter. But Becker has also written what is probably the most unromantic and severely sustained sociology of the occupation called art that has yet been produced.

The basic idea of the book is, appropriately, in its title. Becker uses the concept "art world" to argue that art is not produced by artists but by networks of cooperating persons (minimally in the practice of poetry, maximally in the production of grand opera) using a variety of skills and resources to make works which may or may not be designated as art and which may or may not find their way through channels of distribution to their audiences, who, by paying for them, enable the processes of art making to recur. Art making depends upon the manufacture of paper, canvas, potters' wheels, oil paint in small tubes, trombones, oboe reeds, multitrack recording devices, scenery, costumes, looms, crocheting hooks, and so on; and on the work of editors, impresarios, curators, dealers, critics, aestheticians, carpenters, engineers, backers, boards of trustees—and, perhaps, butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers as well. Becker quotes Trollope crediting his manservant (who brought him coffee every day at 5 a.m.) with an essential role in the creation of his fiction, and he refers to Picasso sweet-talking his favorite printer (who didn't even like Pablo's work) into undertaking a nearly-impossible-to-print lithograph.

Art, then, doesn't get made without the cooperation of a lot of people, and if made, doesn't generally get seen, heard, or otherwise appreciated unless its delivery to audiences and publics can be accommodated within an art world's system of distribution. There are exceptions, of course, and Becker pays

careful attention to them, particularly in his discussions of "maverick" and "naive" art and in his chapter on change in art worlds. But art worlds are powerful, their systems slow to change, and the exceptions few, difficult, and remarkable. Becker pursues these themes in great detail and always with clear illustrations from the art worlds of music, painting, sculpture, photography, film, theater, dance, literature, and other arts (and crafts), emphasizing in separate chapters the role of conventions, material resources, distributors, and government (through art property law, censorship, subsidy), and the power of critics, aestheticians, and other "editors" to shape and alter the form and character of the finished art work. And he does it all with the kind of savvy that working artists will, I think, find accurate and real.

Is that all? Well, yes and no. When Becker turned his attention some years ago to photography and the study of art, comments were made that it represented a radical departure from his earlier work on occupations and deviance that made his reputation as an ethnographer. Excepting the fact that it is based on written sources rather than fieldwork, this book makes clear that it was not a departure at all. Like his earliest work, Becker's plain empirical good sense, his lucid writing, and his care for fully describing the way things actually are constitute the great strengths of this book, overriding the deliberate banality of its basic idea. Becker is one of the very few sociologists of art who, scratched, doesn't reveal under the skin a thinly disguised prophet, critic, art-groupie, or guardian of culture. He does his conscious best to avoid making moral or aesthetic judgments about art, and he treats the data of art worlds no more or less reverently than he would treat the data of any occupational world.

Yet Becker knows that this posture will offend the dominant ("critical") tradition in the sociology of art, whose very interest in art stems from the assumption that it is a specially resonant subject matter for sociological study; that it is created by people of special gifts or genius who make works of great beauty expressive of profound emotions and perhaps universal human values; and that for these reasons the study of art can reveal the deepest truths about society and culture. Becker is not a partisan of this view, and from the outset he tries to anticipate the thrust of this criticism of his work (e.g., so what else is new? why don't you tell us anything about why this art is good and that bad?) by not quibbling if his book is called not a sociology of art at all but a "sociology of occupations applied to artistic work."

Well, that is surely a defensible posture, and it makes his book entirely of a piece with his earlier work on occupations. But I think too that he need not have been so cordial. Becker seems to have written this book with the imagined hot breath of the sociol-

ogy of art establishment on his neck—or its monkey on his back. Anticipating their criticism that his book tells them nothing they didn't already know and nothing "critically" or aesthetically fresh, he states candidly his conviction that social science does not generally produce new discoveries but provides fuller understanding of the things that many people already "know." His book does that admirably. But it will also teach any nonartist a lot that he or she didn't know, and it provides a potentially workable model for the analysis of a variety of other occupational worlds beyond that of art.

But there is more; he goes on:

... it seems obvious to say that if everyone whose work contributes to the finished art work does not do his part, the work will come out differently. But it is not obvious to pursue the implication that it then becomes a problem to decide which of all these people is *the* artist . . .

It is exactly this point that the book does not pursue in any systematic way, although there are recurrent intimations of a repressed argument never explicitly made. The book is most spirited and engaging when Becker is talking about—well—"deviant" art, whether it be minor or aspiring arts or maverick, naive, or folk art—i.e., the not fully "integrated professional" arts. Not exactly a surprise since, like his durable concern with occupations, it is continuous with Becker's longstanding sympathy with deviance of several other sorts. But the sympathy is less relaxed than usual in this book. The argument in behalf of these arts that one senses Becker wants to make goes largely unmade, except tangentially, when, for example, he lets slip his feeling for quilting and weaving (his involvement in jazz and photography—still not fully arrived arts—is well known), his apparent bewitchment by the uncategorizable Watts Towers, and his acid observation that when professional artists take up pottery they are careful to affirm their credentials as serious artists by making their product unusable for homely purposes.

That unmade argument represents a curious reticence, and it invites the question of why Becker, not well known for his prudence, should be so diffident, so unassertive in this respect. Is it deference to the power of established art worlds, with which (as a musician and photographer) he has to maintain at least some relations? to the granfalloon [à la Vonnegut] of the sociology of art by staying away from their questions if not their turf? Possibly, but not probably. A more likely explanation is that Becker is caught in the logic of his own aesthetic relativism, which dictates that art is what art worlds say it is, artists are those so designated by art worlds, and no aesthetic special pleading by a sociologist will change that.

Even sticking with his logic, however, he might have found a way to make the argument I think he wants to make, were he a sociologist less skeptical than he is of theory and political "positions." Herbert Gans, for example, whose relativism is no less severe than Becker's, was nevertheless able to argue (from strict and simple democratic assumptions) that culture industries underserve certain social groups (the aged and ethnic minorities, for example) for whom he claims a right to aesthetic equity from the institutions of popular art. The claim is made (as Becker might point out) to not much effect, but the argument is made explicitly, and within a relativist frame that conceives a specific aesthetic as a property of the culture of social groups (classes, ethnic groups, age groups) rather than as a function of the more specialized conception of art worlds.

Becker likes "big" theorizing even less than he likes politics (imagine: a major book by a prominent sociologist without a single reference to Marx, Weber, or Durkheim!). Like Goffman, he is in the skin-trade: what-is-visible-to-the-eye-that-cares-to-look is what reveals. But unlike Goffman (who seeks the approval of prestigious theorists by exhibiting his concern with highly abstract and exhaustive typologies and other metaphenomena), Becker has pulled off the more difficult feat of establishing a major reputation in sociology while hardly ever lowering his eyebrow or uncurling his lip at the mention of "theory." It's hard to imagine the word falling from his tongue without a suspicious "so-called" prefixed to it.

Becker's macrotheoretical reluctance deliberately but unnecessarily limits the reach of this book. Marxist sociologists of art should take note, please, that Becker, a most un-Marxist sociologist, has written a book about art that deals comprehensively and almost exclusively with the forces and relations of production (and distribution) in a detailed way that no Marxist has come close to: not Lowenthal, nor Lukacs, nor Hauser, nor Adorno, nor Goldmann, nor Aronowitz, nor even Raymond Williams. These materials make possible a sociological analysis of the aesthetic issues from which Becker, oddly, withdraws, because, I think, their pursuit might require the kind of "European" theorizing in the sociology of ideas with which he feels uncomfortable.

It's an unnecessary loss because Becker understands that an aesthetic, like any body of ideas, is sustained, altered, or otherwise carried through time by identifiable groups of people who commit themselves to that aesthetic (rather than some other aesthetic) in ways and for reasons suggested by the pattern of constraints and interests revealed by the history and structure of art worlds, and by the ties of art worlds to larger social structures. Becker differentiates within and among art worlds sufficiently to indicate the diversity of interests involved but insuffi-

ciently to indicate how inequalities in the power wielded by different sectoral interests affect the prestige of art works, art workers, schools, genres, and media, and hence the aesthetic on which it rests. He does not ignore conflict and other disagreements within art worlds, but his emphasis is on the consensus-building that makes and unmakes reputations and on the cooperation without which the very concept art world would be difficult to deploy analytically.

Becker also knows that aesthetic revolution (and even aesthetic innovation) can threaten the vested interests of art world institutions and the general culture itself, but he offers no detailed account of any bitter struggles. He is willing to tell us that a new aesthetic will never make it into the art history textbooks unless it captures an existing art world or creates a new one (as some do), but he is unwilling to tell us what it is about some new aesthetics that induces unyielding opposition from existing art worlds and the obstruction of efforts to create new ones. He is willing to tell us that an art world discourages the making of sculptures too heavy for the floors of an exhibition space to support, and the composition of music (and other performance) too long for audiences to sit through. He is even willing to suggest how the discouragement can be overcome (Woodstock? *Nicholas Nickleby*? sculpture-become-architecture-or-landscaping?). But he is unwilling to show us how art worlds transform good taste into bad and ungainliness into grace against what opposition; and who gets what from the transformation, with what consequences for the structure of art worlds, the culture of the nation, and the sensibilities of citizens. I think he has the analytic frame with which to tell us, and the kinds of materials to tell us persuasively, and I regret that he chose not to.

Critics are always telling authors what they should have done or might have done. But, strangely, authors persist in writing the books *they* want to write. Becker has written the book he wanted to. It is a very good book, and everyone, including not entirely satisfactory critics like this one, should be grateful.

David Kunzle. *Fashion and Fetishism: A Social History of the Corset, Tight-Lacing and Other Forms of Body-Sculpture in the West.* Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982. 359 pp. \$27.50.

Reviewed by Nancy A. Hewitt
University of South Florida

David Kunzle's *Fashion and Fetishism* is provocative. His heresy, self-proclaimed, is to show that "an aspect of female behavior regarded still—and afresh—as one of the more obvious and crude symptoms of the historic oppression of women"—tight-lacing—"had an expressive and dissident function tending to a kind of female sexual self-assertion, even emancipation" (pp. xvii, xviii). Kunzle would no doubt agree with a recent feminist critic of nineteenth-century tight-lacing that, in this period, men's and women's limited anatomical differences were enormously exaggerated by clothing, most "directly and graphically" for women by the corset (Roberts 1977:558). Kunzle himself repeats the feminist charge that the corset was "undeniably a symptom and symbol of female oppression." Yet, while the corset was "fashionable" (i.e., part of "the culturally dominant mode of dress expressing, as a rule, the dominance of a social class"), tight-lacing was not (p. 1). Therefore, the corset could serve as a cultural "symbol of oppression," while tight-lacing could serve as an individual "agency of protest" (p. xviii). For Kunzle, tight-lacing transformed corset-wearing from "conformity with the 'fashionable' . . . role of the socio-sexually passive, maternal woman" to protest against it (ibid.).

To demonstrate the "manner in which this symbol of oppression became an agency of protest," Kunzle employs a wide range of sources and disciplinary perspectives. From medical and philosophical treatises, novels, popular magazines, paintings, etchings, cartoons, advertisements, and correspondence, he weaves a rich tapestry on the social history of female sexuality enlivened by numerous anthropological, psychological, and sociological subthemes. Among the subthemes, the effects of technological progress and capitalist development on changes in fashion are particularly suggestive. Kunzle cites a key change in the early sixteenth century, from the continuous and flowing lines of medieval dress to the separation of skirt and bodice, with the attendant expansion of the former and tightening of the latter. The "new sartorial architecture of polarization, division, and contradiction" that followed may have corresponded, he argues, "to the new capitalist ethic, simultaneously expressing power through bulk and self-restraint