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Stuart Plattner's *High Art Down Home: An Economic Ethnography of a Local Art Market* [Review]

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High Art Down Home: An Economic Ethnography of a Local Art Market. By Stuart Plattner. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1966, pp. 250. English ISBN 0-226-67082-1 cloth; ISBN 0-226-67084-8 pbk.)

Stuart Plattner is best known to anthropologists as the director of the Program for Cultural Anthropology at the National Science Foundation in the United States. The local art market, site for this ethnographic analysis, is located in St. Louis, Missouri, a city with which the author became familiar while professor and chair of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Plattner's past anthropological research focussed on peasant marketing systems. He was one of the founding figures of the sub-discipline of economic anthropology and he once served as president of the Society for Economic Anthropology. In 1958, prior to turning to anthropology to earn a more stable income, Plattner graduated from New York's Cooper Union where he studied painting during the heyday of abstract expressionism. His wife (in the acknowledgements her name, Phyllis Baron Plattner, is given) provided his entrée into the St. Louis art world. She had taught part-time at the Washington University School of Fine Arts in St. Louis from 1971 to 1985, and had exhibited her work (we are not told what kind of work, a curious but consistent occlusion) in local galleries and museums. Plattner also describes his adult life as a form of participant-observation in and of the art world, since he kept track of his Cooper Union cohort while they struggled to make livings by their art and eventually, as frequently happens, turned to teaching to support themselves and their families.

Given the richness of these qualifications and experiences, one could be forgiven for expecting a more trenchant and compelling ethnography than is found here. Anthropology can potentially contribute to the understanding of an under-scrutinized institution, namely art markets in capitalist societies. To do so, however, would require use of the full panoply of anthropology's analytical techniques, wherein behaviour labelled economic would be contextualised in the broader matrix of concepts, practices, and interactions of which the art market is but one part.

Instead, what we have in *High Art Down Home* is an example of what has long been recognized in anthropology as the shortcomings of any analysis failing to question the fundaments of neoclassical economic theory. Plattner makes the fundamental error common to anthropological studies made close to home: he treats the locals' categories, which are also his own, as unproblematic

analytical concepts rather than constructs of one kind or another in need of explanation. Economic behaviour is assumed to be that of rational individuals maximizing their benefits and minimizing their risks in a marketplace where price is determined in part by the costs of production, materials, and labour, and in part by supply and demand. Such behaviour is assumed amenable to mathematical modelling, and deviations from any given model are assumed to be paradoxes in need of explanation. The possibility that these assumptions are formed from cultural or ideological premises is not addressed — at least not directly, a point to which I shall return below.

The author sets out to solve what he considers to be a paradox. It exists because artists are supposed to eschew marketability and produce artwork of individual vision and aesthetic value. At the same time the work must conform to some extent to what the market determines to be desirable and saleable. Plattner finds incommensurable that "art is sold like a commodity but is produced like a religious calling, as an object of intense personal expression" (23). Is this really a paradox, or is it an artefact of unexamined assumptions? People typically operate within several discursive realms that, upon closer scrutiny, are in mutual contradiction. Plattner does not ask the more interesting question, why in modernity has the idea of art become opposed to the idea of the economy? Such a question could also be posed about the gift, another category of thing that has come to stand for selflessness in personal relationships, against the self-seeking of the public sphere of exchange. To answer these questions, however, would require treating the capitalist marketplace as contingent and its practices as broadly cultural or ideological. It would also require a more complex definition of human agency, wherein divergence from the idea of self-maximizing is not treated as a paradox in need of resolution.

High Art Down Home is divided into five central chapters with an introduction, conclusion, and eight appendices. The author sets the international stage in chapter two by describing the rise of the modern art market. He asserts that New York's anomalous bull market for art during the 1980s and its subsequent crash, and events surrounding the Impressionists in Paris in the 1870s are the immediate and historical backdrops for contemporary art-market strategizing. Chapter three's cultural geography of St. Louis maps and describes the various galleries, museums, and associations that are the institutional settings of the local art scene, and briefly suggests some of the local opinions about them. Chapter four describes the lives and career strategies of artists, chapter five of dealers, and chapter six of collectors. These latter

three chapters quote extensively from interviews, providing a refreshing change of voice and the opportunity to make other interpretations of people's statements than those made by Plattner. Curiously, the artists are described as either painters (making either abstract or realist art) or sculptors, which gives the analysis an anachronistic feel. In other words, there are no installation artists, video artists, multimedia artists, performance artists, photographers, or textile artists, which suggests that the book does not account for the diversity of the St. Louis art world. Possibly Plattner does not consider the artists' choice of media to be a significant part of their economic strategizing, or else his art vocabulary does not correspond to now-standard distinctions between practices.

All high art is summarized as "art for art's sake", masking the many and conflicting approaches within contemporary art practice. This is not the "disarray of art theory" (198) that Plattner opines, but rather the signs of creative life comparable to the theoretical differences found in any discipline within the humanities or social sciences. Throughout the book I found a tendency to reduce artistic ideas, concepts, and practices to material causes, an aspect consistent with its economic focus. For example, the Barbizan School of outdoor painting is summarized in terms of the advent of portable oil paint tubes and railways. Further, the impressionists are discussed in terms of financial success: they "proved the point that going against received wisdom in contemporary art could be profitable for artists, dealers, and collectors" (30). While accurate in a superficial sense, much of the complexity and reflexivity of artistic movements is not given explanatory weight. Moreover, these are neither new nor insightful statements, but are, rather, standard issue in introductory courses.

Sometimes Plattner's supposedly neutral descriptions suggest an underlying cynicism directed at artists, dealers, and collectors engaged with New York-style high art. One such artist is described as part of a "tightly inbred group" (93) rather than part of a small group of close friends. A curator who sees their job as in part encouraging artists and audience to have a broader, more cosmopolitan approach is judged to have a "patronizing view" (67). Coming from a university educator, this begs the question: don't professors want their students to consider the world beyond their immediate locale, to overcome that particular narrowness of mind called ethnocentrism? Plattner betrays a middle-brow suspicion of high art talk, and one senses an underlying project of debunking at work, but without the precision and journalistic flare of a Robert Hughes or Tom Wolfe. Some of his characterisations, such as stating that Andres Serrano makes anti-Catholic sculpture, come closer to Jesse Helms-

style dislike than informed commentary, since the work alluded to, *Piss Christ*, is neither anti-Catholic nor a sculpture, despite its controversial title and materials. When a market-minded artist is said to have given up on "the pretense of cultural significance" (79), Plattner reveals himself: the paradox is only a paradox because some artists are deluded about their own artistic endeavours.

The use of scare quotes around terms is confusing and adds to the implicit debunking: does their use mean "so-called" (implying his own doubt of the term's accuracy, as on page 42: "his 'primitive' style") or is it to indicate what he considers jargon (such as on the same page, "cultural capital", or page 60, "diversity"), or is he quoting some unnamed source?

I used this book in an interdisciplinary graduate seminar on visual anthropology. The visual arts students did not think the book had anything relevant to offer them. They found its portrayal of an art community simplistic and flat. For the anthropology students, the book was an old-style ethnography that adhered to an outmoded analytical framework. For me as an anthropologist involved with local arts communities, the book has an anachronistic air, as if the author found himself stranded in a world that operated just beyond his conceptual reach. Not only does the book fail to illuminate questions about art and commodification, it leaves a niggling doubt about some anthropological approaches' capacity to make sense of worlds even less familiar.

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