

Artistic Practices
Social interactions and cultural
dynamics

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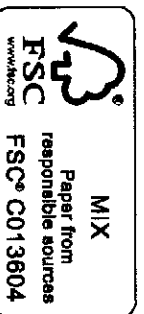
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Introduction

Tasos Zembylas

The term “practice” is not just another fancy term that suggests something radically new. Although it goes back to Aristotle, its intended contemporary use in social theory and the humanities is to replace other established concepts, such as “action” and “behavior.” Practices are configurations of cohesive activities that establish coordinated and collaborative relationships among the members of a community. From this perspective, practices are clearly understood as collectively constituted and regulated, and as transforming along social, cultural, technological, and economic trajectories. A concrete action, in the classical sociological understanding of the term, might be an element of a particular social practice, while on its own, it fails to be a practice. Furthermore, “behavior” is another term that denotes a range of actions or manner of conduct, although it is commonly embedded in an externalist view of events. Such theoretical distinctions determine the intentionality of the meaning of “practice.” However, a strict definition of this term is less important and may indeed lead to dogmatism. Thus, in order to avoid the vanity of definitions, I will go along with a certain semantic openness while keeping in mind that the locus of practices is the social life of practitioners; their accomplishments, which as a rule includes institutional settings. Consequently, practices are implicitly and intrinsically tied to living communities situated in time and space.

Practice matters. However, in allusion to Heidegger’s “forgetfulness of Being” (*Seinsvergessenheit*), one might argue that modern philosophy and social theory have been suffering from “forgetfulness of practice”—an expression frequently used by my friend, the philosopher Allan Janik. Forgetfulness as used here has two meanings. Practitioners in the arts and sciences work hard on a theoretical or experimental level and ultimately present their results without mentioning the creative process—either because creative practices appear self-evident to them, or because their awareness focused on the contents but not on the *modus operandi* of their accomplishments. Their cognitive and practical skills, which are essential for their creative practice, thereby remain in the dark, outside of public awareness and appreciation. The second meaning of forgetfulness is the devaluation of the body as a bearer of agency. This epistemological misconception is expressed clearly in Descartes’ distinction between *res cogita* and *res extensa*, where he denied the body any intelligence.

The criticism of this rationalist tradition, which constructed rationality as a merely formal cognitive and disinterested intellectual faculty removed from everyday life, dismantled assumptions of the various forms of intellectualism. Regardless of the intrinsic differences of the various theoretical developments, such as phenomenology and pragmatism, as well as of the works of several philosophers and social theorists, I believe it is possible to argue that these counter-positions emphasize the primacy of practice and the pivotal role of the body as an intelligible “vehicle.”

The focus of this anthology is *artistic* practices. I have chosen this topic for a number of reasons. First, I believe that over the past four decades, the sociology of the arts has highlighted the institutional structures and power relationships that effectively determine visibility within the art world and consequently artistic reputation. Analyzing the social constitution and organization of the arts has, without a doubt, proven fascinating and recently I have become increasingly interested in artistic processes in order to understand how knowledge, experience, and interchange support both the reproduction of the arts, and innovation within them. Second, the concept of practice is theoretically very promising, since it overcomes the binary opposition of the individual and society and makes it possible to analyze sets of activities and discourses on micro and macro levels simultaneously. There is a third reason to choose this topic. Aesthetics is a philosophical discipline that has always been affected by various presuppositions. Many sociologists have applied an externalist perspective, assuming that aesthetics represents a hegemonic discourse, to establish specific patterns of valuation. While this observation is not entirely incorrect, at the same time, it is also not very accurate, since ideas about aesthetics often have an intrinsic, non-causal relationship to the process of artistic creation. Therefore, I believe that a close look at artistic practices might illuminate the practical dimension of aesthetics.

What I stated about practice also applies to the arts: art matters! Art affects us and signifies things that are valuable for us, whereby “art” refers to the creative process as well as the perception and reception of artworks. Art is a catalyst for social interactions that sometimes cause public conflict or conversely facilitate mutual understanding and strengthen collective bonds. Precisely in this function, art serves as an effective means to legitimate or criticize established ideologies and power relations. Furthermore, the artistic sector is a place of work where many people make their living. Hence, art is simultaneously a social dwelling and the cement of social distinctions. Last but not least, art is interwoven with culture and politics, and it is thus inconceivable that these three concepts could ever exist without being fundamentally interrelated. This interpretation of the social significance of the arts should also explain why this anthology touches themes of general and topical interest far beyond the scope of the sociology of the arts.

The present volume is composed of eleven chapters offering original theoretical and methodological perspectives for the study of artistic practices.

The first contribution, by Tasos Zembylas, will explore the meaning of practice from Aristotle through Ludwig Wittgenstein to Theodore Schatzki and offer a conceptual framework for the analysis of artistic creation as a complex and incremental process. Practice theory in this sense does not seek to replace existing strands of theories; instead, it is presented as a complementary approach to provide access to new themes for the sociology of the arts.

The second chapter, by Theodore Schatzki, represents a practice-theoretical treatment of art. Schatzki begins with a brief overview of practice theory and then shows art as a constellation of practice-material bundles, contrasting this view with Howard S. Becker's well-known account of art worlds. Finally, he analyses the three key aspects of artistic bundles: the teleological dimension, practical understanding, and sense experience.

Nathalie Heinrich applies the paradigm concept to the art world. She identifies three different coexisting ways of practicing and conceptualizing the visual arts: first, classical art, which is mainly figurative and narrative; second, modern art, which transgresses the patterns of traditional figuration; and third, contemporary art, which challenges the very notion of art itself. Her analysis of these three paradigms discloses the different practices developed within each paradigm; creation, presentation, valuation, and mediation of artworks.

In her contribution Marie Buscatto recapitulates the existing research on gender relations in the arts and analyzes the gendered character of amateur and professional artistic practices. Facing the pertinent devaluing of their creative work, some musicians seek to overcome or transgress the established gender order. Buscatto thereby discusses the main transgression strategies used in the arts for undermining rigid gender classifications and ensuring a genuine, dynamic albeit incomplete transformation of the established social order.

In a collaborative work, Chris Mathieu and Iben Sandal Stjerne examine the acquisition, refinement, and abandonment of practices over the course of careers in film-making. Referring to several empirical studies, they plausibly show how constant negotiations about the constructed meaning of “good” and “bad” practices modify actual practices. Furthermore, the authors argue that practice changes are, in some cases, closely linked to changes in the environment, but in other cases, practice depends on internal processes and outcomes that deem certain paths and trajectories more likely than others.

Silvana Figueroa-Dreher sheds a light on jazz improvisation, showing how the musical material, attitude of the musicians, and interaction among them play a crucial role in the elucidation of improvisational practices. In an attempt to generalize her empirical insights she elaborates improvisation as a general model of creative action.

Chiara Bassetti interprets the body, with its lived experience and its incorporated knowledge, as a fundamental dimension in all human practices. Her consideration of the bodily nature of dance performance highlights the entanglement of propositional knowledge and practical competence. Bassetti demonstrates how repeated collective practice leads to embodiment, which

allows improvisation, while the progressive embodiment of a dance-piece allows *being-in-there*—a crucial state in dance.

The next chapter moves to literary writing processes. In the first part, Tasos Zembylas explores the nexus between the sociology of the arts and the tacit-knowing approach and discusses its application in the empirical investigation of the artistic creative process. In the second part he sheds light on the generation and integration of creative ideas, on the relevance of experience, the way writers face particular challenges that arise out of the openness and fragility of creative processes, and on the influence of their peers.

Laurent Thévenot's contribution discusses the various forms of engagement in participatory art projects. With reference to a "shared garden" project in Paris, he explores various aspects of engagement, the emergence of communalities, and forms of justification of common goods. His analysis unfolds the complex—and sometimes conflicting—relationship between artists and the public.

Sociology has traditionally viewed mediation in art as an outcome of institutional structures or of the values held by particular actors. Sophia Krzyś Accord analyses the preparation and installation of exhibitions in order to reveal mediations as outcomes of interactions that occur not only between different human actors, but also between artworks, other objects, and space. Curatorial knowledge can thus be collaborative and contingent upon the affordances of objects and spaces as they are made through the installation process.

The final chapter, by Graciela Trajtenberg, discusses artistic practices developed at the margins of the art world. In the case of non-commissioned graffiti art, these margins relate to either legal constraints or the informal artistic training in this specific field of practice. The growing role of the internet, however, supports community-building and the dissemination of knowledge about street art. Hence, temporality and locality are transgressed and new forms of publicity emerge.

To sum up, the present anthology includes various discussions and analyses of artistic practices as a coordinated effort to examine the complexity and indeterminacy of artistic creative processes.