

Howard S. Becker, Robert R. Faulkner and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, eds., **Art from Start to Finish: Jazz, Painting, Writing, and Other Improvisations**, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006, xvii + 234 pp., illus., \$24 (paperback).

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In the preface of *Art from Start to Finish*, the editors take on the voice of a devil's advocate and raise an impertinent question, one that's designed to elicit a salivating response from interdisciplinary scholars like myself, who have struggled to square sociological and formalist approaches to works of art. "OK, now we know all about artistic institutions," the voice says. "We know about their relations to their enviroing societies. We know how their making and reception are affected by class and all those other things. But what about—you know—what about the artwork itself?" (xiii)

This is a question commonly posed in English departments across the country, but it's much less familiar in the precinct of the social sciences, which may account for the half-embarrassed tone of the question — as if it were treading on a faux-pas. The sociological impulse has often led to rewarding explorations of the context of art-making: we've learned much about the construction of art markets, about the educational networks that nourish artists, about the role that cultural capital plays in the prestige given to various kinds of art, and about how different social identities (being a man or a woman, working-class or middle-class, black or Latino or . . . ) can affect access to an artistic career. But social science has often stopped short before the artwork itself. To explain the rhythm of a poetic line, the shape of a melody, the cinematography of a film — well, these were jobs better left to experts in the field, who also happened to be the sort of non-scientific types who enjoyed speculating (and speculating some more) on a relatively thin data sample. As Howard Becker explains in his essay "The Work Itself," "We almost never attempt to explain a single instance of some kind of behavior . . . We would rather learn a little about many instances of something or, at least, much less about any particular work and more about many of them." (29)

The editors of *Art from Start to Finish* thoughtfully open up this field of exploration, with much assistance from a diverse line-up of contributors who span such fields as economics, ethnomusicology, performance studies, and art history. In their introduction, the editors lay out the collection's four animating principles with a relaxed wit. Principle #1: "art is not an individual product" (2), but the result of collective negotiation, where artists themselves must attend to physical, social and economic pressures, not to mention the various audiences they anticipate for their work. Principle #2: "the artwork is one of the actors involved in the drama of its own making" (3) — which is to say, the material aspects of the artwork (the suppleness or brittleness of steel in a sculpture, the sound of words in a poem) have a strong impact on the evolution of the artwork. Principle #3: "the work contains and embodies all the things that happened in its making" (5); rather than consider the artwork simply a finished product, the editors consider it a story, the story of its creation, which is ongoing as long as there are new audiences for the artwork. Principle #4: we should ask "how this artist in this place at this time could create this work in the

form it took". (6) If every artwork is the product of extreme serendipity, then the sociologist's duty is to plumb the depths of that serendipity, to reveal the decision-trees that often go unremarked.

*Art from Start to Finish's* contributors take the editors' injunction in a number of directions, loosely organized around the question "how do we know when an artwork is finished?" There is a strong bent to explore those art forms that highlight the process of their own making (and which thus furnish an easier illustration of Principle #3). Four essays focus on improvisation-driven music, including a valuable meditation by Scott DeVaux on how jazz recordings differ from live performance, a cogent exposition of Zimbabwean *mbira* music by Paul Berliner, and a wonderfully concrete investigation by Robert Faulkner of how jazz musicians think about "the shed," that paradoxical place where musicians go to practice routines in order to liberate themselves from the force of the habitual.

Surprisingly, nearly half of the collection is devoted to the visual arts. Larry Gross draws a quick but lucid genealogy of how "the fragment" and "the sketch" became valued artworks in their own right; Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett interviews the artist Max Gimblett (her husband) on his working method ("You're trying to generate a paradigm that is completely open," he says, while later claiming as his motto "The flute without holes is the most difficult to play"); and, in a particularly probing essay, Pierre-Michel Menger ruminates at length on the French sculptor Rodin, who confounded all attempts to neatly classify his work into the categories of "finished" and "unfinished" by constantly recycling motifs and figures from one work to another. Menger's analysis of Rodin opens onto larger speculations about how a sense of inevitability and a sense of surprise dovetail in our perception of the singular artwork: the power of a work of art, Menger suggests, comes from the sense that we couldn't imagine it otherwise—and yet could have never imagined that it would take the form it did.

The essays are consistently shrewd, but I have to confess that, when I turned the book's last page, I was left muttering the opening question posed by the editors: "But what about the artwork itself?" With one bright exception (which I'll turn to below), the contributors largely respond to the editorial injunction with a dodge-and-weave: they affirm that, yes, it is essential to discuss individual works of art — and then they spend most of their energies on the social practices that enable moments of performance (how *mbira* musicians learn melodies, for example) or on larger theories of what constitutes "the artwork," rather than on the particulars of an individual artwork. They hesitate just at the threshold of the nitty-gritty, the place where a singular work of art confounds and stimulates with its singularity.

The problem wouldn't seem simply to be a disciplinary one, since *Art from Start to Finish's* contributors span such a diverse range of academic fields. I'm hard-put to explain this seeming perversity, although it does appear to supply evidence that the experience of art — how we take in a poem, play, sculpture, and so on — continues to inspire some embarrassment and queasiness, even in those who would seem most receptive to it. Stanley Katz, in his foreword, ends with the half-pithy, half-snippy remark that "the social sciences can remind scholars of the need to react to beauty but not to be captured by it" (xi). The shape of the collection makes me think that he's testifying, inadvertently, to a strong and ambient anxiety here: that an aesthetic response to an artwork is something close to submission — or, at least, some form of analytical paralysis. Who, one wants to ask, were the latest people taken hostage by beauty, and what crimes have they committed, Patty Hearst-style?

Let me be clear: It's not that, while reading *Art from Start to Finish*, I yearned for tremulous testimonies to the power of this-or-that masterpiece. Rather, given the editors' own mandate, I merely hoped for more explorations of how individual works of art, by taking a certain cast, freshen our sense of perception. The Russian literary critic Victor Shklovsky famously wrote that art exists so that one can "recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*." The experience of art, Shklovky argued, estranges us from the habits we've developed to parse our world quickly and efficiently; it induces a new consciousness. Jazz drummer Art Blakey offered likewise that music is supposed "to wash away the dust of everyday life": We come to a concert, say, with our conventional sense of things settling on us like a fine powder, and somehow we enter into a heightened, renewed awareness of the world we live in.

I wish that more contributors to *Art from Start to Finish* had delved into the mystery of that "somehow." The most stimulating essay on that score is Larry Kagan's account of his own "shadow art" sculptures, which harness the power of the silhouette to unexpected effect. Kagan sculpts, one might say, not only with tempered steel (his preferred material) but also with volumes of shadow in space. Kagan's steel sculptures often take on the look of a chaotic entanglement of wires, but when lights are strategically placed around them, they reveal shockingly figurative silhouettes — of a chair, a piano, an '@' sign, or (self-reflexively) a hand puppet. (See figures below.)



Figure 1: Larry Kagan, "Wooden Chair (Round)."



Figure 2: Larry Kagan, "Piano."



Figure 3: Larry Kagan, "At."

Kagan's sculptures have intrigued both art critics and those less schooled in art history because they raise fascinating conceptual questions (What distinguishes the frame of an artwork from the artwork

itself? What separates an illusion from reality?) with an uncommonly light touch. And Kagan's essay is satisfying because he describes his own artistic trajectory through the concrete problems he faced and the concrete solutions he devised. Frustrated by pesky shadows that seemed to dissipate the impact of an earlier series of works, he decided to work with, rather than against, the effect of the shadow — and so was forced to struggle with different manners of lighting, the problems of installing work with such controlled settings, and so on. These quite pragmatic considerations are what allows him to dramatize, in his work, some of the more theoretical propositions that he advances — for instance, that shadows are not simply “flat shapes . . . cast by objects” (the conventional view) but also “slices through volumes,” silhouettes that occupy three rather than two dimensions.

“Ever have the experience of standing in a sunny field,” Kagan asks, “and feeling yourself shudder with the sudden chill of a passing cloud overhead? Or perhaps you remember sitting in the shade of a tree to get away from the hot sun.” He continues: “In either case you were inside such a cool and dark volume. And it wasn't so much a visual experience as it was a feeling.” Reading Kagan's essay at this point, I felt another sort of chill — of recognition and estrangement, a feeling that Shklovsky would easily identify as the sign of artistic power and one that more social scientists might explore, in the declared spirit of this collection.