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Review of *Aesthetics and the Sociology of Art*, by Janet Wolff

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Janet Wolff, *Aesthetics and the Sociology of Art* (Controversies in Sociology No. 14), London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983. 120 pp. \$8.95 (paper).

In this compactly written and generally accessible monograph, Janet Wolff outlines the contours of reductionism and ideology as central issues in the sociology of art. She provides a thorough critique of contemporary sociological practice, surgically identifying sloppy logic and intellectual imperialism in nearly every recent attempt to solve the "problem" of aesthetics sociologically. Upon completing the book, the reader will no doubt feel greatly informed about a wide range of epistemological, methodological, and ideological issues. At the same time, the reader may feel perplexed in his/her attempt to frame an answer to the question, "What's the next step?" Hence, the monograph would probably give admirable service as a short "kick off" to an undergraduate honors course or a graduate seminar in the sociology of art and aesthetics.

Wolff easily fends off art critics and aestheticians who would reserve "art" exclusively for the province of aesthetics. Any art, she argues, is embedded in a particular historic and social milieu. Art is institutionally situated in a material world. In short, art *and* art criticism are social products. No doubt most sociologists, this reviewer included, will agree with Wolff that art and art criticism are quite properly within the realm of sociological investigation.

Herein lies the problem of "reduction." If art and art criticism fall within the sociological purview, is there anything of consequence left over for aesthetics to salvage as its own? Wolff clearly thinks there is. To make this case, however, she must contend directly with myriad critiques to the effect that art (and the aesthetics which give it meaning and interpretation) are little if anything more than ideology. A substantial portion of the monograph is thus given over to the task of explicating a variety of "art is ideology" positions. Wolff's synopses are literate, pointed, and frequently sympathetic.

Wolff's generally appreciative attitude toward advocates of "art is ideology" is rooted—obviously, it seems to this reviewer—in their clear and not overdrawn demonstration that art is a social product. Nonetheless, this position claims too much for Wolff.

There must be, in her view, an understanding of the aesthetic which is not totally buried in sociological reductionism or ideological critique. Sociology, in addressing art, has an aesthetic of its own which needs to be explicated. The search for this aesthetic leads Wolff to seek and argue for the "specificity" of art.

Several meanings of "specificity" are reviewed by Wolff, but the fundamental assumption is that art is irreducible simply to economics, history, politics, etc. Although Wolff champions the specificity of art, she is unyielding in her critical analyses of theorists who have so far offered suggestions as to its nature and constitution. She states:

to date the strongest contenders for this task are beset by serious weaknesses which make it difficult to see how their theoretical contributions can either solve the problem of the aesthetic or be incorporated into a sociological approach (108).

On this note, Wolfe leaves her readers to ponder and perhaps construct "solutions" of their own.

This is a useful book for students of the sociology of art in particular and for those interested in the project of cultural production generally. Wolff outlines the major positions of Foucault, Gadamer, Lacan, Lukacs, Marcuse and a host of others having lesser name recognition but no less stimulating ideas. The eight-page bibliography is a mine of relevant material. The only reservation this reviewer has is the price. Why should a book which could, theoretically, be photocopied for under \$3.00 cost three times as much to buy?

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