

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

HOWARD S. BECKER, ROBERT R. FAULKNER, and BARBARA KIRSCHENBLATT-GIMBLETT (Eds.) *Art from Start to Finish: Jazz, Painting, Writing, and other Improvisations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006, 234 p., index.

The most striking unfinished artwork of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is perhaps Antoni Gaudi's La Sagrada Familia in Barcelona. Begun nearly 120 years ago, still in progress long after the artist's death in 1926, it has a currently estimated completion date of thirty years hence. The work has been continued under the architect's posthumous guidance by his former students, and has now been handed down to our contemporaries. Ongoing funding is provided by private donations. This iconographic edifice is referred to as "the Bible in stone" and dedicated to the poor. During his lifetime Gaudi designed three facades: the Nativity, the Passion, and the Glory of Christ. Only the Nativity façade, now with its associated four towers aligned with the mountain horizon and standing 100 meters high, was completed in the artist's lifetime. Since then, above the Passion façade another four towers have been completed. If the artist's vision is realized there should be a total of 18 towers. Four over each of the three facades representing the 12 apostles, four more dedicated to the writers of the gospels, and the remaining two in celebration of the Virgin Mary and Christ. The tower representing Christ will be 170 meters high. This living monument to Christianity and Gaudi's creative genius edifies the unfinishedness of art.

Becker, Faulkner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's book originates from a two day conference in Grenoble, France, that was orchestrated by Becker in 2001 with funding by the American Social Science Research Council and the Rockefeller Foundation. The organizing theme was the "Work of Art Itself." Participants came not only from academia (i.e., the social sciences and humanities) but also from various artworlds (i.e., practising jazz musicians, authors, filmmakers, performance artists, painters and sculptors). Each was sent two "provocations" prior to the conference. The first asked them to consider: how do we know when an artwork is finished? The second queried: what is the role of technology in the arts? Three papers, which became chapters one to three, were initially circulated: Becker's "The Work Itself," Pierre-Michel Menger's "Profiles of the Unfinished," and Michael Joyce's "How do I know I am Finnish? The Computer, the Archive, the Literary Artist, and the Work as Social Object." After the conference the authors and editors pulled together a 12 chapter book that provides, given the diversity of participants and the

openness of the two questions, a reasonably coherent exploration of the theme. Four chapters use music as a point of reference, and six draw on a mixed bag of contemporary visual arts. The remaining contributions are primarily theoretical but make direct reference to various artistic practices such as writing, filmmaking, and jazz playing. Overall, and in contrast to an earlier review by Scott Saul (*International Journal of Communication*: 1 2007: 35-39), I suggest that the authors are largely successful in addressing the “work itself.”

I much enjoyed Faulkner’s explanation of the necessity of relentless practising or “shedding” to jazz musicians. This went a long way to making comprehensible the book’s heartfelt dedication to “all those musicians who got lost coming out of the bridge of ‘Sophisticated Lady’ and were never heard from again.” Also informative were Michael Joyce’s musings on writing or not writing hypertext fiction, Larry Kagan’s reflections on making object/shadow sculptures, and Max Gimblett’s candid interview on the ways he approaches completing a painting. Scott Deveaux’s discussion on the sources of Sonny Rollins’s ambivalence towards making jazz recordings and how copyright can disadvantage performing musicians was very helpful, as were Paul Berliner’s insights into the rigor, fluidity and liveliness of Mbria music, and Richard Caves’s explanation of the “economic” conditions and preconditions of artistic production.

This empirical richness results in a predictable difficulty. There is a variability requiring the reader to think across the arts rather than within a particular field. This is overcome in all of the chapters by a sometimes forced attempt to address the conference theme and cross reference each other. There is also an occasional tendency towards top heavy theoretical discussions in the foreword by Stanley Katz, the preface by the editors, the introduction by the same editors, and the chapters by Becker and Menger. Joyce’s excursions into hyper-textuality took some working through before I appreciated his “elevated conversation in which punning and the associative resonance of words played an important part” (xiv). My greatest difficulty was overcoming an initial resistance to the topic. I kept asking: how does all this relate to how artworks get created in the first place? I now recognize the point. Using the question of how artists relate to finishing and/or how artworks are socially deemed as finished is a useful way to get at a sociological understanding how artworks are created. Only as artworks become in some sense “finished,” or not finished/Finnish as Michael Joyce points out, do they become “created.” There is much here to inspire further research.

The Barcelona tourist bureau estimates that some 4,000 people a day visit Gaudi’s unfinished cathedral, which has been the subject of concerts, movies, documentaries, Easter candies, countless news articles, and more than 70 books. As demonstrated in Menger’s chapter on Rodin, by Gimblett’s reflections on his own artistic practises, and humorously through Wallace Stevens’s remarks on Harry Levin’s circuitous search through a myriad of cities over a number of years for the penultimate

manuscript of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, artists oftentimes resist "finishing" a work and most often see their work or want their work to be seen as an ongoing process. Unfinishedness keeps, not only the art but in a metaphorical and real sense, the artist alive. Becker et al.'s provocation to sociologists of art to understand and explain the sociological process intrinsic to the "work itself" opens a new and fertile research field.

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