

## Call for Papers

### The Social Production of Art Today: Revisiting Janet Wolff

BSA Sociology of the Arts Study Group & Cultural Sociology

Thursday June 6th 2024, 10am – 4:30pm, University of Leeds

This symposium will showcase contemporary work in the sociology of the arts framed around a return to Janet Wolff's seminal book, *The Social Production of Art* (1981). More broadly, the intention is to foreground work in the sociology of art which is informed by theories and intellectual histories other than the dominant traditions that orient the subfield (Bourdieu, Becker), or which complicate their dominance. We are soliciting 15-minute papers which either:

- 1) Explicitly engage with Wolff as a primary theorist in contemporary sociologies of art;
- 2) Use similar theoretical tools or approaches to Wolff, e.g. a focus on ideology;
- 3) Evaluate *The Social Production of Art's* relevance today;
- 4) Consider the historiography of the sociology of the arts itself. This might involve discussions of the forces that uphold certain voices at the expense of others (Bourdieu, Becker, and now Latour), or a discussion of the role of national traditions within the sociology of art.

There will be two paper sessions, broadly themed around: *Contemporary Approaches to the Social Production of Art* and *Rethinking the Canons in the Sociology of Art*. Please indicate if you would like to be considered for a specific panel

Janet Wolff will join us for the day, offering a talk about the book, its writing, and how it has traveled with her through her career.

**Please submit a title, an abstract of 200 words, and which panel you would like to be considered for, to [I.harris@soton.ac.uk](mailto:I.harris@soton.ac.uk) by 5pm Monday April 15th.**

**We are reserving at least 25% of the paper slots for ECRs. Please inform us if you are an ECR.**

#### **On *The Social Production of Art***

Janet Wolff's landmark work in British sociology of the arts, *The Social Production of Art* (1981), begins with a simple premise: 'Art is a social product'. From our position, just over 40 years on, it is easy to forget that this simple premise was hard won, pushing back as it does against romantic myths of artistic genius and transcendental aesthetics. Systematic and comprehensive, *The Social Production of Art* surveyed notions of the author (and their

supposed death), of genius, as well as the technologies and social organisation of art making and interpretation. Critical to Wolff's analysis was the ideological function of art and its role in social reproduction. Although recognising important distinctions between art forms, Wolff made a case for talking about the arts in general—a generalism that runs counter to the subfields that have grown around distinct art forms today.

Wolff was writing in the 1970s, in the North of England, outside of the major geographic centers that were becoming central to the sociology of art: France and the US. This was a time when artists were themselves engaging in institutional critique, when Cultural Studies was in the ascendancy, when Becker had published 'Art as Collective Action' but not *Art Worlds*, and when English translations of Bourdieu's work were only beginning to appear. The sociological conversation around art that Wolff contributed to featured Nicos Hadjinicolaou, John Berger, Stuart Hall (and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies generally), Raymond Williams, and Terry Eagleton, amongst others. It is explicitly historical materialist—but for her criticism that this tradition often fails to consider gendered oppression—and throughout her career Wolff has consistently brought class, superstructure, and ideology into ongoing conversations about aesthetics. However, *The Social Production of Art* remains eclipsed in many curricula. The theoretical terrain of the field is routinely mapped between Pierre Bourdieu, Howard Becker and more recently Bruno Latour, whose intellectual traditions, and geographic locations, continue to orient the subfield.