

Book Review: Anthropology of the Arts edited by Gretchen Bakke and Marina Peterson

blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2017/03/15/book-review-anthropology-of-the-arts-edited-by-gretchen-bakke-and-marina-peterson/

2017-3-15

In *Anthropology of the Arts*, editors **Gretchen Bakke** and **Marina Peterson** offer a new overview of significant anthropological engagement with artistic practices ranging from painting to sound and film, presenting canonical writings by theorists including *Mary Douglas*, *Pierre Bourdieu* and *Marcel Maus*. **Sander Hölsgens** praises the curatorial decisions that enable the book to gesture towards a diversity of anthropological writing styles and ethnographic practices, and welcomes the collection as a valuable addition to any curriculum looking to explore the relationship between anthropology and the arts.

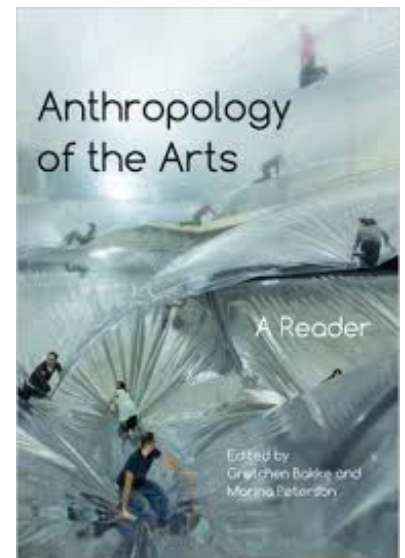
***Anthropology of the Arts*. Gretchen Bakke and Marina Peterson (eds). Bloomsbury Academic. 2017.**

Find this book: 

With the collection *Anthropology of the Arts*, editors Gretchen Bakke and Marina Peterson set out to rethink the existing history of significant anthropological engagement with art practices. The volume explores the traces of the poetics employed by anthropologists to understanding a diversity of art forms. Notably, Bakke and Peterson bring together canonical writings by Franz Boas, Mary Douglas, Pierre Bourdieu and Marcel Maus with contemporary essays by Michael Taussig and Marko Zivkovic. This conscientious mingling of texts results in a reader that could effortlessly act as the heart of a course on the refined and layered subject matter. Moreover, it implicitly indicates how anthropological writings on the arts have developed since Bronislaw Malinowski's study on canoes and sailing, for better or worse.

The quality of this volume is located on the level of curatorial and editorial decisions. Its structure ranges from art as a social phenomenon and its modes of dissemination to intricate pieces on form, aesthetics and embodiment. The included texts are never longer than a dozen pages—oftentimes they are presented as carefully composed double-page spreads. In so doing, it seems as though the essays partake in a dialogue with one another, which encourages students to work towards a cross-referential understanding of the arts. Interestingly, the seven sections are complemented by a pointed preface and multiple relevant bibliographies through which to navigate the wonderful subfield that we call the anthropology of the arts.

The selection of essays and authors is outstanding. It is encouraging to see that Deborah Kapchan's poignant piece on gestures and Lila Abu-Lughod's sharp interpretation of post-television cultures are considered to be key texts within the subfield, and these intimate studies certainly complement the more abstract and analytical writings. The volume is at its best when it suggests reading, say, Kapchan's 'A Gesture Narrowly Divides Us from Chaos' directly after Maus's 'Techniques of the Body'. Careful and considerate editorial decisions shine through the volume's shiny and smooth pages; although one can easily skim through a section or two, *Anthropology of the Arts* is most enjoyable when read from beginning to end, allowing the editors to guide, direct, steer.



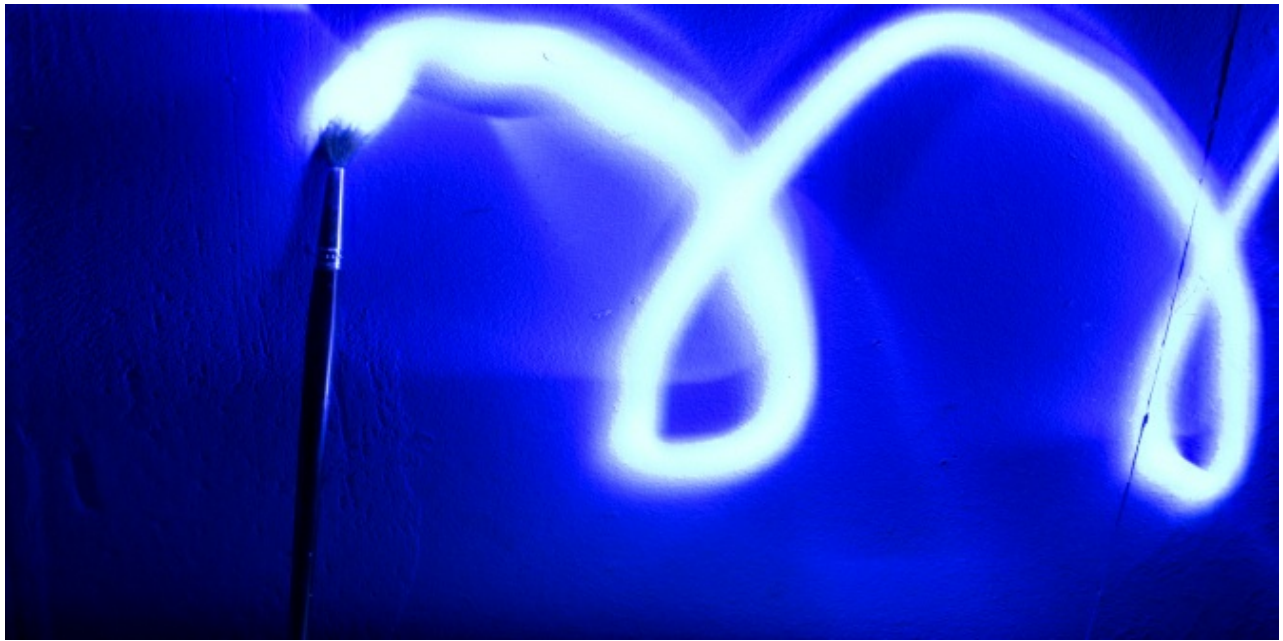


Image Credit: (Evi Van Cutsem CC BY 2.0)

It is also noteworthy that the volume concludes by eliminating the hiatus between anthropology and the arts. In this closing section, Bakke and Peterson give room to anthropologists who approximate their subject matter via artistic practices. Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead discuss the value of filmmaking as ethnographic method, while Taussig pronounces his drawings as being towards the people and situations he encounters.

Such approaches coincide with the growing interest in practice-led research, especially within European academic environments. Precisely because of this, it is remarkable that these artistic endeavours are hardly visualised within the collection. In 'I Swear I Saw This: Drawings in Fieldwork Notebooks, Namely my Own' (2011), Taussig exhibits his own drawings and sketches. One could argue that they are the crux of this publication. *Anthropology of the Arts* presents an excerpt from this book, yet images and imagery are otherwise conspicuously absent.

Admittedly, there are a handful of chapters that include photographs, maps and other visualisations, but although it might be challenging to achieve this in terms of copyright, it would have been wonderful if these artistic practices had been more integrated in the volume. For instance, Steven Feld articulates the reasoning behind his hour-long soundscape *Voices of the Rainforest*, which generates the expectation that we, as readers, will also have the opportunity to listen to his recordings. These, however, are not included in the volume; they are only referenced in the bibliography. In a similar vein, it is slightly surprising that the recent turn towards sensory ethnography is not included in *Anthropology of the Arts*. As the volume emphasises the significance of aesthetics, embodiment and practice-led research, sensory ethnographies would seem to resonate with the included essays.

This, however, also points to what curating seems to be at the heart of its being: a challenging process of leaving out equally relevant works. The 45 essays and excerpts included in *Anthropology of the Arts* have defined the subfield and are meaningful in their own right. This reader, Bakke and Peterson write, 'is directed first to courses within the discipline such as Anthropology of Art, Anthropology of Design, Anthropology of Performance, Anthropology of Media, and Anthropology of Music. Second, it is meant to serve large introductory courses on the arts in society' (5).

In its current form and shape, *Anthropology of the Arts* would be a welcome addition to the curriculum of this realm of courses. It eloquently moves from craft and dance to literature and sound studies without reducing artistic practices to a study of mediums. It chronicles a history of the relation between anthropology and the arts, whilst going beyond a straightforward chronology of publications. It gestures towards a diversity of anthropological writing styles and ethnographic practices, including experimental, pedagogical, and analytical approaches. *Anthropology of*

the Arts, then, provides a relevant and insightful selection of studies on and through artistic practices, underscoring the significance of anthropology in its capacity to carefully compose research methods.

Sander Hölsgens is a filmmaker and a PhD candidate at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL. He is also a contributing editor of *Cultural Anthropology* (Cultanth.org). His most recent research is an anthropological inquiry into the sensory experience of public space in Seoul, South Korea. Find him on Twitter @sanderholsgens. [Read more reviews by Sander Hölsgens.](#)

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

- Copyright 2013 LSE Review of Books