

## Anthropology of the Arts: A Reader

By Gretchen Bakke and Marina Peterson, eds.  
 London: Bloomsbury, 2017.

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This is a large collection of mainly previously published articles and extracts that productively traces a range of approaches to anthropological understandings of art. The material included ranges from the well-known and canonical—Malinowski, Boas, Lévi-Strauss, and Geertz—to the less well known and more experimental—Shane Greene on the embodiment of punk, and Marko Živković’s brilliantly wry look at performance artist Marina Abramović (both of which are published here for the first time). The editors have put together an eclectic and very creative range of material that, rather than being arranged in any strictly historical way, is organized into thematic sections. These cover art as social process, making art, form and aesthetics, embodiment, engagement, infrastructures, and collisions with contemporary art. Each of these sections has a short but useful preface by the editors, a list of further readings, and suggestions for ethnographic exercises for students. This makes the reader especially useful as a teaching aide. It gives an overall coherence to the particular group of contributions to each section, and suggests that students think through the perspectives offered by engaging in their own practice. It is really good to see that some of the suggested exercises involve students making their own artworks—there is nothing like making a basket to help students appreciate arguments about embodiment. The media covered by the contributions themselves are also broad, ranging from painting and performance, to sound, music, and cheese-making, and the wide range of individual artworks discussed avoids the pervasive tendency to differentiate between “contemporary art” and the kinds of “non-Western art” that are still often thought to be the domain of anthropologists. It also challenges the presumption that art is solely, or primarily, a visual phenomenon.

Having said that, there are only 11 black-and-white illustrations in the reader, and the addition of more visual material would have helped enhance the book’s utility as a classroom aide. Even a list of URL links to relevant illustrations for each contribution might have been a solution to any possible reluctance from the publishers to include extensive visual material. I have been lucky enough to see Živković present his contribution as a talk, and the accompanying video footage of anthropology students sitting earnestly around a table talking to Abramović, versus the art students lying on their backs waving their legs around with her, made a

strong impression. Of course, not all the contributions originally had illustrations, but I found myself thinking about what visuals I would use when considering how to use the book in teaching—which I nonetheless certainly would do.

Each section of the book brings together a diverse range of contributions that, through their juxtaposition alone, often creates a kind of theoretical argument. So Boas’s discussion of the formal qualities of Alaskan needlecase design is in the same section as an extract from John Dewey’s *Art as Experience*—suggesting historical alignments as well as thematic continuities. Dewey is currently used in teaching at the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard. The sections can also be read in a variety of ways, and the editors’ general introduction provides explicit suggestions for alternative routes and pathways through the book as well as drawing out affinities and oppositions between individual contributions. This gives the book a kind of flexibility that is not often seen in readers of this kind. Although the sections are thematic, a sense of historical development is not missing, and the editors do a good job of balancing a critical assessment of the theoretical arguments at stake with giving the reader a sense of how those arguments fit in a wider chronological framework. Again, this makes it a very useful tool for both teachers and students.

The collection’s central focus is on the exploration of art as social process, as something inseparable from other aspects of culture and society. This gives it an overall coherence as a reader, while allowing it to maintain a diverse range of individual arguments and perspectives. Although an extract from a 1969 sci-fi book by Ursula Le Guin (daughter of Alfred and Theodora Kroeber) and an account of dance in Haiti by anthropologist turned choreographer Katherine Dunham are among the contributions included, the majority of the writing is from professional anthropologists. This gives it a strong disciplinary focus, but does preclude other highly relevant contributions to the kinds of debates involved that come from outside the discipline. Those from outside that are included function as really productive irritants for some of the anthropological texts. The ethnography of a fictional future world provided by Le Guin raises all sorts of arguments around text, imagination, and authorial status, and its juxtaposition with an extract from Michael Taussig discussing a drawing he made during fieldwork is an example of really creative editing.

The editors’ overall aim with this reader is to “bring to the fore anthropological tools for examining the making, doing, meaning-making, and context-making integral to the arts, in both practical and semiotic ways” (1). The inclusion of practice-based suggestions

for student activities alongside the range of theoretical approaches covered is a really welcome feature. The editors intend the reader to be a productive tool that demonstrates the usefulness of anthropological approaches and methods to teachers in broad “Arts in Society” undergraduate courses, as well as to those specifically teaching the Anthropology of Art. Most collections of this kind overlook the potential for student activities, and although some of the practice-based exercises are dealt with a bit briefly, they do all provide incredibly useful starting points from which teachers can begin to engage students in practical research. The insistence that students should learn about the anthropology of art by making artworks themselves and by engaging with it in an embodied way transforms the reader from an important collection of key writings on the anthropology of art to a much more directly applicable classroom tool. It is a valuable resource that extends the way the anthropology of art is taught in new directions.

## Celebration: Photographs of the Guna Chicha

By James Howe. Panama: Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute/Congreso General de la Cultura Guna, 2016.

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The practice of ritually drinking fermented beverages is a widespread phenomenon across indigenous Central and South America. Community-wide drinking parties are held to celebrate a girl who reaches puberty, to feed the spirits, to reinforce the sense of community, to solidify the political alliances, or, indeed, for a combination of religious, political, and economic motivations. Many among the conquistadores, the missionaries, and more recently the anthropologists have been impressed by the importance of fermented drinks in the social life of Amerindians. The ethnographic, historical, and travel literature shows different reactions from observers, spanning from contempt to sympathy/scholarly interest, to the revelries, high morale, or metaphysical depth characterizing such celebrations. With the variety of techniques of preparation and cultural uses, “the gustatory, symbolic and ritual importance of fermented bev-

erages throughout South America has been considered a common trait” (Erikson 2004, 5).

James Howe provides us with a detailed, yet accessible, ethnographic description of the *chicha* ceremonies held by Guna people living in the San Blas Archipelago of Panama (Guna Yala in their language) to celebrate the coming of age of young girls. This could well be the most detailed visual ethnography of a drinking ritual among an Amerindian people so far produced. The 100-page-long book contains 84 black-and-white photographs taken by the author during his fieldwork in Guna Yala in the 1970s, with a few more taken during a recent trip in 2009. All the pictures are beautifully rendered and printed. Some, as the author acknowledges in the introduction, have been improved through digital scanning technology, thus overcoming problems of aging and light exposure. The result allows the reader a deep appreciation of the different stages involved in preparing and consuming *chicha* among the Guna, the festive mood, the gender dimension, and the role of ritual specialists leading the celebration.

From page to page, the reader is accompanied through the different moments leading up to collective drinking when women and men offer each other calabashes full of *inna*, which is how the Guna refer to the fermented sugar cane and maize drink. This could have only been achieved not solely through long-term fieldwork and familiarity with local ways of life, but also, and most importantly, through a careful and thoughtful attunement to the rhythm of communal daily living that characterizes Guna sociality. The photographs in the book not only provide an important documentation of the ceremony, but also give a sense of the author’s participation in it. Most of the pictures are close-up views of the different moments of the ceremony. They bridge the distance between the reader and the events portrayed, leaving to the text the task of providing the context. This adds a new dimension to what is normally achieved through textual ethnographic description and analysis. Here, the pictures are evocative; they capture actions unraveling, people closely interacting. They convey the festive mood, the high and inebriated spirit of participants, and the laborious preparations beforehand.

As for the text, it begins with a brief introduction to the place, the people, and their history. Different ceremonies are held once a girl reaches puberty, varying in length and ritual complexity, and ideally leading up to the three-day-long *inna suid*, the “long *chicha*,” which might be held up to a few years after the first ritual. Howe starts by describing the first ritual held as soon as a girl reaches puberty, in which adult villagers contribute material for constructing the seclusion hut for the young girl and children bring water to wash her