

Book Review

Still Life: Ecologies of the Modern Imagination at the Art Museum

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Dominguez Rubio, F. (2020). *Still Life: Ecologies of the Modern Imagination at the Art Museum*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

“Still Life: Ecologies of the Modern Imagination at the Art Museum” is a carefully crafted study that bridges the gap between production, materiality, and meaning-oriented approaches in sociology of art. At first encounter, the book may feel like a continuation of Howard Becker’s (2008 (1982)) agenda that focuses on supporting actors and their role in the (re)creation of artworlds. Indeed, Dominguez Rubio is also interested in all the supporting activities of the art museum. He calls it mimeographic – as opposed to creative – labour: i.e. the labour required to keep art objects the same as they are. Mimeographic labour saves the object long enough, so it can be imagined as eternal. Such labour is performed by various museum employees, as well as by preservation, containing, transporting, digital-recording devices, and even by the artists themselves.

However, Dominguez Rubio goes beyond a set of separate stories about particular art practices, creating instead an holistic picture of both the master narrative of modern art and the political economy of the contemporary global art world, as they are connected through the dynamic ecology of art. His study provides a coherent analytical model that proves that mimeographic labour is not just one more as yet underexplored element of the contemporary artworld, but rather a crucial process that makes any social order possible, in arts and in our collective live in general.

The choice of a site for fieldwork is fully justified: The Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) is the museum that played a decisive role in constructing the narrative of modern art over the course of 20th century, and it is also the largest, the most resourced and well-equipped machine that produces ‘the eternity’ of modern art. At the same time, MoMA is obviously one of the most iconic contemporary cultural institutions that the public would want to know more about. ‘Still Life’ does what is promised: it gives its audience an opportunity to see ‘behind the scenes’ of some of the most famous artworks and artists of the twenty and twenty first centuries that became defining for the master narrative of modern art. From Dominguez Rubio’s research readers learn a lot about the museum’s routines and the huge variety of jobs that are performed in coordination with each other – by humans, materials, devices, physical forces, and the artworks themselves. The book consists of four main parts. Each part explains one of the following aspects by which modern art objects are: preserved and repaired; contained and transported; emplaced and exhibited; and digitized.

“Still Life”, however, is not limited to the field of sociology of art. It is a part of a larger trend within the social sciences towards the exploration of maintenance and repair practices as well as the labour of care more broadly. The publication of Dominguez Rubio’s journal papers several years prior to the book’s release, have already

influenced and consolidated this emergent sub-field of sociology and nature of the research taking place therein. As a result, by the time that the full version of Dominguez Rubio's study became available as a book, his criticisms of the dominant approach within the field, Actor-Network Theory, had already been accepted and partly absorbed by (post-)ANT forms of scholarship (Denis and Pontille, 2019).

In the book, Dominguez Rubio criticizes ANT for adherence to a) a strict distinction between the functional and broken conditions of objects, and b) broader sociological assumptions concerning the natural solidity and stability of material things that enable for a particular order to be maintained. He highlights, firstly, the constant process of decay that any material thing is undergoing at any given moment of time, and secondly, the ecological nexus that either accelerates or slows down the decay. The order becomes possible through the constant maintenance of *things* in such a condition that enables them to be "put into work" as *particular kind of objects*. A "particular kind of object" is defined by the master narrative in which it is located. In this case, it is the modern art narrative. The same is applied to the humans who need to be put into work as particular kind of subjects. In this case, the artists, who often do not know why and how they created something, must acquire a well-narrated intentionality and clear memory about each stage of their creative career. That is achieved through the interviews conducted by museum curator and conservators or the analysis of supplementary documents (Part 1).

Ecology is one of the recurring notions that social sciences borrow for different purposes ever since the early stages of their development. Dominguez Rubio uses the notion of ecology not in a metaphorical sense but quite literally, and thus more in accordance with recent developments in environmental sociology (van Koppen, 2017). He demonstrates that on the level of things (including human bodies as things), there are no pre-given boundaries between inside and outside, nature and culture. Light, air, humidity, temperature, and all the micro-elements, including those that are transmitted through the breath of a person who is responsible for preserving an artwork or through the materials constituting an artwork's container, are essential for the material condition of an artwork, its aesthetic qualities (especially, colours and shape), and its capacity to (re)produce the narrative of modern art (Part 2).

But it is worth noting, that, while flattening the ontology of artworks as things, the author successfully manages to link them to the meanings and values, distinctions, and hierarchies of artworks as objects. In doing so, Dominguez Rubio demonstrates how the labour of care occupies the very heart of all the key aesthetic, political, and economic processes animating contemporary art studies: globalization, colonialism, aesthetic and economic value, copyright, new art forms, digitalization, and so on. But Dominguez Rubio does not stop here. He amplifies the subject of his book to the level of existential, which he does by drawing parallels with the constant struggle against the decay of human bodies, and the current ecological condition of our planet. Articulating these wider resonances allows Dominguez Rubio to frame the book as a tale of fragility and loss, transcendence and oblivion.

Despite all the attention given to materiality and ecology, Dominguez Rubio avoids a possible de-humanization of the labour of care. Without specifically conceptualizing it, the author regularly gives us a glimpse of the emotions that museum employees experience while interacting with artworks or artists: their words and gestures express tension, curiosity, fright, concentration, frustration, and joy. He also shares his own feelings from the fieldwork. Describing, for example, what he felt when entered the conservation department of MoMA and its storage facilities for the first time. However, the researcher does not reveal many details of his eight-year study and fieldwork at the museum. This absence may help to avoid scaring away a broader audience. But the fact that the author does not let the readers see "behind the scenes" of his own work makes it more difficult to use "Still Life" as a model for further development of the methodological apparatus of the sociology of art.

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