

THINKING TOGETHER

from: < **howard s. becker** > ;

to: < **robert r. faulkner** >

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preface by Franck Leibovici

this book is a contribution to the art project (*forms of life*)—*an ecology of artistic practices*, paris, 2011-2012, by franck leibovici.

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an ecology of inquiry—or a form of life

one fine day in may 2011, i received by e-mail a word document of 250 pages, titled “thinking together.” it was howard becker’s and robert faulkner’s contribution to an inquiry begun a year earlier, titled *(forms of life)—an ecology of artistic practices*¹. this inquiry, carried on not by a sociologist but by an artist and poet, began with a simply summarized hypothesis: a work of art is more than the artifact exhibited; for it to function in the widest possible way, it’s necessary to take into account the practices which have brought it into being, the forms of collective action which have carried it that far, the kinds of maintenance it needs, the marks of asceticism it displays, the public consequences it will generate—the ensemble that we will describe with the word “ecosystem,” in order to distinguish it as much as possible from the idea of “context”: while “context” always preexists the work, the ecosystem of the work is, in contrast, produced *starting out* from it. thus two works which may be formally and physically identical (two monochromatic paintings, for example, by a russian artist from the beginning of the 20th century and an american from the ’60s) will not function in the same way because of their radically different ecosystems. that these art works were not only linked by, but are also carriers of “forms of life,” that’s what we wanted to explore.

1. franck leibovici, *(forms of life)—an ecology of artistic practices*, les laboratoires d’aubervilliers /questions théoriques, paris, 2012. artists and scholars received a letter, which invited them to join this collective inquiry (see below, p.349).

but this immediately poses several problems for us.

first, we didn't know how to *represent* the "forms of life" and their ecosystems. we didn't even know what should be understood by "artistic practices." because, even though i am an actor in this world, i quickly realized that the "practices" of my comrades in contemporary art were so hybrid, so labile, distributed, collective, that a simple ethnographically intended visit to their studio wouldn't be enough to give me access to their "practices." i would have to question them, assemble the pieces of the puzzle, try to reconstruct a much larger image. at the same time, i above all didn't want to content myself with their own commentaries on their work, because between what an artist does and what he says he does... in fact, i wasn't interested in artists, what interested me were the art works. not the link between an artist and his practice, but the one between the art work and the practices it involves. not a sociology of professions which sometimes runs the risk of crushing the works by reducing them to side effects, to the status of a simple reflection of interactions taking place in a world, but an attempt to bring the works back to the center of our attention in order to evaluate their results—without, for all that isolating them, glorious, from the rest of the world, in an idealized autonomy. following these practices, these instruments, these collectives let me avoid traditional dangers and simplistic binary oppositions: the artist versus his work, production versus reception, individual versus society, etc. starting from practices, you are immediately at a level that is simultaneously intra- and trans-individual, taking you through all the strata until you find yourself at the heart of the institution in the blink of an eye... and maybe back again. the institution was no longer this goliath crushing david, the artist, the institution was itself, like the practices, distributed, and could be found mixed into the very core of the practices and interactions.

in short, faced with these first two problems, we decided to let the artists themselves serve as our guides. after all, who knew better than them how to delimit the territory of their practices and point out their action.

so when, one fine spring day, i received the contribution of howard becker and robert faulkner, i came down to earth.

it wasn't as sociologists, taking a look, distant and "learned," from outside, on this question that we had invited them to participate in

our project, but as practitioners—practitioners of music, one plays the piano, the other the trumpet—and practitioners of research. they sent me an electronic epistolary correspondence they had carried on for several years, dealing with the question of improvisation in jazz (how do people who don't know each other nevertheless play together for hours, in a bar, without having ever rehearsed?). but beyond the thematic contribution of their study, which developed a dynamic conception of the idea of repertoire, their text posed (in the framework of my inquiry) the question of the form of life of a research: *what was the form of life of a research project?* i had never asked myself that question before. that a research, just like a work of art, produced its own ecosystem, through an ensemble of practices, of collectives, of kinds of maintenance, forms of asceticism, public consequences—that's what their contribution let me see.

in the worlds i work and live in—contemporary art and poetry—people usually think, naively, that being scientific "rhymes with" following a strict research protocol, symbolized by an algorithm applied mechanically. this correspondence showed, in the expression "scientific writing," the importance of the word "writing," which we too often ignore, considering that "doing science" can exist perfectly well without "writing science." we have today, however, a well-established history of the writing of science. this petty sin is found moreover, this time, among scientists themselves, who too often think of writing as a neutral and transparent medium which lets you put the results of your research on paper. in this view, writing serves simply to express data already gathered in proper form, independent of specific system of inscription. what this correspondence becker and faulkner sent me exemplified, on the contrary, was that the technologies of writing informed, in the course of the research, the very nature of the data.

the quality of a scientific study is often strongly linked to the quality of the data it has produced. but how are these data produced? by techniques of notation, by systems of representation. the pertinence of the descriptions produced cannot be dissociated from the resources, the instruments and techniques, of writing they were made with. by which i do not mean "stylistic" qualities ("well written," "badly written") nor the literary genre used (to describe, for instance, an idea in the form of a theatrical dialogue.) the resources of writing do not come

into play only at the moment of editing, when the writing has been done, but also in the very production of the data; you get the data you get as a result of the technology of writing you have chosen. from this point of view, there is no such thing as “raw data,” since the materials have already been “mediated,” already formatted, by the writing instruments, writers and setting chosen to produce them. in a certain sense, the resources of writing co-produce the raw material.

if we follow, now, our two correspondents, you will not only, for example, see some theoretical references that they mobilize but also *how, why, and at what moments* they mobilize them. how, for example, becker summarizes selby’s research on witches in oaxaca, in mexico, and immediately indicates the tremendous adaptability of the protocol selby improvised: “we could do that, not go to see our mexican neighbors but musicians playing in bars and ask them what tunes they know”... (“a sociology of tricks,” antoine hennion might say); how faulkner then mobilizes magazines which litter his apartment in order to find things he can use, like a mountain climber, as footholds, to go further with this idea; or how at a certain point he tells himself that, having restated their question enough times, he can now use the fourfold tables he so loves (briefly, he will make it possible to do that without upsetting becker too much!). the dates at the head of each message show very simply how an idea is born, grows, changes, lays down successive layers of meaning over time (a *genetics* and a *genealogy* of the idea, in action).

it’s just because they have a longtime member’s competence in the world of both jazz and sociology that our two friends can deploy this agility, this ease, rapidity, and offhandedness with respect to the most serious matters of their two disciplines. it’s also, on the other hand, the technology of e-mail that lets them imitate an oral conversation when they respond to the last point of the preceding message, even returning later to earlier questions left not yet dealt with—e-mail lets them play in both the oral and the written formats. but it’s a practice which, in itself, leads to the inquiry in the form of an electronic exchange of letters, a practice reduced neither to the acquisition of members’ competences, nor to technological developments. this suggests a metaphor from sports, the idea that you have to immediately grasp what the other player has seen and the tacit understandings he has mobilized in order

to act, and then use that understanding to produce a new *move* and advance a square. each response in the game has to be thought of as an *action*, knowing that many games might be being played at the same time. the atmosphere is simultaneously friendly and professional. it’s a private conversation, but our micro-reflexes are always on the alert.

the editorial format for scholarly articles is nowadays dominated by the “important journals” in a field. this format permits the commensurability necessary to compare and evaluate articles as they compete to be published. imagine how much time this would take if each article was written in a unique style and format. the editor would have to construct, case by case, new criteria, then construct ways of comparing articles produced by different criteria in order to arrive at editorial decisions. this would produce a successful case of “slow science.” but, in order to retain a general similarity of appearance, the link between the research reported and the writing resources it has used and the form of life that has supported it has to be cut. said another way, the editorial format imposed by the important journals has a cost: cutting the link between science in the making and science as the presentation of results.

if following a resource of writing is what lets us get nearer to the form of life of a research, there is no reason to think that the academic format imposed by the journals has anything at all to do with writing resources which have given the research its “look.”

this was proved to me by our two authors. i had read, in 2009, *do you know?* published by the university of chicago press, a text which organized and presented the materials of this correspondence. now i could measure concretely the difference between the official publication of a research, and the original form it had been written in, and found an abyss... almost everything, for me, had been lost... because it was the very form of the correspondence, its format, which showed, in action, what it was to “have an idea” in sociology, or how to create a research project: it is not a collection of rational micro-segments deducible one from the other. it’s instead a heterogeneous ensemble of anecdotes, ideas, plays on words, leading to another anecdote, a new idea, going back to the first idea, and so on. to take account of this production, this operation of writing-by-four-hands, mixing improvisations, rhythms linked to the format and the time dimension of electronic correspondence, the agility required to synthesize things

coming from ordinary life, to adapt and adjust past work and work done by others to the case being dealt with here: that's what must, on the evidence presented here, be considered as an operation relevant to the domain of art.

this epistolary object thus has a major virtue: to show that scientific writing is a question of poetics.

why is it so important to make this response public first in the framework of art? because it is perhaps one of the responsibilities of art, today, to make visible the forms of life necessary to what is still not thought of as art ("making the goldfish aware of the water"). it's perhaps up to art to take charge, at least in part, of the relations that can exist between the production of knowledge and the making of art. to not leave this responsibility to others—to everything that isn't art. to pose the question of writing in science is to create an indestructible link between the production of science and the questions of poetics.

the response of becker and faulkner nevertheless goes beyond the framework of the *forms of life* project.

the epistolary form was, for a long time, the dominant form of communication between "savants" (we can think here of the great correspondences of the 17th and 18th centuries). this correspondence thus finds its place in a great tradition rather than in the marginal fringe of a counterculture. but, in the present context of the production of knowledge, it stands as a radical statement about the relations between the arts and sciences (human and social). it's thus time now to let this text produce similar effects in its own ecosystem of origin, that of the social sciences, so that it can, as it has done for art, make the question of the practices and tools of writing inseparable from that of inquiry itself and above all that of the *forms of life*.

franck leibovici
(translation by howard s. becker)

How This Book Happened

Sometime before June 2003, Robert R. Faulkner (Rob) and Howard S. Becker (Howie), sometimes addressed by Faulkner as "Count," started thinking seriously about a project to study jazz improvisation and the repertoire of jazz players. Since Faulkner lived in Massachusetts, on the East Coast of the North American continent and Becker lived on the West Coast, they did almost all their work together by e-mail, except for a few meetings face-to-face.

The correspondence continued for several years, and their book, *Do You Know? The Jazz Repertoire in Action* was published by the University of Chicago Press in 2009. A French translation, *Qu'est-ce qu'on joue, maintenant?* (La Découverte: Paris, 2011) followed.

In the fall of 2010, Becker and his wife, the photographer and writer Dianne Hagaman, spent three months, as they customarily do, in Paris. One day, Becker received an e-mail from a conceptual artist and poet named Franck Leibovici, who had read Becker's earlier book *Telling About Society* and thought they had some interests in common. They did, and Dianne and Howie got to know Franck, who soon invited them both to contribute to a large project he had underway at Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, called *des formes de vie*. He explains the details of this in his preface to this book.

It's enough here to say that Becker initially thought that he couldn't contribute to the project for what seemed to him the good and sufficient reason that he wasn't an artist and so had no idea what form a contribution could take. Hagaman, who had lived through the entire Faulkner/Becker project, from first thoughts to published book, had

another, and better, idea. She remembered the hundreds of e-mails the two had exchanged and was convinced that they documented the story of the events that culminated in *Do You Know?* in a way that ordinarily never happens for any kind of sociological project. The accident of geography meant that the minutiae of communication, ordinarily condensed into a summary term like “story” or “development” had been written down in permanent form, and so were available for inspection. She and Becker read through the entire archive and came away convinced that the story of the project really was there in the electronic correspondence. (Her own contribution to Leibovici’s larger project, “32 Cutaways,” was a video piece.)

Becker wrote to Faulkner about this possibility, who was immediately enthusiastic. Becker pasted all the e-mails together and sent the result to Leibovici, who was equally enthusiastic. The piece was one of a hundred that formed the corpus of the work that became the finished project (if a project like this can ever be said to be finished). Fragments appeared on two pages of the book documenting the project, (*forms of life*)—*an ecology of artistic practices* (Les Laboratoires d’Aubervilliers / Questions Théoriques: Paris 2012). And Becker and Leibovici “performed” a part of the correspondence that had been translated into French, Leibovici reading the part of “Becker” and Becker reading the part of “Faulkner.”

Leibovici and Grégory Castera, co-director of the Laboratoires d’Aubervilliers, decided that the appropriate way to display the correspondence would be in a book, but no obvious publication outlet came to light. Until Larry Gross, Director of the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Southern California proposed that the Annenberg Press, one of the school’s activities, publish it as an electronic book. Everyone involved was enthusiastic.

Even after they discovered that meant more work to do. The e-mails were not in what you could call tip-top condition. Many were missing dates and other identifying information, and the whole corpus needed to be gone over to make sure that it would be reasonably clear to readers other than the people who wrote them. Hagaman undertook this job and scoured the couple’s computers to find the most accurate set of originals from which to constitute an accurate account of the events that inspired and produced the major ideas of the book. Her

meticulous work made sure that the materials were in the best shape they could attain.

Becker and Faulkner read the complete version and made some minor editorial changes, occasionally changing names and taking other measures to protect the anonymity of people who had not known that they were participating in a research project (in fact, of course, for part of the time neither Becker nor Faulkner were completely clear that they were doing a research project). Leibovici proposed that the document include a sort of “soundscape,” made up of the tunes the two correspondents constantly referred to as they went about collecting the interviews, observations, and reminiscences that made up the bulk of the material they worked with. Electronic publication makes it possible to insert electronic references to such material and so, when a tune is mentioned for the first time in the correspondence, the title is clickable and the click takes you to a performance of that tune found on YouTube (which means that you may encounter a short ad before the music begins). Otherwise, the e-mails are presented as they were written, including all sorts of informalities, jokes, personal references, etc. which we have not tried to annotate or explain. The semi-private language, we think, becomes understandable in a very short time.

Along the way, Larry Gross and Arlene Luck, the managing editor of the Annenberg Press, kept the project manageable, letting us know when some idea would not be economically or technically practical.

All this proving that the old maxim is right: it takes a heap of people to make a book.