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## Howard S. Becker Interviewed by Harvey Molotch

**Harvey Molotch (HM):** I'd like to know, why are you not "Howard"?

**Howard S. Becker (HSB):** Only my mother ever called me Howard.

**HM:** And how long have you been "Howie"?

**HSB:** Forever.

**HM:** How do you portion it off, Howie versus Howard?

**HSB:** Well, you know, when I got into the business, when I started at Northwestern, I knew everybody there. And my first day, I had a class, and I thought, "Should I wear a tie?" And I thought, well you know, I don't wear a tie ever. But I'm a professor, so now I should. So I put on a tie. And on the way home, I thought, "Hey, I'm a scientist. What will happen if I don't wear a tie?" So I didn't wear a tie the next day. Nothing happened. And I never wore a tie again. But, you know, when you write your dissertation, they don't want nicknames. And so when I wrote the first article, which was at Everett Hughes's insistence—did I ever tell you about that?

**HM:** No.

**HSB:** I was working in Everett's office, and he said, "About time you wrote an article," the way he did. So I said, "What should I write about?" He said, "Take something out of your master's thesis." I said, "What?" He said, "Just take some idea, and whatever sticks to it leave in, and whatever doesn't leave out." I said, okay, sounds good. I did that.



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And then he said, “Now send it out to get it reviewed.” So I sent it to six different journals, all of which turned it down. So Everett said, “Goddamnit, send it to the *AJS* [*American Journal of Sociology*],” which he was the editor of. And it was accepted. This was my introduction to the politics of publishing.

**HM:** What I’m going for is the informality. It could have gone the other way around, someone could have experimented and worn a tie again and again and the world also wouldn’t fall apart. And so you had a bias, in a way, toward a certain kind of substantive solution.

**HSB:** I got my PhD at twenty-three, in 1951. And I probably looked like a kid. And I dressed like a musician. And I think it just didn’t, you know, they weren’t sure they wanted to hire someone like that as a college professor.

And so I wandered into a research career (without a tie). For the fourteen years after I got my PhD I was essentially a research bum. I don’t think it’s a career you could have now. There was a lot of research money available. I had a post-doc at the University of Illinois. I got hired for a year at the Institute for Juvenile Research in Chicago, which is when I did the marijuana interviews. Then I went to Kansas City to work with Hughes on two big projects. So there was never any occasion for people to treat me like Professor Becker. I just worked with other people in this research organization, which was very informal.

But I went to Stanford for three years, because I had dearly wanted to live in San Francisco. I took this research job at Stanford in the Institute for the Study of Human Problems, which was run by Nevitt Sanford, who had gotten a million dollars from the NIH [National Institutes of Health], at a time when that was really a lot of money, to start an institute for the study of alcohol problems.

I knew Nevitt, and we had met at a bunch of conferences. He called me and said, “How would you like to be the sociologist in our institute?” So I said, “Sure.” Again, I was just Howie. I wasn’t a professor. I was kind of half a professor for one year, then I quit the sociology department.

**HM:** But see, again, it could have gone either way. Some other people who look young might then compensate and of course wear a tie in order to differentiate themselves from the kid that is the research assistant. So it seems to me that is a choice, a mood, to persist in Howie.

**HSB:** Well, why not? I mean, I wasn’t enamored of becoming a college teacher. That wasn’t it.

**HM:** I don't want to push it too hard . . .

**HSB:** What you would like me to say is, "Why did I do that?" I don't know why. I just did it.

**HM:** So, okay. I'll allege something then. There is something about you that embraces the informal and the mundane. And does not sit well with pretentiousness.

**HSB:** I guess so. If you say so. [*Laughs.*]

**HM:** That's what it looks like . . .

**HSB:** If that's the allegation, I won't deny it . . . counselor.

**HM:** And the reason why I make something of it is because it's just possible that we see it in other manifestations, like in your work. So one knows the remarkable range of things that you've been involved in. And they declare you to be a leader in a whole range of fields—symbolic interaction, deviance studies, music, photography . . .

**HSB:** I plead "not guilty" to all of this.

**HM:** So to me a lot of this comes to a head, almost as a capstone, in your book *Telling about Society*. Do you view *Telling about Society* as in a way . . . I don't want to use words like *masterwork* or words like *capstone* . . .

**HSB:** Yeah, but I think all my books of the past ten or fifteen years are like that. *Art Worlds* was that kind of bringing together of a lot of stuff. And *Tricks of the Trade* certainly is.

**HM:** So in *Telling about Society*, if we could just stay with that, one of the things you're doing is declaring a kind of epistemological map of the different ways people can know about and then represent society. Have I got that, more or less?

**HSB:** Yes. Why not?

**HM:** So . . .

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**HSB:** Well, Harvey, we'll see where you go with it. Because I don't know what you might want to make of that.

**HM:** One of the things you're doing is that you are deprivileging sociology as the only way to tell about society.

**HSB:** Well, there's a definitional problem.

**HM:** Okay.

**HSB:** I'm deprivileging academic sociology as it's currently constituted. There's something else that's vaguer and larger and not contained in academic boundaries that I think of in some more general sense as being sociology.

**HM:** So give me an example of what you mean by this other realm of . . .

**HSB:** Sure. Robert Frank published a book of photographs in 1956 called *The Americans*. It doesn't really work to leaf through it from the front or the back, run through it in fifteen minutes. You have to really look at each picture, kind of catalog for yourself what's in there, where he made that picture from, where he was standing, what he might have had in mind, what kind of people these are, what kind of setting they're doing whatever they're doing in, et cetera. To me, that's sociology. He's telling a lot of people—because this is a very well-known book, an awful lot of people have seen those photographs and thought about them—he's telling a lot of people a lot of ideas about how to think about the United States in the fifties. To me, that's sociology.

Now, of course, Robert Frank would probably die at the thought of being called a sociologist. He might disavow that, but that's his problem. I'm distinguishing between a department of sociology at a university, you know, organized the way it is and broken up into subdisciplines and about to meet in Las Vegas for a week of reading papers at one another. To me, that's academic sociology, but it's not necessarily interesting stuff about society.

**HM:** You've raised the example of Robert Frank. How broadly and narrowly would you go in other directions? So the conventional profession of economics, music, really the whole history of art . . . how much of an embrace are you doing? They're—some version of telling about society?

**HSB:** Well, you see, it's not the history of art, but how it's done. How it's looked at. There are some historians of art who for me were absolutely sociologists. George Kubler wrote a terrific book called *The Shape of Time*. Kubler was a specialist in Spanish colonial architecture in Mexico and South America. But what his book is about is artistic careers, the careers of forms in a subdiscipline of the arts, in this case architecture. He's interested in what kind of a career you can make if you come into the particular art form when that form has just been invented, or when it's in full bloom, or when it's on the decline, when it's sort of getting played out and is not as interesting as it used to be.

And he says what kind of music someone would write, let's say, if they're at the front end of that cycle, is very different than if they're at the tail end of it, when it's all over, when the resources of that particular format have kind of been exhausted as far as the people involved can see. Well, that's sociology to me.

On the other hand, a lot of history of art isn't about anything like that. So I wouldn't think of that as sociology. It's a way of looking at things rather than an area.

**HM:** Would that carry over to artists themselves in their work?

**HSB:** How do you mean?

**HM:** Is *Guernica* sociological?

**HSB:** Well, that's another story. A lot of people like to do that. They like to read society out of a work of art. You know, the classy examples are from literature because it's easier—*The Red and the Black* is about the rise of the bourgeoisie in France in that period, blah, blah, blah, and so we can read Stendhal as if he were writing a sociology book and just decided to make a story out of it.

That's one way of thinking about it. There's a much more interesting way, which is to look at the work à la Kubler, for example, but lots of other people too, as having been made at a particular time in a particular kind of professional and social milieu in which the artist was thinking about this because that was relevant to what he was doing, he was thinking about that, et cetera, et cetera. Not necessarily that you could clearly read all that out of the final product, because the artist, among other things, may not have had complete control over what the final product was. That's another story.

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**HM:** So one way we can think of *Telling about Society* is that you're laying out the range of, let's call it the "sociological," besides professional sociology.

**HSB:** . . . Well, if you use the word *sociology* in the imperialistic way I do, then it is. Anybody who does good stuff in this area is a sociologist.

**HM:** You've written about a "hierarchy of credibility" and now we're talking about the disciplines. I'm wondering if there's a hierarchy for you. So if we think of these ways of telling as including, for example, professional sociology as in, let's say, the *American Sociological Review*, and I'll also use the *American Economic Review*—those are also ways of telling about society?

**HSB:** Right, for better or worse.

**HM:** What's better and what's worse?

**HSB:** What's better is what we can ascertain to be the fact, and what's worse is what's obviously bullshit. And one of the things I have against economics is that their facts aren't very factual. And I have good authority for this.

**HM:** . . . in that?

**HSB:** One of my favorites is a book by Oskar Morgenstern, who is, you know, [of] Von Neumann and Morgenstern, game theory. Morgenstern also worked in foreign trade; that was his specialty area. And he got very fed up with economists using lousy data. He said that they use facts that are blatantly suspect, and then they want to test hypotheses where a tenth of a percent difference in something is meaningful. He said 10 percent was, in most cases, the minimum you would want to see before you believe any of it.

He wrote a book called *On the Accuracy of Economic Observations*, which really should be required reading for every social scientist. Because what he did was to collect all the sources of bad data, all the things that made bad data. Big chunks of it are applicable to sociology as well, everything to do with surveys.

You know, I am really unjustly accused of being anti-quantitative. I'm not. But I insist that we use good numbers. And that when we use reasoning, like reasoning about probability, that we have data that fits the assumptions of the techniques we're using. And that always involves a random choice of cases, which we practically never have in sociology. The only way that anybody can get away with quota

samples, for example, is by essentially an agreement, a collusion, to treat them as though they were random samples. And they're not, and they're full of error. What Morgenstern did is collect case after case after case of stuff like that.

**HM:** Bad numbers. And, the . . .

**HSB:** I'm against bad data. Which can include fake photographs; it can include badly done fieldwork . . .

**HM:** What does bad data look like in, say, anthropological and sociological fieldwork? What are the practices that cause you not to believe in it?

**HSB:** There are a lot of really simple things. How much time did the person spend there? In other words, if Mitch Duneier tells me that on Sixth Avenue in Greenwich Village there are these booksellers sitting there and they do this and they do that and this is the way they do their business, was he there for a week? Was he there for a month? Was he there for three years? Was he there only on days when it was sunny? There're all kinds of things like that.

**HM:** But you would agree that some people can spend a lot of time and can be obtuse . . .

**HSB:** Oh, absolutely.

**HM:** . . . and some people can spend relatively little time and have accurate observations?

**HSB:** Yeah. I mean, in principle.

**HM:** Take that to the marijuana study . . .

**HSB:** The marijuana study. I mean, it's really not a secret that I was intimately acquainted with marijuana at the time.

And so I thought I knew the answer. This happens to me a lot, I go into a study, I'm perfectly sure I know what the answer is, and then I find out I'm wrong.

There are some people, and I interviewed two or three like this—and it caused me to make a major shift in the hypothesis—who said, “I don't know, I never got high. I still don't get high. I mean, I smoke it, but I don't feel anything.” “Why

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do you keep smoking it?" I asked. "Well, I don't want to look like a jerk with my friends. They all do it, so I do it too."

So I said, okay, what I have to explain is not why people smoke marijuana but how it happens, how it comes about that they smoke it for pleasure. That was the major shift in the theory.

**HM:** So this brings up the topic of what I always like to call the "Howie How": the shift from trying to answer the "why" question to answering the "how" question. Tell me how the "how" came to be part of your being.

**HSB:** Early on, research about drugs was all about Why People Did It, looking for the variable that would distinguish people who engaged in this practice from people who didn't—which was then treated as the cause. The variable most often held accountable was some kind of psychiatric or psychological defect.

My own experience was that people of quite a variety of personality types who I knew in the music business smoked dope and enjoyed it, even though they were not, at least in any way that you could see on the surface, particularly crazy. So I thought that was probably malarkey. And the answer seemed to me that it lay in a series of steps. And the steps are really important.

**HM:** In "Becoming a Marijuana User," it's very clear how the "how" works. People do it together, and it is one step at a time. In *Art Worlds* I think I have a feeling of the "how." But, how general do you want to make that? What's the place of looking for "why" versus the looking for "how"?

**HSB:** Well, it's very complicated because "why" is not a simple question. So you have to say to yourself, "What constitutes a reasonable answer to 'why'?" Is it something that means that invariably a person who is of this type or has this experience or has this gene or whatever will have this outcome? Is that what "why" means? Does "why" mean because they had a propensity to do this? Does "why" mean because they're just evil? I mean, what is a reasonable answer to the "why" question?

And I'm not satisfied with any answer I've heard so far. Some people think it's metaphysically necessary to say why something happened. And partly it's because they don't want to have random stuff going on in the world. Everything should have a nail-downable answer that this is why it happened, why it had to happen this way.



I don't think anything has to happen one way or another. I think things end up happening because there's so much play in what's going on. . . . One of the examples I really love to give is drunken driving. What variables are associated with accidents that result from drunken driving? Well, the police data say that accidents are associated with bad weather, a faulty automobile, being drunk, late at night, bad lighting, et cetera. And so you get somebody in that combination, they're going to have an accident. Okay, terrific. But what about the person they hit, who's not drunk? What accounts for that? What rule, what law, explains why poor Chaim Yankel, who was driving minding his own business, has to have this drunk plow into him? You going to count that driver, who wasn't drunk, as an accident to be explained too? Or are you just going to count the one that the cops said was responsible?

**HM:** What I just took from that is that if you approach it with the problem of "how," you will then more likely run into the explanation of the answer to why, which is that there is no answer to why.

**HSB:** The guy walking across the street needn't have been there, the guy smoking the marijuana needn't have been around when they passed the joint around, needn't have had friends who—none of that is preordained or given by any background variable, any other "why" that you can imagine.

**HM:** Random happenstance is not a satisfying finding and is avoided.

**HSB:** But, for instance, I don't think if you read [Erving] Goffman, you're going to find any "why" things of the conventional kind. What he tells you is, "This is how a total institution works. This is what they do, this is what the consequence of doing that turns out to be for the people involved," et cetera. It's an extreme case where the results are not uniform but are pretty much slotted into one way because one group involved has so much power.

**HM:** Couldn't Goffman be read as saying this is why a person says "oops" when there is no reason to say "oops"?

**HSB:** Well, you can read . . .

**HM:** Well, I'll just say not how one could read . . . I read . . . I think I read Goffman as explaining why someone says "oops." Goffman is explaining how some-

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one passes as normal in a situation when a random thing has happened, that is, you clumsily knocked over the glass and so you say “oops.” And so, in a way, it’s both answering the why question and the how question.

**HSB:** That is not, I don’t think that’s the same order of why as why this kid failed to graduate high school is because he’s poor and black. It’s not the same kind of why, so you’d have to get into that. And that’s the standard understanding of “why” as accounting for the variance.

Don Cressey, in his book about embezzlement, does not say, “This is why these people embezzled.” Instead, he describes a process. People get themselves into a situation where they need money: they have a mistress they can’t afford, they borrowed money from the bank without telling the bank and invested it in a horse-race bet, and the horse didn’t come in, et cetera. So they steal money from the place [where] they work.

They have this problem, and it’s a problem they have to keep secret. They need money, and they don’t have any place to get it without revealing the thing they have to keep secret. Then they have to have an excuse for doing this thing that they, along with everyone else, thinks is a bad thing to do. And they find the excuse ready-made, lying around, which is, banks—if it’s a bank the embezzler is taking the money from—are corrupt, evil institutions.

And they have the technique, because their job consisted of doing the same thing, only toward a different end. So a teller who knows how to make bank records knows how to make a bank record that will suit her and let her squirrel away a couple of dollars every day, et cetera. That’s how it happens. And the question of why did they do it now is probably answerable if you knew all of the circumstances in a “how” way. . . . And I think, also, that coincidence plays a far greater role in what goes on than anybody is willing to give credit to.

**HM:** So if I could maybe take a stab at a summary: “why” is an unpromising avenue in part because of the very ambiguity of what it represents, the methodological difficulty of finding a route to go at it, and the difficulty of dealing with indeterminacy . . .

**HSB:** Which I think is in the world. It’s like . . .

**HM:** It’s part of, if I can just add in, it’s part of your realism.

**HSB:** I personally can't imagine a world that is deterministic. I can't. It seems obvious to me. I'm a radical skeptic. I mean, I really don't believe it until you show me.

**HM:** So the people who are radically assertive—one of the things that does, it seems to me, it animates them to do sociology. And animates them to get up in the morning. And right the wrongs of injustice.

**HSB:** Oh, yeah. Absolutely.

**HM:** And passion to make a difference.

**HSB:** And I wish them luck. I really do. I wish they could. [*Laughter.*]

**HM:** But you're not part of that . . .

**HSB:** Well, I have never seen it. I mean, there's a lot of conventional giving of credence to ideas that are totally unproved. For example, how many people will tell you that Erving Goffman was in part responsible for deinstitutionalization. Goffman gets a lot of credit for that. I'm not sure, I don't think Erving would have been glad to hear that.

I think that kind of outcome is explained by a number of converging things. One is, and the most important, is what Herb Blumer always spoke about as cultural drift. Over a long period of time, people's ideas change, not in some mysterious way but by talking. There's a lot of stuff in the air, they read, they talk to their friends.

**HM:** Couldn't Goffman have been part of that drift?

**HSB:** Oh, indeed. Sure. Goffman was part of it. Tom Szasz was part of it. Ronnie Laing was part of it. A lot of people were part of it. Movies like *The Snake Pit* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* were part of it. People had been going on about that for years and years and years. If you want to think, how did it happen that Ronald Reagan, when he was governor of California, opened the hospital doors and emptied them out—anybody who wants to, although I would love to see any evidence of this, can think that—"Oh, he read Goffman and Szasz, that's why he did it." Or, more realistically, some of his advisers read Goffman and Szasz. Or

they could think, probably more realistically still, but who knows—I haven't seen the archives—what a way for the state to save money. And I think that would be more likely. . . . But, you know, this is all talk, because the proof of that would be when somebody goes into the archives and finds the documents.

**HM:** Is that too strict? Couldn't it be an ingredient in the potion, that you have the intellectuals who are mixing their potion and the saving-money Republicans are now coterminous with them?

**HSB:** Or that Reagan thought that those people won't be able to complain. I don't know what their considerations were. I do know that every time a historian looks into something like this, it never turns out.

I remember hearing a historian who went to some of the hospitals [Michel] Foucault wrote about, and he said if you look at the hospital records—how many people there were, how these hospitals were organized—it's nothing like what Foucault said. They weren't like that, that's all. There's plenty of paper to show you, plenty of records that are maybe not true either; we don't know how they were made. But they at least give you pause if you know more of the story.

**HM:** So Foucault had bad data.

**HSB:** Yeah. That's not an unusual story.

**HM:** So what gets *you* up in the morning? So here we have, if I can be almost sentimental, more than a half century of getting up in the morning and doing project after project. But why did you bother?

**HSB:** Well, in the beginning I did it because I had to do something. I was playing the piano and . . . working for a bunch of mafiosi in these bars. I figured that this is not a healthy business for a nice Jewish kid to be in. One of these days they're going to get mad. And I'd seen them get mad at people. It's not good.

And my father, although I wasn't paying much attention to him, but the idea that his son would become a tavern piano player was, like, "Jesus!" So I thought I'd give this a try. And, besides, I was having fun in school. Most of my fellow students worried and kvetched. And the truth is, I didn't care. Because that was not where it was at for me.

**HM:** By "in school," do you mean graduate school by now?

**HSB:** Yeah, graduate school. I was beginning to see that I was probably not going to be a great jazz pianist. And so, you know, I'll keep on going to school. It's kind of interesting.

**HM:** So getting into sociology wasn't particularly passionate for you. At the time, it was respectable.

**HSB:** It wasn't even that. It was something to do. Sociology was kind of a last-minute choice. I decided I should go to graduate school. So what field should I be in? And I thought, English. Because I like to read novels, and, what the hell, I'll read a lot of novels and that will be school. What could be bad about that?

And then, I think it was the summer—maybe it was the spring—before I entered the sociology department, I read *Black Metropolis*. It was cool in the way that anthropology must have seemed cool to a lot of people then. Which was not to remedy injustice, but because it was exotic. It's kind of fun. You go to a strange place and you watch people and you write everything down. But it had certain drawbacks. You had to go to weird places and eat God knows what kind of food . . .

**HM:** Anthropology, we're talking about?

**HSB:** Anthropology . . . and sleep in who knows what. But *Black Metropolis* was urban anthropology. You went home at night, you ate food that you were accustomed to and liked, you slept in your own bed. Sounded like a better proposition. So I went to the sociology department. It was just that simple. I barely knew what it was.

And then I took a class in fieldwork with Hughes. He had you pair up. So each team was assigned a census tract. And you went to your census tract, collected a genealogy from somebody, went to a public meeting, interviewed three people about whatever he was interested in that quarter, et cetera. And you'd be writing it all down. It was good, you know, fun.

**HM:** It does seem to me that the *craft*, again to use one of your big words, is motivating.

**HSB:** Yeah. I think it's something I can do, something I like to do, something I've got some skills in doing.

**HM:** You entered graduate school not out of the labor movement, for example . . .

**HSB:** And I didn't belong to any left-wing group in New York City, like so many people did . . .

**HM:** But then there is the factor of the meeting up with, of all people, Hughes.

**HSB:** Well, first of all, you have to understand I didn't *choose* Hughes. I began writing field notes about musicians because I took a course called Advanced Fieldwork with Ernest Burgess. So I dutifully wrote field notes, about where I was working, a tavern on Sixty-Third Street. At the end of the quarter I gave them to Burgess. And when he gave them back he said, "This is occupations and professions. That's Professor Hughes."

So I went to see Hughes. He listened to me. He said, "Well, give me your notes and come back in a week." He was very brusque.

Okay. I went away and came back in a week. "Mr. Becker, come right in. Sit down." He gave me back my notes. He had written as many pages of commentary as I had written field notes. What was going on was, he told me at some point later, all the students he had who wanted to study occupations and professions wanted to study professions. They wanted to study doctors, they wanted to study lawyers. And then I came in and I wanted to study these lowlife good-for-nothings who are playing in bars.

Wonderful! Because he had a methodological principle in mind, which is that in high-status occupations, people are not going to talk to you openly about what they're up to, about the bases for the decisions they make and so on, because it wouldn't look good. But in the lowly occupations, nobody puts on any front. Why should they? So, he said, he read my notes, and [they're] full of people putting squares down and making fun of the people in the bar and all that. And he said it was like gold to him. His methodological principle was that anything you see in a lowly occupation is probably going on in a higher-status occupation, only they won't tell you.

He chose me for a completely venal reason: I would further his research.

**HM:** It was a meeting of two people meant for each other in some sense, that you were bringing the right thing. Not just because you did the lowly guys, but your approach . . .

**HSB:** Yeah, yeah. Right. But it needn't have happened.

**HM:** So this idea of the low, the routine, the ordinary, the mundane—I'll use all those, lump them all together . . .

**HSB:** The uninteresting.

**HM:** The uninteresting. Is that something that, for example, you did with *Art Worlds*? There we're dealing with sort of a higher-status occupation, and you are interested in the person who carries the painting from one part of the building to another.

**HSB:** Uh-huh.

**HM:** So do you think that that's a continuous theme?

**HSB:** Yes. It was kind of a fixed methodological principle for me that you look at all the cases. The experience I had with the medical school research was really interesting. We studied the University of Kansas medical school. Why Kansas?

We did it because Everett—it's too long of a story—but he was coming to Kansas City to consult on a project that Lloyd Warner had going on down there. He met the dean of the medical school. Everett talked the dean of the medical school into letting us do a study there and rounded up the money to do it. That's how he got there. Pure accident.

People used to ask me all the time, "Why did you study Kansas?" I said, "Why not?" "Why didn't you study a good medical school?" I thought that was such bullshit. And that's a persistent thing in sociology. You know, you go to study the arts, are you going to study people who cut paper silhouettes on the boardwalk? No, no. I was very immunized against the highbrow sampling fallacy, the idea that you take the best. The best according to what?

There's a lot of sophistry about that. People trying to make the case that, after all, the people who are the stars, you know, they didn't get there by accident. They're pretty good, aren't they? Yeah. So is this guy. You know, that's a very persistent theme. Because it's the way you select the cases for study in a conventional sociology of arts study. You take the best. Because they—you know, it's a version of Talcot Parsons—they exemplify the values, et cetera, of this collectivity.

**HM:** The other thing that you've done with *Art Worlds* is to widen the focus through the idea that the art world itself consists of more than the artists.

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**HSB:** All the workers are important. In a very simple sense. That's not an ideological point. It's a practical point. They're all important because if you take this one away, things will not be the same.

**HM:** To what degree—and let's just stay with your art world—is it flat? In other words, are you just as well-off starting with the janitor as you are with the curator?

**HSB:** In principle, if you took a museum and you really followed it out, all of the links and connections, you'd end up with the same picture no matter where you started. Of course, you won't do that because it's too big. That's a practical matter.

You'll end up with *this* set of activities, because that's as far as you got because three years are up and you have to go back to work.

**HM:** But I'm taking it quite seriously that the payoff may be just as great if you start with the janitor.

**HSB:** Well, yes. I think so. It might not be the same payoff. Because art—especially the kind of art that's in museums—“everybody knows” that the really important stuff is what's on the walls, or in the galleries, or in the archives, and in storage. It's not what they throw out every day, what the janitors pick up. Everybody takes that as a given. And it would be crazy not to.

**HM:** I was talking to you about the inclusion of the elements that are often not included and the embrace of the ordinary. And I . . . “Zen”—just to get to a word. I know you've had an interest in Zen over the years and [had] some participation. Is there a connection of Zen with your work?

**HSB:** No. Because I'm not, I don't have a serious interest in Zen. I have a dabbler's interest. I could never possibly sit for an hour in the lotus position, for example. I could never be a serious Zen practitioner. It's the idea of it. I like the idea.

**HM:** So you may be pre-Zen-ed up. I mean, you may be deeply Zen-ed. You may be . . .

**HSB:** Well, one of the people you and I knew at Tassajara [a Zen monastery in the California hills—HM]—what was her name, Katherine? She was one of the priests. . . . I think she actually read *Art Worlds*; I think I sent it to her. And she said, “That's really a Zen book.” And I was really pleased. But that's about it.



**HM:** What do you mean, “that’s about it”?

**HSB:** That’s it.

**HM:** But how many of us get *that* from the priest of the thing?

**HSB:** How many of us know her? You knew her. But you probably didn’t send her a book!

**HM:** Okay. My point has been made better than I could make it. Or you.

So this is not a Zen point at all that I want to raise now. It’s something you’ve heard about a whole lot. What’s the relationship between people doing things together, on the one hand—we have a picture of that through much of your work, including the book that has that as a title—and something that sociologists call “structure.”

**HSB:** [*Laughter*] . . .

**HM:** (Howie rolled his eyes.) One way of starting to broach this subject is through your idea of convention. And the fact that people don’t just wake up in the morning and make the world anew just any willy-nilly way. And that, instead, people proceed through what some might call “a recipe.”

**HSB:** Well, there are lots of things that happen recurrently. You know, like having breakfast. Where do you eat? Who do you eat your breakfast with? What do you eat? What kind of utensils do you use? All that. And that’s right. We don’t invent it all every day.

I’ve written about it. It’s the idea of inertia. It’s easier to do it this way. Why? . . . It’s easier. How can I, and my buddies, get through the next three hours playing for these people who have hired us to play for a dance? Well, we could start from scratch and make everything up. Or we can look for things that we already know how to do in common, because they’re the kind of things that those people are ready to dance to and they will recognize them and they won’t be surprised or displeased and will pay us at the end of the night. And we know how to do it, so we won’t make fools out of ourselves. Well, how do we know how to do those things? Because, over the years, ways of doing things have developed and we’ve all learned them.

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Which doesn't mean that you can't do it in other ways. It just means that there is more friction. There will be more aggravation, more possibility of trouble, et cetera. If I think it's important enough, I'll go ahead and take the trouble and run the risks. But for a lot of things, it doesn't seem worth starting from scratch.

And a lot of *Art Worlds* is about that. How big should a work of visual art be? Should it be 50 feet by 150 feet? Well, in principle, you could do that. Maybe on the side of a building you could do that. But then you'd have another problem of preserving it. Whereas if you make one that's 5 feet by 8 feet, they'll put it in a museum or you'll hang it on somebody's wall. You can get the materials easily. They sell stretchers that size. They sell canvas. All that.

**HM:** But is the system jimmied in some way? And this is my way of sneaking power into this discussion. Are there ways in which this ease is facilitated in some systematic, biased way?

**HSB:** By what?

**HM:** Well, by something like privilege, class, hierarchy.

**HSB:** Give me an example.

**HM:** If, in 1953, you declared yourself a Communist . . .

**HSB:** No. Let me give you an example. In 1650, if I'm a prince and I want to get my portrait painted, I know what to put in the contract so that they'll paint the kind of picture I want. They don't have to say yes. But I'm pretty much the only game in town. So if they don't want to do that, you know, let them go fly a kite. I mean, that's an example of the exercise of power.

Or if the duke or whoever has a court orchestra, and he tells the kapellmeister, "We're going to have a party and I want you to compose a dance suite." Then the kapellmeister composes a dance suite. Which is why there are so many suites by Bach and others made up of jigs and sarabands and gavottes and all that. Minuets.

**HM:** So how comfortable are you, then, with something like a study of privilege and power?

**HSB:** You mean, do I recognize that people can tell other people what to do? Or they don't even have to tell them, they just set it up so . . .

**HM:** That things are . . .

**HSB:** Of course. . . . Hollywood is a prize example. The specifics are important. Like, who is supposed to be wielding the power? Do they really? How is that communicated? How is it built into the system? Under what circumstances does this exercise of power work, and when doesn't it? All that. You know. In other words, I don't take it as a given that X will always invariably be able to tell Y what to do.

**HM:** But the possibility that there are tendencies based on . . .

**HSB:** Oh, more than tendencies. . . . If I'm working for Rupert Murdoch on Fox News, it's more than a tendency. I know that I'll get fired, or I think I'll get fired, if I don't do it this way. So if I don't want to get fired, I do what he wants or I don't go to work for him.

**HM:** And, in general, that people who control media outlets of a certain scale set the conditions of what other people will find difficult to do, compared to other . . .

**HSB:** Well, that's not to be taken for granted.

**HM:** *Not* to be taken for granted.

**HSB:** Well, in general, I don't like to take anything for granted. Maybe they don't care, maybe they don't notice, maybe people . . . You know, you have to find out what really happens.

**HM:** Well, in this example . . .

**HSB:** Harvey, I was in Brazil for a couple of months in 1976. That was at the height of the dictatorship. The dictatorship exercised a lot more control over everything than we could imagine here. I mean, there's no one exercising that kind of control here.

There was a lot of play around the edges. Everybody in the theater business, for instance, knew that it was very chancy whether you could get something on the stage or not, because there were known cases where a perfectly innocuous bedroom farce would be suddenly shut down because some general took his wife

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to see it and she was offended. Whereas something openly political would be playing next door without interference.

There's a lot of slippage.

**HM:** To what extent is it a matter of analytic taste that one scholar is interested in the slippage compared to the zeal to find regularities and constraints? It seems to me like type 1 / type 2 error, if I can put it that way . . .

**HSB:** Yeah. I'm sure that's true.

**HM:** . . . and that different people, as analysts, lean toward the one side of that . . .

**HSB:** Well, I'm sure that's true.

**HM:** . . . and that you have really not been very "interested"—you use that word a lot—that you have not been very interested in documenting, commenting on, showing that it couldn't be any other way because of the preconditions.

**HSB:** Well, I don't think that's true.

**HM:** You don't think what's true?

**HSB:** That there are things that couldn't be any other way because of the preconditions. Hey, if somebody shows it to me, you know, I'm a realist. If they show it to me and I can't think of a reason it's not so, then they win, and that's that.

There's more than one way to skin a cat—you should excuse the expression. And it's good that people have different tendencies and study things from their point of view. And it's good that I do it the way I do it. I don't think there's a right way. And no one's ever convinced me that there is. Including me. I mean, I don't think this is the right way. I think it's a good way. I think it's a good way as demonstrated by results.

**HM:** Something we didn't talk about is your relationship to the French . . .

**HSB:** And the Brazilians . . .

Well, I've been involved with the French really since 1985. It began with two things. In 1985 there was a group who were interested in the Chicago school. And

two of them translated *Outsiders*, . . . and *Outsiders*, for much the same reason that it was successful here, got to be an academic best seller in France. It still is. It's bizarre. I think it's got to do with generational change in sociology: what the students would be interested in reading and what we can give them to read that they will actually read.

Then there were the sociologists of art. Because when *Art Worlds* came out French people read it, even in English. And in part of *Art Worlds*, I used material from a book by Raymonde Moulin, a sociologist of art who is retired now but then had a research center at the CNRS [Centre national de la recherche scientifique] in the sociology of art.

In 1989 Raymonde asked me to spend a month in her center. I did, and that was the real thing, it was immersion for me.

**HM:** So, get me to [Bruno] Latour.

**HSB:** I met Bruno here in San Francisco. He came and gave a talk somewhere. He had just published in France what became *The Pasteurization of France*. And he gave a talk about that in English. This is right at the beginning of when science studies was beginning to happen. And I thought, "Wow, this is great." This is the same thing I'm talking about, only it's in a completely different area.

We got quite friendly. There's a thing that he said in *Science in Action*, which came out later. He says, the fate of a scientific finding, including what it means, is in the hands of the people who take it up. It's not the author, the creator of the fact. Well, that's identical to what I think about artworks.

**HM:** Are there also distinctions?

**HSB:** He's got a different language, and there are somewhat different emphases . . .

**HM:** You're on the same . . . wave . . .

**HSB:** To me, we are.

**HM:** And is there anything in [Pierre] Bourdieu that you align with? Obviously, there are differences. Is there an alignment?

**HSB:** I did a piece about this. It's on my website. It's a dialogue with Alain Pessin called "A Dialogue on the Ideas of 'World' and 'Field.'"

**HM:** About?

**HSB:** Alain started it. He arranged for me to get an honorary doctorate at Grenoble, where he taught. And we got to be very good friends. He said, “Everybody says Becker and Bourdieu are saying the same thing, only Becker ignores conflict and Bourdieu ignores cooperation. Do you think that’s true?” I said, “No, of course not. It’s completely different.” And he said, “Well, why don’t we do a dialogue about that?” So we did.

**HM:** I’ve seen people refer to the “world,” the idea of worlds and the idea of “fields” . . .

**HSB:** Well, that’s what this piece is about. I think the idea of fields, the way he talks about it—I don’t know how much of that you’ve read . . .

**HM:** Quite a bit . . .

**HSB:** It’s very metaphorical. And the metaphor is from physics. There’s kind of a box. And inside the box, forces are at work. There’s a zero-sum thing going on. If you get more, I get less. And that’s what it’s about. It’s about the play of forces that determines the disposition of limited resources. And I could never take it seriously. I mean, where is the box? Really, it’s metaphorical. Who says it’s zero-sum?

It might be like that. But just saying it is, is not enough, . . . and he was given to ex cathedra statements. That’s how it is.

I was really kind of snotty in this dialogue that Alain and I had. Because I said what I always envisioned when I saw this—and I think it’s in *The Rules of Art* where he [Bourdieu] does this most openly, that I’m aware of—he makes the analogy with physics absolutely flat out. So I had a picture of this little box with these buzzing electric things buzzing around—zip, zip, zip—I could never take it seriously.

Plus, empirically, he was kind of a cheat. Stan Lieberson pointed that out in his ASA [American Sociological Association] presidential address. He talked about the book *Distinction*. And he said, “In the text, this class does this and it gets this and this class does that and it gets that, and so on. See the tables in the back.” And he said, “Apparently nobody looks at the tables in the back, but if you look, what they show are minuscule differences.” He put them in the back for a reason. Stan didn’t say it quite that way.

His method was, if you want to arrive at quantitative conclusions, use all the data. That's a heavy thing from the boss man. Lieberson is someone I admire. I think his book *A Piece of the Pie* is really a classic. You want to study inequality? You want to study it quantitatively? There it is. There's not a lot of posturing and carrying on.

**HM:** I think we've done enough. We've left the French and come back to Lieber-son. And I'm worried we'll both get fired by the transcriber.

**Interview:**  
**Howard S. Becker**

