

**TASA 2012 Conference, The University of Queensland****Abstract Template**

**TITLE: Having your meta-theoretical cake and micro-eating it too: A few observations on sociological theorizing (based on recent developments in the study of art)**

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Abstract (*no more than 250 words with no figures or tables*):

It recently occurred to me that most sociologists I value are either 'meso' and 'meta' in orientation or 'micro' and 'grounded'. A prime example would be the work of Simmel, whom has often been mistakenly described as a 'theorist of modernity', when his theorizing is predominantly transhistorical or micrological - or both. Even sociologists valued for their 'groundedness' are often theoretically more ambitious than is recognized. As Zerubavel puts it, part of the reason we still read Goffman's work is precisely because the latter's first book was not titled: *The Presentation of the Self on the Shetland Islands!*

I elaborate my argument with examples drawn from my own field of specialization - the sociology of art. I concede that contextualist accounts, such as those offered by Howard S. Becker's *Art Worlds* and Pierre Bourdieu's *Rules of Art*, provided the field with a certain level of intellectual coherence. But they also led to excessive sociological imperialism; deterred dialogue with other disciplines; and resulted in little curiosity about phenomena that lie outside the modern 'institutional definition of art'.

I conclude my pseudo-manifesto for a meta-/micro-sociology by suggesting that the most interesting work by contemporary sociologists on art-stuff involves investigations of general 'cognitive patterns' or the concrete relationships that human actors and artworks enter into. While seemingly schizophrenic, such an art-sociology has the capacity to provide a meaningful account of what pictures, sounds, poetic turns of phrase, thoughtful design and the culinary arts, do to us in a range of social situations.