

BY DEA VANAGAN

Since exploding onto the scene in 2008 with her now-cult book *Seven Days in the Art World*, Sarah Thornton has charted a meteoric rise and won international influence. Her bold and inquisitive analysis of the art world and its wider impact has engaged and inspired a new audience to enter the debate. She tours around the globe giving lectures and interviewing some of the most prominent living artists in the world, and her clever and thorough style has helped position her as one of today's key authorities on the contemporary art world and art market. Her latest book, *33 Artists in 3 Acts*, hits the shelves this November and dares to ask (and offer answers to) the difficult question: "What is an artist?" I caught up with the hierarchy-transcending writer, currently based in London, ahead of the release of her latest publication.

Thornton is a self-professed "research nut" with a commitment to accuracy, and everything she says is considered and purposeful. There is never a dead silence, only strategic pauses before sharing her well-defined views. She manages to give off a strong sense of conviction without ever sounding aggressive or sanctimonious. Putting interviewees at ease is a great skill of hers that is apparent almost immediately upon meeting her. She is energetic, explorative and genuinely curious.

Thornton credits her success in art history to having "a photographic memory as a child" and being "very visually dominant," so it is fitting that when arranging to meet, she decided that the perfect setting for our interview would be Tate Modern.

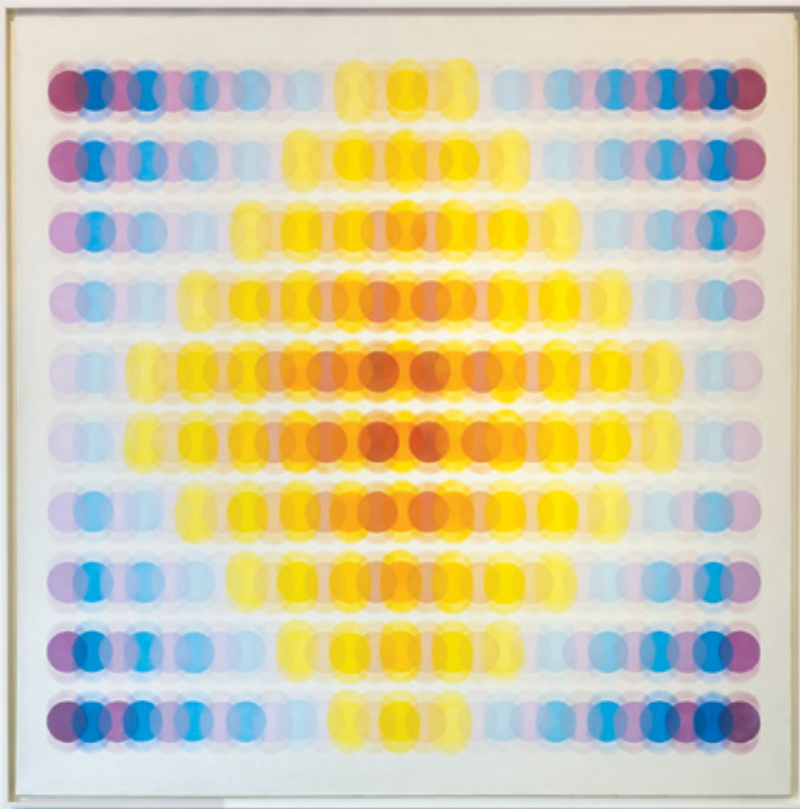
Despite living relatively near one another, which we didn't know at the time, I travelled downtown alone and arrived at the gallery a few minutes early. As I browsed the bookshop, I thought about how apt her choice of venue was: Tate Modern features as the backdrop to many of the scenes in *33 Artists in 3 Acts*. "Location is very relevant," Thornton proclaims. She always seems to have one eye on context, recognizing it as the key backbone in creating a truly vivid encounter for her readers where "every interaction is a performance." It is her attention to detail and illustration of subtleties that bring her interviewees to life and break down the general elitist barriers ever-present in most books about contemporary art. Her flair for creating clear structures offers readers manageable points of access to the subcultures of the art world and lives of contemporary artists, without ever compromising on quality or content, or sounding pretentious—an admirable skill when you consider how opaque much of today's contemporary art writing can be.

It's Friday afternoon, and the gallery is typically packed with school groups and tourists. Thornton briskly guides me through the Surrealism gallery, pausing briefly at Marcel Duchamp's *Wedge of Chastity* (1954) to tell me that the erotic flesh-pink plastic form enveloping a bronze cast is one of her favourite pieces in the collection. Although she never had the chance to interview Duchamp (he died in 1968 when she was a baby), the artist's presence in *33 Artists in 3 Acts* is a vital reference point for many of her interviewees. He also makes up one of the 33—a symbolic number since there are actually only 29 living artists featured, "but then it depends on how you count them," Thornton explains. "There are many ghosts in the book: Duchamp is one of them."

She takes me to the location of the final scene of the new book, but avoids giving too much away, conscious not to spoil the ending. She perceives the monograph as the dominant form of artist book, and proudly states that *33 Artists in 3 Acts* is an "anti-monograph," as it allows for a comparing and contrasting of artists. She continues to explain that "people have so much invested in the mystification of the art world,"

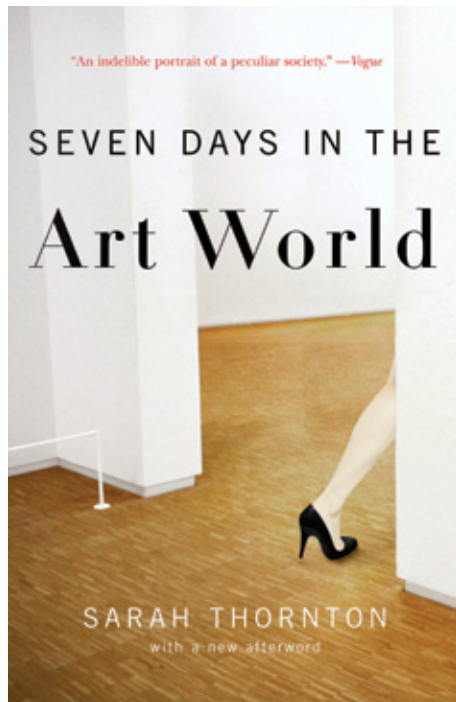


Sarah Thornton with Manuel Espinosa's *Emina* (1968) at Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, UK, June 2014
PHOTO JAMES MERRELL



PULSE TAKER

SARAH THORNTON and the state of art



and that juxtaposing contemporary artists hasn't been done much.

Three key themes structure the book: Politics, Kinship and Craft. None of these words belongs to the sexy jargon of the art world, as *collaboration* or *relational aesthetics* do. Thornton aims to "rehabilitate" words, such as Craft, from their denigration. In this respect, the book is organized to fit in with and be relevant to the narrative and cast, "because the characters have to engage." Thornton basically sees it as a group show. When pressed about demographics, she tells me that 40 per cent of the artists in the book are female and that the artists hail from five continents. Each act includes gay artists, artists of African descent and artists who don't make a living from their work. There are curators who have been the "voice" of an artist (for example, Massimiliano Gioni for Maurizio Cattelan), and there were also some artists she interviewed and holds in high regard, but did not mention because they didn't fit within the three themes. "It is like being the curator of a biennial: you do a lot more studio visits than artists you include in the show." Being Canadian didn't sway her journalistic concentration, as there are no Canadian artists included, but then she reminds me that she's the Canadian representative.

I was interested to know how this Canadian became a worldwide sensation whose work would be translated into 16 languages (most recently Russian and Latvian) and who would sell more than 100,000 copies of her books in North America. "A happy accident" to her Canadian father and British mother, Thornton was born in Kingston, Ontario, while her father was completing his degree at Queen's University. She lived in small towns just outside of Ottawa and then Toronto, but mostly identifies with being an Anglo-Montrealer, having lived in Beaconsfield, Hudson and Westmount. Moving around a lot as a child nurtured her understanding of different communities and cultures. She naturally compared and contrasted them, albeit on a regional scale, and this ultimately led to her fascination with sociology and culture.

Her parents were avid art enthusiasts and would take her to museums

and galleries whenever possible. Her mother was a potter as well as an all-around craftsperson—a great seamstress, gardener, cook and amateur photographer—who studied art history as a mature student. Thornton loves art history, but feels that most educational courses on contemporary art fail to embrace the subject from an ethnographic point of view. She hopes that, in future, departments will prepare students in developing more rounded research skills to approach the present and the work of living artists, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the discipline.

Generally a straight-A student, Thornton graduated from high school at the age of 16, where she won the award for highest academic achievement, and later attended Dawson College, where she was awarded for outstanding achievement in creative arts. Following her mother's artistic tendencies, Thornton studied art history at Concordia University. She was a research assistant for professors Catherine MacKenzie and Reesa Greenberg, generating a bibliography of feminist art history. Greenberg, co-editor of *Thinking about Exhibitions* (1996) and pioneer in the exploration of art-historical institutional critique, became Thornton's mentor, and still remains a close friend. Greenberg's influence on Thornton's work is evident in her keen eye for the aesthetic context and social structure of art's environments.

Taking a slight shift in her academic path, Thornton then took graduate courses in communication studies, again at Concordia. In 1988, she was awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship to pursue her PhD in the UK with the sociologist of music Simon Frith. Although London has some of the world's great museums and art galleries, she "slid down the cultural hierarchy" and her attention drifted toward the social ladders in the clubbing scene. Fast forward a few years, and her PhD thesis and eventual first publication, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (1995), offered an unexplored angle on the subculture of dance clubs and raves. Eminent British cultural theorists Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson hailed it as "theoretically innovative" and "conceptually adventurous." She assures me that she no longer researches after midnight.

Analyzing acid house and the institution of the discotheque may seem somewhat incongruous when bearing in mind that Thornton went on to become the chief contemporary-art correspondent for the *Economist* and author of *Seven Days in the Art World*; however, her experimental period begins to make sense once you consider *Club Cultures* as a critique of Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. His exploration into the semiotic signifiers of youth fashion and culture sparked her fascination with subcultures. But his interest in aesthetics over political context led her to take an interest in the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Howard S. Becker.

She names Becker's *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* as a pivotal book that largely influenced her PhD, directing her towards analyzing "hipness" and pop music. It remains one of her favourite publications. "He was ahead of his time in systematically exploring the cultural nuances of social differences," Thornton says; however, she is less convinced by his attempt at defining the art world. "Unfortunately, Becker's *Art Worlds* is his worst book.... He imagines an art world without hierarchies...and, as a result, doesn't make useful sense of it."

Every time Thornton sets out to write a book, taking an average of five years per publication, she treats it like writing a PhD, researching above and beyond the material she could ever use. When asked how she approached her latest book, she told me, "It's typical PhD student mentality. I'll interview 100 artists then decide what the book is about, where others may

interview 10, write their proposal, then interview 23 more.” While acknowledging the inefficiency of this process, she says that she feels more content doing this, as it ensures she warrants the authority to say what she does.

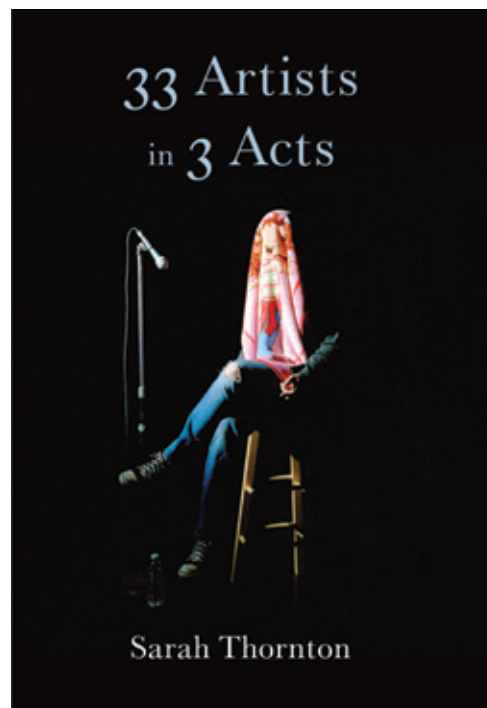
Thornton loves structure “in a slightly fetishistic way,” citing this as one of her two fortes. She explains that to obtain a strong structure, you must over-research to ensure you have enough material to put the puzzle together. She sees her other major strength as avoiding any preconceived notions before interviewing someone, but still preparing rigorous questions—the sincerity in her voice is not lost on me. I would argue her third talent (if there were only three to highlight) is her ability to gain access. Her skills in establishing strong and enduring networks and building friendships have been central to her success. “Do you think I had good access in *Seven Days*?” she remarks, half surprised. “I guess I did,” she admits, accompanied by a knowing smile.

As I probe further, she tells me that throughout researching her PhD, it was all about access, and that she tried not to pay entrance to a nightclub. “That was just my skills, I was a nobody...but being Canadian was hugely useful.” With an accent that the British general public couldn’t pinpoint as belonging to any level of class, she was able to remain autonomous. “I could have been a plumber’s daughter, or my dad could have been head of the bank.” For a moment, she ponders if the benefit of being indefinable, class-wise, is the main reason why her accent has never shifted, but then adds that “the politeness of being Canadian is also helpful when gaining access.”

With regards to access for *33 Artists in 3 Acts*, the fact that her previous book was well-read internationally engendered trust among most people. “They understood I was exploring and keen to understand the nuances of what they do, and not out to get them.” While writing the book, she was simultaneously reporting for the *Economist*. This meant utilizing a major brand name along with the other perks of the job: “The *Economist* travel budget was hugely useful, and quite often I would write up a piece for the *Economist* [about 65 articles in total, including her piece on Damien Hirst that went viral and broke the record for most hits on the magazine’s website] and research material for the book at the same time.” She acknowledges that without her affiliation to the magazine, certain artists would have resisted being interviewed, “despite my powers of persuasion or that I’m such a nice Canadian girl!” Certain artists loathe doing interviews, and don’t until they are under pressure to promote an exhibition.

Not everyone in the book was happy about being included at first, and one “cranky artist” even complained about Thornton’s “charm offensive,” she states, before letting out a theatrical laugh to emphasize her amusement at the remark. But the bottom line is that her strict criteria, defining whether someone was “in or out,” was if they made interesting work and had something intelligent to say. She mentions Gabriel Orozco, Maurizio Cattelan and Carol Dunham as key supporters of the book: Orozco is given pride of place in the introduction with his reflection that, in the book, “We are all portrayed in our underwear. At least some of us get to keep our socks on.”

In both *Seven Days in the Art World* and *33 Artists in 3 Acts*, there are nuggets of wisdom coming from both Thornton and her interviewees, providing the reader with an understanding of the general art world often through a single example. She allows readers to delve into the international art arena and experience its distinct array of subcultures. For instance, in the section on the MA crit class at the California Institute of the Arts in



Seven Days in the Art World, you begin to understand art education, and in the chapter about the Turner Prize you get a sense of the standard of recognition when Thornton says, “every night of the week there is always a curatorial jury meeting somewhere.”

Despite being an avid lecturer, regular moderator and even judge at various international art events, Thornton feels most at home researching and wielding the pen, which I find slightly surprising when you witness her spritely and confident demeanour. She blushes when mentioning the supposed weakness of her spoken grammar. “I cringe thinking about what the transcript will actually say when transcribed,” she admits, but any slight verbal slips only come across as insightful passion.

The more time Thornton spends outside of Canada, the more Canadian she says she feels. Despite spending lots of time in America (her parents had immigrated there by the time she moved to Britain), she realized quickly that she was not American—“as you can tell by my accent, I seem unable to assimilate.” London was a good fit for her because it’s a “vibrant, culturally exciting place.” However, she misses her North American family and friends and would like to spend more time in Canada and the United States.

So what’s next for the contemporary-art raconteur? “I have no idea. I’m really at a crossroads.” Whether it may be illuminating our minds through our television screens, leading an educational institution or penning another international bestseller, she is clearly motivated by a good challenge and longs for a lively debate—and will always provide a freshness of insight. ■

The Canadian Art Foundation International Speaker Series presents Sarah Thornton at the VanCity Theatre, Vancouver, on October 27; at the Knox Presbyterian Church, Ottawa, in collaboration with the Ottawa International Writers Festival and Carleton University Art Gallery, on October 29; and at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, in partnership with ROM Contemporary Culture, on October 30. Full details can be found at canadianart.ca.