

art world confidential

A renowned sociologist goes native, writes *Leslie Camhi*.

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Q am I the only art-world insider whom sociologist Sarah Thornton neglected

to consult for her wildly informative and entertaining new book, **Seven Days in the Art World** (W. W. Norton)? During five years of research, Thornton conducted 250 interviews with artists and auction-house experts, curators and collectors, critics, dealers, graduate students, educators, and others. The result: a continent-hopping tour taking readers through seven days in six cities—a November evening sale at Christie's; an epic-length Cal Arts crit; a visit to a hugely commercial artist's studio, et cetera—and illuminating the art world's power centers as never before.

"The book is very much about everything but the art," Thornton says over drinks in the Jardin du Palais Royal while in Paris to lunch with the book's French publisher. (German, Dutch, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, and Korean editions are also in the works.) Lithe and chic in a gray-and-white striped Paul Smith jacket, wide-leg white Armani pants, and gilded Prada platform sandals (toenails: platinum), she projects, at 43, an uncanny youthfulness and vitality. When she began research, she found many in the art world resistant to sociology's charms. "There's this core belief that nothing is more important

than the art itself," she continues. "I don't disagree with that. But that doesn't mean the other stuff isn't worth writing about, too."

In *Seven Days*, out next month, Thornton's razor-sharp observations of obscure protocols and quasi-ecclesiastical hierarchies are profoundly demystifying. There's the auction houses' definition of a "good Basquiat," for example: made in 1982 or 1983 and containing "a head, a crown, and the color red." There's the answer a hard-core 70-something collector offers when asked what period of art he collects: "This morning." She's alert to every nuance of value, from sculptor and Turner Prize nominee Rebecca Warren's green leather boots (which seemed "one pair in a considerable collection of trophy footwear") to the pecking order of the ads placed in *Artforum* and the moaning of a mid-level Italian collector at the Art Basel fair, lusting after an "A-plus" work on reserve for somebody else.

"I've always been obsessed with cultural hierarchy," the Canadian-born Thornton, now based in London, admits. A former academic blessed with a boxer's timing, she published her first book, the cult classic *Club Cultures* (1995), a dissertation on hipness among music-obsessed U.K. youth, just as the rave scene was exploding across her adopted homeland.

Pondering her next big move, Thornton recalls, "I

thought, Art is really what excites me most. I have an undergraduate degree in art history, and I worked in a gallery before I went on to do my Ph.D. So I went back to my first love and applied the ethnographic skills I had learned subsequently to it."

Yet even when she appears to home in on artistic creation, in the chapter devoted to her visits to Takashi Murakami's three Japanese ateliers, her real subject is the intense give-and-take between the artist and his microcosm of assistants, dealers, and museum personnel. "It's the studio, not just as the place where art gets made," Thornton explains, "but as a platform for negotiation and a stage for performance."

Seven Days arrives on the heels of unprecedented public interest in, and prices for,

contemporary art, but the book seems destined to outlast its moment. And Thornton's intellectual passion for her subject remains unslaked. She's planning a new project, responding to the art world's increasing globalization with research in a series of far-flung locations.

Meanwhile, she offers an indelible portrait of a peculiar society, simultaneously cutthroat and curious, bifurcated by economic and cultural concerns, glamorous yet filled with people who would have been unpopular in high school. It's the place where, Thornton writes, quoting *Artforum* co-publisher Charles Guarino, she's found "enough oddball, overeducated, anachronistic, anarchic people to make [her] happy." Readers may agree with them both.

—LESLIE CAMHI



THE OBSERVER
SEVEN DAYS IN
THE ART WORLD
AUTHOR SARAH
THORNTON,
IN MOSCHINO.