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Defining Art and Artists
as a Methodological Problem and a Political Issue

*Arts Council of Finland
Research and Information Unit
1995*

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ISBN 951-53-1013-X
ISSN 0788-5318

Arts Council of Finland
Helsinki 1995

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Introduction

This paper is based on experiences from a research project on the social and economic position of Finnish artists, carried out at the Research Unit of the Arts Council of Finland. The project started with literature and plastic arts in 1985, and continued with six more fields at the turn of the decade: cinema, dance, graphic design, music, photography, and theatre. The outcomes have been published in eight monographs, each concentrating on one art form (Heikkinen 1989 & 1996, Irjala 1993, Karhunen 1993, Karhunen & Smolander 1995; Karttunen 1988 & 1993, Oesch 1995), and several articles (see, e.g., Mitchell & Karttunen 1992; Heikkinen & Karhunen 1994, Heikkinen 1995).

Besides assessing the current position of artists in the Finnish society, the Arts Council project has aimed to evaluate the long-term effects of the extensive 'state artist policies' originated in the 1960s. By this concept, which is rather widely used in the Finnish context, we refer to that part of cultural policies which pertains to the direct improvement of artists' economic and social situation, i.e., their "support" through grants, awards and compensations.

The Arts Council studies have been in the first place social scientific in orientation. Theoretically Bourdieu's sociology of culture has been of crucial importance, as well as neo-Weberian theory of professions. Cultural economic studies concerning artists' labour markets have also been utilized. Mainly unobtrusive research methods have been exploited. Instead of a questionnaire, the studies have been based on data collected from documents and archives; for instance, the income data derives from the registers of the National Board of Taxation.

In this paper we concentrate on some methodological by-products of the project. Rather than to present an overview of the empirical findings, we have chosen to focus on some of the unresolved problems which were raised repeatedly during the project. The issues discussed are thus presented, not as conclusions, but as topics which would require further study and which would have potential methodological relevance for further studies in the area.

This paper examines the various, often conflicting, definitions for 'art' and 'artist' that emerge at different levels of interaction between "politics" and "the arts". We suggest that by studying these competing definitions and the process of producing and applying them, it is possible to discover and disclose power relations. They can be found both in and between art fields as well as in the interaction between art fields and political and administrative decision making. The comparison between the

outcomes of using different definitions can be used as an effective tool in analysis, especially from the political perspective.

The role of the definitions of art and artist in the "real world"

The starting point for this paper is the idea that classifications and definitions of 'art' and 'artist' are historically variable and socially – often politically – produced. Classifications are anything but neutral. Moreover, they not only reflect the social relations that have brought them about, but they also serve as instruments of domination. As Bourdieu (1993b, 262) claims, the majority of the notions artists use for defining themselves or their adversaries are weapons and stakes in the battles of the artistic field. In the arts, as in other social worlds, people are struggling for access to immaterial as well as material rewards and resources. From this perspective, social life can be seen as a series of social closures, accomplished with the help of classifications, taxonomies and (re)labellings, whose outcome is a division of people into those who have and those who have not (for 'social closure', see Murphy 1988).

For the art field, the process of definition is a political issue. Certain bodies make continuously far-reaching decisions about who is an artist and who is not, and what is art and what is not. Peer artists, civil servants and politicians use certain definitions of art and artists to determine, for example, eligibility for economic resources and social rewards. As Zolberg (1990, 172) points out, "[a]ssignment to the social role of artist or owner of rights to an art work is potentially valuable, materially and symbolically".

The agents participating in the definition process vary both historically and societally, and also between various art worlds. Even within the same art world these agents and the criteria of definition they apply differ depending on the context and the purpose. (See Becker 1982.) Among the institutions participating in the definition of an artist there might be for example art schools, artists' organizations, and institutions which decide on publishing works or supporting artists financially. The state is always one of them both indirectly, because its legislation affects the conditions under which works of art can be produced and distributed, and directly when it exercises censorship or subsidizes art.

Definition of art and artist as a methodological problem

In an empirical study of the artists' social and economic position, like the Finnish Arts Council project, the researcher has to determine the meaning of 'art' and 'artist' at the conceptual level and to locate their concrete counterparts in the real world. As starting points for definition the researcher has the purpose of the study, the research problems and the theoretical framework. He or she has to consider the availability of data too, since time and funds are always limited.

In studies of the artists' social situation, several criteria, or various combinations of them, have been used in identifying the population (see, e.g., Frey & Pommerhne 1989). The definition can be internal or external, subjective or objective. In sociological studies, the population is normally defined on the basis of external observable features: use of time, source of income, public performance or activity, membership of professional organization, training, public support, prizes, or critics. A subjective definition, in turn, is a self-evaluation, which may more or less correspond to reality, or just reflect a desire or an aim. A study of artists perhaps comes closest to self-definition when artists are sampled from taxation registers, census or telephone directories where the person himself has stated his occupation.

The adequacy of the definition, i.e., its validity, poses a serious problem. The population frame is in fact a list of artists (extensional definition) which it has to correspond to the meaning of 'artist' (intensional definition). The conceptual level claims to have a meaningful relation to the real world. The problem is, who is going to speak for or represent the real world. For example, the art world actors, the "general public" (or tax-payers), the politicians who formulate arts policy and the arts administrators who implement it all have very different conceptions of what the artist is and who should be counted as such. In such a situation the researcher should reflect on the relationship between the definition process of art and artist happening in the real world, in essence a political struggle, and his own seemingly technical and objective definition. As Bourdieu (1993b, 263) claims, the decision about who is an artist and who is not,

"-- for all its apparent positivistic innocence, is, in fact, all the more crucial, because one of the major stakes in these artistic struggles, always and everywhere, is the question of the legitimate belonging to a field (which is the question of the limits of the world of art) and also because the validity of the conclusions, notably statistical ones, which one is able to establish *apropos* a universe depends on the validity of the category *apropos* of which these conclusions were drawn."

In the Finnish project, identifying the universe of enquiry has been one of the most difficult and interesting problems. We had to choose a method to piece together the target population in each study, i.e., to compile a list of the artists representing each particular art form. In many cases, we have also faced the problem of how to demarcate the field or art form in question. For example, which art form does comics belong to, or does it belong to "the arts" at all – and according to whom? Or, if the target population is to be artists working in the fine arts, should the universe of enquiry entail photography? Classifications concerning the arts change in time, and the boundaries are subject to continuous "negotiations" (cf. Zolberg 1990, 87).

From the onset of the Finnish project, it was clear that different definitions would lead to very different results concerning the economic situation of artists. We also came to the conclusion that there was no way of finding a universal set of criteria, which could be applied to different art fields. Art fields were constructed differently, e.g. according to the level of organization, public support, the relevance of credentials like training etc. One criterion, such as professional training or membership in artists' organizations, would produce different results for different art fields. The nearest we could get towards comparable results between art fields seemed to be through applying a different set of definition criteria for each art field, not through applying the same criteria all over the art fields.

It was decided to divide the work between several researchers, each trying to find the best definition criteria for the art fields she was working with. Comparability was to be achieved through taking into account the different characteristics of the art fields. This was, of course, made easier because of the small scale of the Finnish art world. We could in most cases take in the whole of the artist population in the field, not having to use samples (music was the only exception). It was also possible to do much of the classification work "by hand", such as collecting and classifying information about the artistic production of the study population in some cases.

Playing with definitions as a tool for analysis

In the Arts Council project, we soon realized that competing definitions of art and artist can be compared with each other to discover the power relations in and between the fields and the mechanisms through which access to them is gained. The use of several criteria provided information on the structure and operation of different art fields. It also helped to detect how the impact of state policies extends to the structure and cleavages of the field of art as a whole.

Frey and Pommerehne (1990, 147) rightly state that the criteria for determining who is an artist have major consequences for the number of artists arrived at and therewith, for example, at their income level. The Arts Council project has only validated this claim. For example, in the study of plastic artists (Karttunen 1988), several different definitions were adapted. The whole study population (N=1314) was comprised of persons who had applied to be included in the Finnish Artists' Association's professional register in 1984 (members of artists' professional associations were automatically included), or had been awarded state grants for artists in 1975–84, or had graduated from the main art schools in 1979–83. From the whole population three different, partly overlapping subgroups were taken under special inspection (see Table 1). In addition, some reference data was available from Statistics Finland on people who had given plastic artist as their occupation in the Population Census in 1985 (N=1910). However, the category of plastic artists in the Census was somewhat problematic for our purposes as it included, e.g., porcelain painters and set-decorators.

Table 1. Number of plastic artists and the share of grant receivers according to different definition criteria

Criterion	Number of artists	Share of grant receivers
Whole research population	1314	29 %
- Artists in the FAA register	934	36 %
- Members of plastic artists' organizations	723	42 %
- Artists by occupation in the tax register	850	NA

As a research strategy the play with various definitions of artist turned out to be fruitful, as it revealed how strong an influence the definition exerted on the results of the study. To begin with, the numeric size of the profession varied from the 700 members in professional organizations to the nearly 2,000 plastic artists in the

Population Census (see Table 1). The register of the Artists' Association of Finland, in turn, comprised more than 900 living plastic artists. The comparison of different definitions also revealed signs of women's exclusion from and discrimination by institutions of plastic art. Depending on the definition, the percentage of women varied from less than one-third to two-fifths; the more closed the group and the less based on subjective definition, the lower the figure.

When evaluating the effects of state policies, the four definitions of a plastic artist produced very different outcomes. For example, 42 percent of those belonging to professional organizations had received state support in 1984, the year of study, compared to 14 percent of non-members (Table 1). This is actually a witness to the fact that in our 'semi-corporatist' arts administration system, the plastic artists' professional organizations have almost monopolized the right to define an artist in their field. Consequently, in the conditions where the commercial market for art is small and private support relatively rare, these organizations have much power in determining who can function as a full-time plastic artist in Finland.

Table 2 describes the number of authors in Finland according to various external criteria, and the share of authors who have received grants within a year in respective groups. The figures demonstrate the same type of effect as in the case of plastic artists, where different definition criteria produce groups which can be organized according to the level of closure. It also shows how "author" is more open as a profession as "plastic artist". Authors do not have formal professional training, and the entrance to professional organizations is not so restricted as in the case of plastic artists. The difficulties in entering the "hard core" group of full-time professionals relate to the difficulties in earning a living as a writer on the limited markets. The figures on the share of grant receivers also illustrate the close relationship between being a full-time author and receiving public support. Almost nine in ten of the full-time authors had received some public grant, and a grant is an almost indispensable condition for working full-time in the profession. (Heikkinen 1988; 1989.)

Table 2. Number of authors and the share of grant receivers according to different definition criteria

Criterion	Number of authors	Share of grant receivers
Whole research population ^a	1149	60 %
Members of authors' organizations	874	64 %
Active authors ^b	715	74 %
Authors in the tax register	350	81 %
Full-time authors	252	87 %

^a Authors who are members of authors' organization and/or have received public grants during the previous ten years

^b Those of the research population who have published literary works during the previous five years

In the next section, the process of producing and applying different definitions of the arts and the artist is discussed from the point of view of the interaction between representatives of the art worlds, bureaucracy, and politicians in the formulation and implementation of art policies. We now approach a territory that would require further study. The Finnish system of arts administration provides the concrete example for discussion.

The process of definition – interaction between the field of art and the arts administration

Finland, among the other Nordic countries, has adopted extensive programmes of direct financial support for the arts and the artists, and government plays an important role as a patron of art. This goes back to the development of the welfare state, and the role of the state pertaining to this concept. The importance of public support for art as a vital component of the national identity has been emphasized by the smallness of the linguistic area. The fact that the commercial market for art is small, and that private enterprises have had relatively little interest in financing the arts, has further increased the role of public funding. Thus, it can be argued that the state has a major, sometimes even decisive, role in the process of defining what is meant by art and artists. For example, in many art fields artists rarely can confine themselves to their artistic work full-time without state support. In this case, the definitions of art are produced through defining the eligibility of individual creators and performers of art for public funding.

The Finnish system of arts administration is a mixture of two different types of arts administration: the Ministry of Culture -type and the arts council -type (for a detailed description, see Heiskanen et al, 1995). In the first type, the support for culture is organized as other public functions to be run by the regular public service according to normal established procedures, headed by a ministry or in some cases divided among several ministries. The second type is based on a quasi-independent organization such as the National Endowment for the Arts in the USA and the Arts Council of Great Britain. (Cf. Cummings & Katz 1987.)

If the government is not to be indiscriminate in its cultural patronage, it has to make choices. Inevitably, this means making judgments of taste. The arts councils provide the expert opinion and peer-group evaluation needed by cultural administrators, who wish to protect themselves from the accusation that they are making arbitrary decisions. In the ideal model the government only decides on the level of expenditure, and then passes on a lump sum to be distributed by the arts council. (Cf. Cummings and Katz 1987, 12-13, 354.) In the Finnish system, the arts councils act more as an advisory body toward the Ministry, their actual decision-making power being limited mainly to allocating direct financial support for individual artists.

Typically, arts councils have been established also to remove arts policy, at least the direct support of the arts, from the normal government agenda, in the hope of 'insulating' the arts from "politics proper". Obviously, this hope for insulation might also be in line with the strive for autonomy on the part of the art fields. It might be argued, however, that this has not been among the main issues when the Finnish system was established in the late 1960's. Besides expertise, the Finnish model is also based on the idea of representation (cf. Calligan 1993). Party politics as well as such considerations as regional representation are also at stake when the members of the national arts councils are nominated, although the role played by party politics has been considerably diminished compared to the early days of the councils.

The Finnish national arts councils, each representing a specific art form, and their central organization the Arts Council of Finland, act under the Ministry of Education as a part of the national arts administration. They offer the main avenue through which the representation and expertise of the art fields is brought into the policy formulation and implementation. The members of the national art councils in Finland are appointed for a period of three years. According to the law, they have to be elected among candidates proposed by the prominent organizations and insti-

tutions in respective art fields. Consequently, they are not elected as private individuals, but as representatives of certain organizations and institutions. The majority of the members are artists. In this sense the artists themselves participate in formulating and implementing public art policies through their organizations.

The procedure is based on, and emphasizes, the strongly established position held by artists' organizations in the art fields, and contributes to their further reinforcement. Artists' organizations acted as pressure groups and partners of negotiation toward public authorities already before the present system of arts councils (established in the late 1960s), which finally established their position as semi-official expert organizations in matters concerning professional artists.

The support granted by national art councils presupposes that the recipient can be defined as an artist in the sense of both classification and evaluation. As members of the national arts councils, the representatives of professional artists are responsible for the peer-group evaluation needed to interpret and apply the statutory quality criteria for allocating grants to artists. Through this process, the criteria applied by artists' organizations for defining artist and artistic quality are infiltrated to the decisions of the arts administration. Artists' organizations also have their say in the work of government ad hoc commissions, either as members or expert advisors.

The role of artists in the arts administration cannot be understood without relating it to the overall objectives of the state artist policy. Towse's (1994) remark that the arts is not a field in which public policy objectives are easily made explicit holds true also for Finland. Conclusions on the direction of the primary objectives for arts policy have to be drawn on the basis of government planning documents, preparation documents for legislation, the prevailing legislation and, perhaps most importantly, from the actual allocation of resources.

The principles behind the present Finnish state artist policy were formulated in the report of Government ad hoc commission on the arts (1965). According to the report, the most crucial factor affecting the standard and influence of art is the independent and free development and artistic expression of an artist's personality. Consequently, the most important task of public policies promoting the arts was to create as favorable conditions as possible for the artists in this respect, i.e., to enhance the social and economic position of professional artists. The emphasis has been on freeing the artist from the restraints of the box office and mass taste. According to Cummings and Katz (1987, 366), this concept, contrary to the concept

of art as a public service, leaves a limited role for government planning, and government is supportive but reactive rather than directive.

In the report, the definition of "art" was not referred to as a problem. Implicitly art was defined in terms of traditional high culture, which can be considered as the prevailing interpretation of the early 60's in Finland. The committee also stressed the importance of promoting art of high professional standard. Thus, when the system of National Arts Councils and artist grants was established at the end of the 60's, the principle of promoting "excellence" was unambiguously the driving force behind it¹.

Producing new administrative definitions for "the arts"

The role of the arts administration is demonstrated by the process of defining and re-defining the concept of "the arts". Presently, the system of national art councils comprises nine national art councils and their joint body, the Arts Council of Finland. These national councils each represent a specific art form. They exercise power of decision for awarding grants to artists, and each has its own statutory stipulated quota of grants. When the system was set up in 1968, they numbered seven. In 1977, the National Council for Camera Art was divided into councils for photography and cinema, and in 1983 dance was separated from theater. Presently there are the following councils: National Council for Architecture, Cinema, Crafts and Design, Dance, Drama, Literature, Music, Photography, and Plastic Arts.

The establishment of "new" art forms has proceeded in close interaction between the administration and the art fields. The arts administration has reacted to pressures from "new" art fields which have demanded representation and a share of the support given to the arts. On the other hand, the process of negotiation has required the art fields to create organizations to act as representative negotiation partners demanded by the administrators. Consequently, especially those artists' organizations which have been established during the present administrative system derive their origins more or less from the reciprocal relationship between art fields and art administration. These late-comers represent art fields which are "new" also

¹ Dimaggio and Useem (1978) have formulated two different policy approaches in terms of the principles of participation and excellence. They argue that these two principles stem from two totally different images of what art should be. Focus on excellence implies strong boundaries between performer and audience, professional and amateur, high versus popular forms of art. Art policies guided by the concept of excellence strive to support mainly traditionally defined high art of high professional standard.

in relation to the arts administration: cinema, photographic art and dance. The very latest, born in the 1990's, represent fields which are in the process of being established as art forms, such as light and sound design or comics.

As the analysis of the cultural policies in different countries by Cummings and Katz (1987) demonstrates, government support for the arts has expanded tremendously since 1945 in all European countries, both by volume and by broadening the scope of activities covered. Also in Finland, the broadening of the concept of the arts has created constant pressures for new administrative structures, and rearrangements within the definitions applied by each of the national arts councils – for example performance to be included in the visual (plastic) arts, comics in design (according to the model offered by graphic design and illustration). Also the borders of the art forms represented by the national arts councils have become more and more blurred, one example being the recent decision of photographic artists to apply for membership in the central organization for plastic artists. The development is reflected in the recent discussions and plans to reform the whole system of arts councils.

It has been claimed that the "administrative classifications" (cf. DiMaggio 1987, 451), the distinctions among art forms and artistic genres created by the state, exert conservative effects on the field of art. It is easy to see that both the guiding principles behind Finnish art policies and administrative practices as well as the structure of the administrative organization produce certain ways of defining art and artist. The system of arts councils, each representing a certain art form and its respective institutions and organizations, is characterized by an inbuilt inclination to maintain the existing subdivision of art. For the arts administration, supporting new areas is not purely a problem of attitude or policy but of structure as well (Heikkinen 1991).

It is difficult to overestimate the impact of public arts policy on the art worlds in a country like Finland, given the structures of financing and the role of the state. On the other hand, there are several features characteristic of the Finnish system of arts administration, which act towards increasing the influence of the art fields on the process of defining art and artists within the structures of arts policy formulation and implementation. These features pertain both to the administrative model adopted (representative peer-group panels) and to the type of overall objectives chosen (improving the situation of professional artists).

Discussion

The researcher who wishes to study the arts and artists in their social and political context inevitably faces the problems of definition and identification. In most countries, anybody is entitled to call himself an artist, and pursuing this profession is in principle free. On the other hand it is hard to gain entry into the field of legitimate art, and the borders of art fields as well as the right to be called an artist are objects of constant struggle. The various definitions used and produced by different agents reflect the structure and power relations within the artistic fields, and within arts policy formulation and implementation. The researcher can turn them into effective tools through critical examination. It is, however, not always easy to trace the real definer in each case where different definitions for the arts and artists are applied. As the Finnish case indicates, the definitions applied by the arts administration, for example, are closely intertwined with those produced by the art fields themselves, and especially by the organizations of professional artists. There is in fact good reason to ask, how far it is possible to draw a line between the arts administration and the art fields.

From the point of view of the art fields, the questions of defining art and artist, especially in relation to arts policy formulation and implementation, are political issues, which may have extensive implications for the status and conditions of art and artists. When the role played by public funding is strong, as in Finland, the administrative decisions are bound to have notable impact on the prerequisites of artistic creativity in the art fields concerned. The impact of public arts policies extends to the structure of the field of art as a whole. By supporting the arts through organizations that represent them the Finnish system emphasizes the central position held by artists' organizations in the art worlds, and contributes to their further reinforcement. This is also conducive to certain corporatism, or guild-likeness, in the art worlds. The fact that the corps of Finnish artists shares more features with the professions proper than the artists in many other European countries, derives, at least partly, from this semi-corporatist nature of the arts administration.

The studies of the social and economic position of the arts and the artists are most often commissioned by public art administration or artists' organizations, and their purpose is to evaluate public arts policies and to suggest reforms if needed. As there cannot be one correct definition for 'art' or 'artist' the researcher must make his or her choice between non-neutral definitions. Consequently, the researcher is easily drawn into the battlefield of art politics, either during the research process or

afterwards. As a precaution it is important to be conscious of the potential biases and the effects of the definitions and categories used on the results of the study and the policy suggestions; this is also, of course, good research practice. The researcher should also pay attention to the potential political uses that his or her definition and its implications offer to actors in the art world, art politics and art administration.

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