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Introduction: What is Art?

This book is about the sociology of the arts. That is evident from its title. Perhaps not clear is what I mean by art and what I mean by a sociology of it. *Art* is a value-laden word, conjuring up images of the best that has been penned into words or brushed onto canvas. This book uses the term in a more mundane, and a broader, sense. Art includes the tangible, visible and/or audible products of creative endeavor; it includes not only the traditional fine arts but also the popular and folk arts.

Sociology is, among other things, the study of society, the study of human systems, the study of how people create meaning, and the study of social inequality. These aspects of sociology are central to this book. We will examine how groups of people work together to create what we call art. We will look at why some things are called "art" and some people "artists"—and why other things and people are not. We will look at the meaning of artistic objects and why interpretations of art vary. We will look at how people use artistic products, for aesthetic pleasure, certainly, but also for other reasons. And we will study the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and class with art.

Defining Art

Definitions often seem to pin down, in academic phraseology, what seems intuitively obvious. I will not give a formal definition of art suitable for quoting in essays or exams.[1] Instead, I will paint, with a broad brush, a picture of the cultural forms that I intend to cover in this book. Indeed, it is not actually possible to define art in abstract terms, because "what is art"—even broadly stated—is *socially* defined, and therefore subject to many inconsistencies. Why is ballet art but World Federation Wrestling not art? They both are scripted before-hand and performed to a sound track (music or the roar of the crowd and the announcer's voice-over); the performers wear attractive costumes and leap athletically about the stage. We might say that art is not sport (but this begs the question, in this case, as to why the World Federation style of wrestling is considered sport). Family

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photos are not considered art, even the ones which are carefully composed and mounted in beautiful scrapbooks. These photos and albums might be an expressive form, but they are too private to be called art. Nevertheless, most of us would think of the photographer Ansel Adams's private albums as art, and some photographers have created family photos, specifically meant to be considered art, that have been exhibited in museums.[2] If we already think of the creator as an artist, or if we see a work in a museum, we tend to call it art. This points to the importance of the context.

The sociologist Howard Becker (2008 [1982]) believes that the context is the most important aspect to the definition of art. He says,

> Like other complex concepts, [the concept of art] disguises a generalization about the nature of reality. When we try to define it, we find many anomalous cases, cases which meet some, but not all, of the criteria implied or expressed by the concept. When we say "art," we usually mean something like this: a work which has aesthetic value, however that is defined; a work justified by a coherent and defensible aesthetic; a work displayed in the appropriate places (hung in museums, played at concerts). In many instances, however, works have some, but not all, of these attributes. (p. 138)

Becker believes that a work is art if people say it is. That is, the contents of the category of art are defined socially. Further, art is defined by groups of people organized into art worlds, which we will discuss in detail later. An example: A colleague of mine was interviewing art students at the San Francisco Art Institute. In a courtyard outside the classroom, a young man dressed in black clothes was standing in the fountain and moving his body in interesting ways. Inside, my colleague found the students discussing whether "Bob" was making art, or whether he was just acting like an idiot again. The students' debate on whether or not Bob's movements were art highlights the issue of context. If the fountain had been in a theater, his dance would probably be thought of as art (whether it was good art is another question). If he danced in a public fountain, passersby might think he was mentally ill. Since the context was an art school, the answer was not clear.

Becker also suggests that we think of the definitional problems in relationship to art as an opportunity for research rather than as a problem: "Art worlds typically devote considerable attention to trying to decide what is and isn't art…; by observing how an art world makes those distinctions rather than trying to make them ourselves we can understand much of what goes on in that world" (p. 36).

Becker's comments are quite correct and we shall examine them in greater detail later. Assuming that we cannot define art formally and abstractly, there are, nevertheless, some elements that characterize most forms of art:

- There is an artistic *product*. It may be tangible, visible, or audible. The product can be a physical object, like a book or record. Or it can be a performance, like a play or a concert.
- It *communicates* publicly. To be art, the cultural product must not only exist, it must be seen, heard, touched, or experienced by an audience, either in public or private settings. All art is communication. Of course, not all communication is art.

- It is experienced for *enjoyment*. "Enjoyment" can take many forms. Art might be consumed for aesthetic pleasure, for sociability and fun, for mental stimulation, or for escape. Sometimes, however, people are exposed to art because "it's good for them," as in a school trip to a museum.
- Art is an *expressive form*. When art relates to real life, it presents a fiction or an interpretation. Sometimes art claims to tell the "truth," but if it takes this idea too literally, it moves into the area of documentary, non-fiction, or news.
- Art is defined by its *context*, both physical and social. What is art in a museum or theater may be just odd objects or strange behavior in other settings. When different social groups view the same expressive product, they may disagree on whether or not it is art.

It is as important to understand what this book will *not* cover, as well as what it will cover. I *exclude* from analysis (1) popular culture in the broad sense, for instance, youth culture or commodity culture, and (2) the media in their informational, rather than entertaining, formats, for instance news, documentaries and the like, whether online or broadcast. Griswold (2013) distinguishes between *implicit culture* and *explicit culture*. Implicit culture is an abstract feature of social life: how we live and think. Explicit culture is a tangible construction, a performance or product that is produced—it is what I am calling "art." The book analyses culture in the explicit sense, but does not attempt to address implicit culture systematically.

In place of a formal definition, a list of what is "art" and "not art" will help define the scope of the book (see Table 1.1). This book will cover: (1) The fine (or high) arts. For example: the visual arts (painting, sculpture, drawing, etching, and other works that you might find in an art museum), opera, live symphony and chamber music, recorded classical music, drama, theater, dance (ballet and modern), other performance art (experimental theater, happenings, etc.), literature and serious fiction, and digital art (art visible only in virtual environments), and art recently "promoted" to high art (e.g. jazz music, some cinema). (2) The popular (or low, or mass) arts. For instance: Hollywood movies, independent film (sometimes considered as fine art), television drama (series, serials, made-for-television movies), television sitcoms, best-selling and pulp fiction, popular music (rock, pop, rap, etc.) including recorded music, rock concerts, and performances in pubs and clubs, and print, television, and online advertising. The fine and popular arts are the book's main subjects, but we will also discuss (3) the folk arts, that is, artistic activities created in community settings. These include: some types of amateur music, garage rock music (e.g. as performed by teenagers), quilting (especially in quilt circles), and graffiti of the artistic (rather than the public toilet) kind, as well as a wide variety of DIY (do it yourself) creation distributed via the Internet, such as music or fanfiction. As mentioned, some types of art do not neatly fall into one of the categories, for instance, jazz can be either popular or high art, and, especially in its early forms, folk art (Lopes, 2002).

Table 1.1 What is Art? Manifestations of Culture Included and Excluded from Consideration in This Book

Art *(as defined in this book)*	***Not Art*** *(as defined in the book)*
☑ Fine art Opera Symphony Painting and sculpture Experimental performance art Dance – ballet, modern, etc. Literature Etc.	☒ Popular culture (broadly stated) Fads and fashions Trends in clothing The meaning of blue jeans Attitudes towards hair coloring or body design (tattoos, piercing) Subcultures, as a way of life Youth cultures Consumerism Manufactured products that carry a cultural meaning (e.g. Levi's, branded clothing, Coca-Cola, mobile phones) Etc.
☑ Popular art Popular music (rock, pop, country, etc.) Popular fiction Movies & film (Hollywood, made-for-TV or Internet, and independent) Television drama (series, mini-series) and sit-coms (broadcast or for download) Advertising (print, television) Etc.	☒ Sport
☑ Folk art DIY art Amateur music Quilting Etc.	☒ Media – in non-fiction and news facets TV, print and Internet news Documentaries Current affairs True crime Science shows The Internet, in most of its aspects Etc.
☑ The art of subcultures (but not how people in them live)	☒ Private expressive forms Personal sketches, watercolors, doodles Photos posted on Flickr/Instagram/Facebook, (most) videos on YouTube Art therapy Etc.
☑ Art products on the Internet – digital art, virtual museums, (some) music, video, and images (when presented as fine, popular or DIY art), and the like.	☒ Lots and lots of other things
Gray Area (These fall outside the book's definition, or at least its attention, but might have strong elements with respect to artness) • High fashion • Cooking, especially *haute cuisine* • Demolition Derby, World Federation Wrestling • Computer/digital games • [etc.]	

This book will *not* cover: (1) Popular culture, in the broad sense. Many people use the term "popular culture" to mean what I refer to as the "popular arts." Other people use it to mean something bigger. They mean "culture" as in Griswold's implicit culture, an anthropological sense: "that complex whole of knowledge, habit and custom" (Tylor, 1924 [1871]: 1). It is this wider component of popular culture

that I exclude. For instance, youth culture is excluded (but not the music that young people might enjoy—music is a popular art form); the lifestyles of subcultures are excluded (but not the art forms subcultures enjoy). I will not cover such topics as: trends in everyday clothing; the cultural meaning of blue jeans; attitudes towards hair coloring or body design (tattoos, piercing), consumer culture, and other customs and norms. (2) Sport is not art, and neither are (3) the non-fiction and news facets of the media. Consequently, I will not consider sport or such media forms as television, print or Internet news, documentaries, current affairs shows, true crime, or science programs. The Internet has had an important impact on many forms of art, but it is a *vehicle* for art, like a museum, movie theater, or bookshop. I will not discuss the Internet as a media form in and of itself nor will I consider many of its key aspects such as email, information sites, blogs, chat rooms, or the like—though I will consider the Internet as an important site for the distribution and consumption of art.

There are innumerable things that are not art. In this list, I have mentioned only those areas which are similar enough to art to cause confusion—mostly cultural forms that are not art. The line between art and non-art is not sharp. How you look at a cultural form, and from where you look, affects your perception of it. For instance, in France *haute cuisine* is considered to be a part of the national heritage and is supported by the French Ministry of Culture. Gourmets exist in English-speaking countries too, but cooking is not valued in the same way. Similarly, high fashion is a form of creative expression for designers. But I do not study *haute cuisine* or *haute couture* in the book.[3] Some cultural forms cross boundaries between art and non-art: digital games are not art, but many aspects of these products (artwork, music, aesthetic style) are artistic. YouTube videos of cats, as a cultural phenomenon, are not art; however, some individual examples might be considered art. I also do not cover art therapy or personal art, as in doodles or recreational watercolors. These are important expressive forms for individuals, but they do not communicate in the public sense that art does.

Why do I consider broad categories of art—fine, popular, and folk/DIY—together? The full answer lies in the book, but the basic idea is that they all can be understood with the same sociological concepts. These analytic and methodological tools are applicable to arts that appear in some tangible or performative format (although they do not always apply well to related areas in popular culture, broadly stated, or the media, which is why these areas are not covered). Concentrating on the fine, popular, and folk arts makes it possible to cover the topic in some depth. Moreover, the distinctions among fine, popular, and folk art continue to exist, but they have blurred in recent decades and the categories are less powerful than they once were. In fact, these distinctions exist for social reasons, and this is an important topic for discussion.

Terms for Art

Since I cover the fine, popular, and folk arts, I need to have a term that includes them all. I will often refer to "the arts," as I have in the title. More simply, I will refer both to the generic concept, and to individual pieces, as *art*. But as I have mentioned, this word can also be used in an honorific sense. For example, an especially good stunt motorcyclist might be described as an "artist" and his demonstration rides as "art" to

separate this motorcyclist from ordinary bikers. I shall not use the term art in this sense. Likewise, "art" sometimes means only *good* art and often implies only the fine arts. I shall set aside this honorific use of "art", and apply the term to mean any of the products created within the fine, popular, or folk arts realms. (We shall visit the idea of art and the honor attached to it later in the book, however.)

Other scholars have come to different solutions to the same problem. Griswold (2013: 11) uses the term *cultural object*, which she defines as "A shared significance embodied in form" – it is "audible, or visible, or tangible" or "can be articulated." I will also use the terms "object" (as in artistic or cultural object) or "work" (as in artwork or work of art) to refer to individual pieces. I tend to use *art*, *object*, or *work* interchangeably. In general, I use these terms to refer to artistic endeavors that produce a product (a painting, a CD, a book, a film) as well as those that produce a performance (a ballet, live music).

The Sociology in Sociology of the Arts

This book looks at sociological approaches to understanding the fine, popular, and folk arts, but what makes a sociological approach? Sociology embodies many ways of thinking about society. Sometimes these different thought styles are at odds with each other to such an extent that it may seem that they do not belong in the same discipline. Nevertheless, at least two ideas link the disparate approaches in sociology. First, sociology endeavors to generate *theory*. A theory is an attempt to say something about society, and most sociologists try to surpass "mere" description of the social world and attempt to *theorize* it, that is, to explain how it works.

Second, sociology also looks at systems, structures, and culture; that is, at the connections among individuals, the stabilized patterns emerging from social interaction, and meaning that is shared across individuals. Sociology sees people as part of systems, structures, and cultures and sociologists concentrate on these rather than on the psychological makeup of particular persons or on the effects of "great men" and women who have single-handedly made a difference.

Sociologists do not agree, however, on whether researchers should discuss human action only at the level of individuals or whether researchers can look at aggregates of people and study how groups, organizations, or networks "act" (the issue of "macro–micro translation"). Sociologists also disagree on whether it is possible to separate elements of culture or social structures from the particular individuals who constitute them (the issue of "generalization"). Sociologists' beliefs about these two issues are background *assumptions* (also called *metatheories*); researchers come to hold them independently of their research, as these beliefs cannot be confirmed or refuted through empirical study.

Sociological Approaches

An *approach* is a group of theories that study social phenomena from the same basic perspective, with a similar set of assumptions or metatheories. Though they share metatheories, the specific theories will differ on many details, and may even be

contradictory at points. There are many different approaches in sociology. For instance, a common distinction is made between *positivistic* and *interpretive* approaches. Positivists tend to measure variables and test hypotheses. Their goal is to create generalizable theories. Positivists are likely to argue that aesthetics and meaning are not amenable to empirical analysis, and thus these topics must be left to art historians and philosophers. Instead, positivists study "objective" aspects of the art world. They may research, for instance, the demographic characteristics of art museum audiences, the repertoires of orchestras, or the effects of the Internet on the strategies and earnings of recording companies.

In contrast, interpretive sociology is concerned with *questions of meaning*. How is meaning created and maintained in social systems? What is the relevance of people's cultural background? What does a particular artwork mean? Most interpretivists believe that meaning cannot be abstracted from its particular situation and is, therefore, ungeneralizable. Sociology, in this view, is about understanding subjective experience and, theoretically, interpretivists are interested in explaining particular situations. Interpretive sociologists might study the meanings of art objects or how people create meaning in their lives through the consumption of art.

There is a place in sociology for both positivistic and interpretive approaches, though some scholars from one camp look down on scholars from the other camp. Indeed, it is important to see sociology, as with all academic study, as a competition among theories and approaches. This book presents five basic approaches (reflection, shaping, production, consumption, and constitutive, as described in the subsequent chapters). Each of these approaches looks at art from a particular vantage point, but they do not map neatly onto a positivistic/interpretivist distinction, which cross-cuts all of them. In some places, the different approaches may seem complementary, but in others, contradictory. This is the nature of academic work.

Sociological Theories

For the purposes of this book, theories are simplifying ideas or models that tell us about society. Metaphorically, a theory is a map of a territory (the social reality). If you wanted to get from London to Edinburgh, and you did not have SatNav in the car (or Google Maps on your phone), you might look up the best route on a paper road map. If the map were 800 miles long, like Great Britain itself, it would not fit into the car. This territory-sized map would not be of much use. However, a map on a scale of 16 miles to the inch would fit on one large sheet that most people (or at least some people) could fold neatly and put into the glove box. A road map is suitable for the job, even though it would vastly oversimplify the terrain, leaving out things like city streets, farm tracks, and changes in elevation, to concentrate on a schematic representation of the motorways and main highways. But once you get to Edinburgh, a big map with a dot for the city is less helpful. For driving in an urban setting, you need a more detailed town plan that shows city streets, or you would magnify the map on your phone. If you walk in the surrounding countryside, you will want a more detailed map still, one that depicts footpaths and topography.

This metaphor not only shows how helpful simplification can be, it also shows that maps are not completely "true" representations of the territory. The only true representation would *be* the territory. A road map is not any more "true" than a topographical map. Maps, like theories, are suitable for certain purposes but not others. Of course, maps, like theories, can be *wrong*, if they contain errors. In this case, they should be thrown out or corrected. Many disagreements among sociologists are over which types of maps are true, rather than which contain errors that could be remedied in future research. For instance, proponents of "reception aesthetics" who come from an interpretive framework might rubbish a positivistic study of the "production of culture" merely because it comes from a different perspective. But this is like arguing over whether a town plan or a road atlas is better without asking "better for what purpose?" It is a disagreement at the level of metatheory.

The metaphor of a map is limited, however, as are all metaphors. Social reality cannot be as easily measured as the physical contours and attributes of the landscape. Indeed, theorists disagree on the fundamental nature of reality (what we are able to see and how it should be measured). This means they disagree over what the territory might be, which adds an extra layer of potential disagreement over the purpose of maps (theories) and whether they are "correct."

What theory you use (or develop) depends on two things: (1) the metatheories you hold due to personal predilection or professional training, and (2) the types of questions you pose. Your questions are strongly influenced by your metatheories. To use another metaphor, theories are like flashlights shining light in a darkened room. Though they illuminate, they highlight only part of the view. They also cast shadows. Theories are useful, indeed essential, to understanding art. But all theories are by necessity limited.

Be critical when you evaluate theory. Look for the metatheory (explicit assumptions and hidden ones), as well as the predictions, descriptions, interpretations, or hypotheses the theory generates. Do reject the theory if it is actually wrong. But also, at least as students, take a flexible approach, and value all research which is excellent within its own perspective.[4] Research uncovers a truth, not the truth. Ask: "Is it a *useful* truth?" and for what purpose. This is what I call the *mosaic method* of building sociological knowledge:[5]

> Recognize that there are a variety of approaches and theories about society. Most are partly true, shedding light on various aspects of society and casting shadows on others; therefore, most theories can be helpful some of the time and in some situations. Thus, each theory (and piece of empirical research) is a tile in a mosaic; to get a reasonable picture, you need more than one tile.

Using different theories to understand art can lead to a richer understanding of art.

Structure of the Book

The goal of this book is to give a comprehensive overview of the field of sociology of art. Part I looks at the relationship between art and society, based on metaphors of reflection (Chapter 2) and shaping (Chapter 3). As conceived by these approaches,

this relationship can be represented metaphorically as a direct link, represented by a straight line, between a cultural object and society. These two approaches are intuitive ways to see the connection, and at varying levels of sophistication, they appear in professional research, in student research, and in journalistic accounts about art. Chapters 2 and 3 will show the benefits as well as the shortcomings of these ways of thinking. The final chapter in Part I (Chapter 4) outlines a more comprehensive and satisfactory view of the interplay between art and society, the cultural diamond (Griswold, 2013), also a metaphor, which adds three other points of interaction—production, distribution, and consumption—to the art-society nexus.

Part II of the book covers approaches subsumed by the cultural diamond. The majority of research reported in the book is covered under this rubric. Part II is divided into two subsections, (A) production approaches and (B) consumption ones.

The research that makes up the production of culture approach, covered in Part IIA, focuses on the "left-hand side" of the cultural diamond. Chapters look at how art is created, produced, and distributed, and examine the relationships among creators, distribution networks, artworks, and society. The main idea in the production of culture approach is that cultural objects are filtered through, and affected by, the people and systems that create and distribute them. Chapter 5 presents an overview, covering two influential scholars, Becker (2008) on art worlds and Bourdieu (1993) on fields of cultural production, as well as key critiques of the approach. Crane (1992) argues persuasively that, in place of the traditional division of high culture and popular culture, a better way to understand and categorize the current artscape is to look at how the arts reach the public, through for-profit cultural industries, nonprofit organizations, or local networks. Accordingly, Chapter 6 discusses distribution by business firms and cultural industries, and Chapter 7 looks at distribution through nonprofit organizations or social networks. Artists occupy a privileged role in the arts, and Chapter 8 focuses on artists along with other creatives in cultural industries. The chapter examines labor markets, creative careers, and inequality in the arts, as well as the social construction of the artist's role, artistic reputation, and genius.

The research that makes up the consumption of culture approach, covered in Part IIB of the book, focuses on the "right-hand side" of the cultural diamond. Chapters look at how people consume, use, and receive art. The main idea is that audiences are the key to understanding art, because the meanings created from art and the ways art is used depend on its consumers, not its creators. Chapter 9 traces the roots of the consumption of culture approach, which are found in cultural studies and literary theory, explores the development of the approach, and covers key critiques. Chapter 10 turns to sites of consumption and the experiences people have when interacting with artworks. Chapter 11 explicates how social identity can influence cultural consumption choices and how individual, group, and national identities connect with art. Chapter 12 turns to social boundaries and art. In addition to looking at the social construction of artistic categories, it focuses on Bourdieu's (1984) Distinction thesis, ideas about omnivorous cultural consumption, and debates about social class, cultural capital, and taste.

Part III points out limitations of the diamond metaphor and the related research presented in the preceding chapters. The cultural diamond is divided into two sides, production and consumption. While this is a convenient strategy for presenting

the sociological literature on the arts and reflects a genuine division in the literature, studies that look at either the mechanisms of production or consumption obviously ignore the corresponding consumption or production, and moreover, often sideline the art itself. In other words, separating art from artists, production systems, consumers, and society makes sense analytically; however, it can obscure our understanding of both the art itself, and art in its social context. In fact, isolating art as a node in the diamond often renders it epiphenomenal. Chapter 13 brings us back to the art itself, focusing on approaches to meaning in works of art. In Chapter 14, the discussion moves from art *and* society, as was presented in Parts I and II, to art *in* society. Art is part of society and cannot be abstracted from it. The chapter looks at cutting edge approaches in sociology of the arts along with a historical appraisal of the aura of art and the social construction (and gendering) of artistic genius.

Part IV (Chapter 15) sums up the book and revisits the issue of multiple paradigms in the sociology of the arts. It presents my own metatheoretical stance—or you could say, my taste in metatheory—and, in essence, it sets out an "aesthetic" of sociological theorizing about art.

Each of the substantive chapters is accompanied by a case study which looks at one issue or research project in depth. The cases include discussion questions, designed to stimulate classroom discussion. Some of the questions ask you to apply material from the chapters or to critically evaluate the case, rather than merely looking to the case for their solution. In neither its presentation of cases nor of sociological approaches to art does this book provide "the answers." Rather it aims to raise questions and then to give you enough information to think critically about different—often overlapping or conflicting—views.

NOTES

1 Philosophers have grappled with the problem of defining art for millennia. For a useful review of the philosophy of art, see Graham (2005).
2 For instance, Sally Mann and Richard Billingham.
3 On *haute cuisine*, see Johnston and Baumann (2015), Trubek (2000), and Ferguson (1998); on *haute couture*, see Crane (2000), and Pedroni and Volonté (2014).
4 I might ask this of colleagues as well, but of course, established scholars are welcome to use their favorite metatheory if they want!
5 Watson (2008: 25) would call this "pragmatic pluralism"; also, see Griswold (1992a) and Morgan (1986). Becker (1970) also uses the mosaic as a metaphor.