

17 Art Worlds

Howard S. Becker

It was my practice to be at my table every morning at 5:30 a.m.; and it was also my practice to allow myself no mercy. An old groom, whose business it was to call me, and to whom I paid \$5 a year extra for the duty, allowed himself no mercy. During all those years at Waltham Cross he was never once late with the coffee which it was his duty to bring me. I do not know that I ought not to feel that I owe more to him than to any one else for the success I have had. By beginning at that hour I could complete my literary work before I dressed for breakfast.

Anthony Trollope, 1947 [1883], p. 227

An English novelist may have told the story facetiously, but being awakened and then coffee was nevertheless integral to the way he worked. No doubt he could have done without the coffee if he had to, but he didn't have to. No doubt anyone could have performed that service; but, given the way Trollope worked, it had to be performed.

All artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, even a large number, of people. Through their cooperation, the art work we actually see or hear comes to be and continues to be. The work always shows signs of that cooperation. The forms of cooperation may be ephemeral, but often some more or less routine, producing patterns of collective activity we can call an art world. The existence of art worlds, as well as the way their existence affects both production and consumption of art works, suggests a sociological approach to arts. It is not an approach that produces aesthetic judgments, although that is a task many sociologists of art have set for themselves. It produces, instead, an understanding of the complexity of the cooperative networks through which art happens, of the way the activities of both Trollope and his groom meshed with those of printers, publishers, critics, librarians, and readers in the world of Victorian literature, and of the similar networks and results involved in all the arts....

Cooperative Links

Whatever the artist, defined as the person who performs the core activity without which the work would not be art, does not do must be done by someone else. The artist thus works in the center of a network of cooperating people, all of whose work is essential to the final outcome. Wherever he depends on others, a cooperative link exists. The people with whom he cooperates may share in every particular his idea of how their work is to be done. This consensus is likely when everyone involved can perform any of the necessary activities so that, while a division of labor exists, no specialized functional groups develop. This might occur in simple communally shared art forms like the square dance or in segments of a society whose ordinary members are trained in artistic activities. Well-bred nineteenth-century Americans,

for instance, knew enough music to perform the parlor songs of Stephen Foster, just as their Renaissance counterparts could perform madrigals. In such cases, cooperation occurs simply and readily.

When specialized professional groups take over the performance of the activities necessary to an art work's production, however, their members develop specialized aesthetic, financial, and career interests which differ substantially from the artist's....

Aesthetic conflicts between support personnel and the artist also occur. A sculptor I know was invited to use the services of a group of master lithographic printers. Knowing little of the technique of lithography, he was glad to have these master craftsmen do the actual printing; this division of labor being customary and having generated a highly specialized craft of printing. He drew designs containing large areas of solid colors, thinking to simplify the printer's job. Instead, he made it more difficult. When the printer rolls ink onto the stone, a large area will require more than one rolling to be fully inked and may thus exhibit roller marks. The printers, who prided themselves on their craft, explained that they could print his designs, but the areas of solid color might cause difficulty with roller marks. He had not known about roller marks and talked of using them as part of his design. The printers said no, he could not do that, because roller marks were an obvious sign (to other printers) of poor craftsmanship and they would not allow a print exhibiting roller marks to leave their shop. His artistic curiosity fell victim to the printers' craft standards; a neat example of how specialized support groups develop their own standards and interests (see Kase, 1973).

The artist was at the printers' mercy because he did not know how to print lithographs himself. His experience exemplified the choice that faces the artist at every cooperative link. He can do things as established groups of support personnel are prepared to do them; he can try to make those people do it his way; he can train others to do it his way; or he can do it himself. Any choice but the first requires an additional investment of time and energy to do what could be done less expensively if done the standard way. The artist's involvement with and dependence on cooperative links thus constrains the kind of art he can produce....

Artists often create work which existing production or exhibition facilities cannot accommodate. Try this thought experiment. Imagine that, as curator of sculpture of an art museum, you have invited a distinguished sculptor to exhibit a new work. He arrives driving a flatbed truck, on which rests a giant construction combining several pieces of large, heavy, industrial machinery into an interesting and pleasing shape. You find it moving, exciting. You ask him to take it around to the museum loading dock where the two of you discover that the door on the dock will not admit anything taller than fifteen feet; the sculpture is much larger than that. The sculptor suggests removing the wall, but by now you have realized that, even if you got it into the museum, it would fall through the floor into the basement; it is a museum, not a factory, and the building will not support so much weight. Finally, disgruntled, he takes it away....

How do nonstandard works ever get exhibited, performed, or distributed?... [T]here often exist subsidiary, nonstandard distribution channels and adventurous entrepreneurs and audiences. The former provide methods of distribution, the latter take a chance on the result. Schools often provide such an opportunity. They have

space and more-or-less free personnel in their students, and thus can muster forces more commercial presentations could not afford: real crowds for crowd scenes, outlandish assortments of instrumentalists and vocalists for musical experiments.

More artists adapt to what existing institutions can handle. By accommodating their conceptions to available resources, conventional artists accept the constraints arising from their dependence on the cooperation of members of the existing cooperative network. Wherever artists depend on others for some necessary component, they must either accept the constraints they impose or expend the time and energy necessary to provide it some other way.

Conventions

Producing art works requires elaborate cooperation among specialized personnel. How do they arrive at the terms on which they cooperate? They could, of course, decide everything afresh on each occasion. A group of musicians could discuss and agree on which sounds would be used as tonal resources, what instruments might be constructed to make those sounds, how those sounds would be combined to create a musical language, how the language would be used to create works of a particular length requiring a given number of instruments and playable for audiences of a certain size recruited in a certain way. Something like that sometimes happens, for instance, in the creation of a new theatrical group, although in most cases only a small number of the questions to be decided are actually considered anew.

People who cooperate to produce a work of art usually do not decide things afresh. Instead, they rely on earlier agreements now become customary, agreements that have become part of the conventional way of doing things in that art. Artistic conventions cover all the decisions that must be made with respect to works produced, even though a particular convention may be revised for a given work. Conventions dictate the materials to be used, as when musicians agree to base their music on the notes contained in a set of modes, or on the diatonic, pentatonic, or chromatic scales, with their associated harmonies. Conventions dictate the abstractions to be used to convey particular ideas or experiences, as when painters use the laws of perspective to convey the illusion of three dimensions or photographers use black, white, and shades of gray to convey the interplay of light and mass. Conventions dictate the form in which materials and abstractions will be combined, as in music's sonata form or poetry's sonnet. Conventions suggest the appropriate dimensions of a work, the proper length of a performance, the proper size and shape of a painting or sculpture. Conventions regulate the relations between artists and audience, specifying the rights and obligations of both.

Humanistic scholars – art historians, musicologists, and literary critics – have found the concept of the artistic convention useful in explaining artists' ability to make art works which evoke an emotional response in audiences. By using such a conventional organization of tones as a scale, composers can create and manipulate listeners' expectations as to what sounds will follow. They can then delay and frustrate the satisfaction of those expectations, generating tension and release as the expectation is ultimately satisfied (Meyer, 1956, 1973; Cooper and Meyer, 1960). Only because artist and audience share knowledge of and experience with

the conventions invoked does the art work produce an emotional effect. Barbara H. Smith (1968) has shown how poets manipulate conventional means embodied in poetic forms and diction to bring poems to a clear and satisfying conclusion, in which the expectations produced early in the lyric are simultaneously and satisfactorily resolved. E. H. Gombrich (1960) has analyzed the visual conventions artists use to create for viewers the illusion that they are seeing a realistic depiction of some aspect of the world. In all these cases (and in others like stage design, dance, and film), the possibility of artistic experience arises from the existence of a body of conventions that artists and audiences can refer to in making sense of the work.

Conventions make art possible in another sense. Because decisions can be made quickly, plans made simply by referring to a conventional way of doing things, artists can devote more time to actual work. Conventions make possible the easy and efficient coordination of activity among artists and support personnel. William Iwins (1953), for instance, shows how, by using a conventionalized scheme for rendering shadows, modeling, and other effects, several graphic artists could collaborate to produce a single plate. The same conventions make it possible for viewers to read essentially arbitrary marks as shadows and modeling. Seen this way, the concept of convention provides a point of contact between humanists and sociologists, being interchangeable with such familiar sociological ideas as norm, rule, shared understanding, custom, or folkway, all referring to the ideas and understandings people hold in common and through which they effect cooperative activity. Burlesque comedians could stage elaborate three-man skits without rehearsal because they had only to refer to a conventional body of skits they all knew, pick one, and assign the parts. Dance musicians who are total strangers can play all night with no more prearrangement than to mention a title ("Sunny Side of the Street," in C) and count off four beats to give the tempo; the title indicates a melody, its accompanying harmony, and perhaps even customary background figures. The conventions of character and dramatic structure, in the one case, and of melody, harmony, and tempo, in the other, are familiar enough that audiences have no difficulty responding appropriately.

Though standardized, conventions are seldom rigid and unchanging. They do not specify an inviolate set of rules everyone must refer to in settling questions of what to do. Even where the directions seem quite specific, they leave much to be resolved by reference to customary modes of interpretation on the one hand and by negotiation on the other. A tradition of performance practice, often codified in book form, tells performers how to interpret the musical scores or dramatic scripts they perform. Seventeenth century scores, for instance, contained relatively little information; but contemporary books explained how to deal with questions, unanswered in the score, of instrumentation, note values, extemporization, and the realization of embellishments and ornaments. Performers read their music in the light of all these customary styles of interpretation and could thus coordinate their activities (Dart, 1967). The same thing occurs in the visual arts. Much of the content, symbolism, and coloring of Italian Renaissance religious painting was conventionally given, but a multitude of decisions remained for the artist, so that even within those strict conventions different works could be produced. Adhering to the conventional materials, however, allowed viewers to read much emotion and meaning into the picture. Even where

customary interpretations of conventions exist, having become conventions themselves, artists can agree to do things differently, negotiation making change possible.

Conventions place strong constraints on the artist. They are particularly constraining because they do not exist in isolation, but come in complexly interdependent systems, so that one small change may require a variety of other changes. A system of conventions gets embodied in equipment, materials, training, available facilities and sites, systems of notation, and the like, all of which must be changed if any one component is (cf. Danto, 1980).

Consider what changing from the conventional Western chromatic musical scale of twelve tones to one including forty-two tones between the octaves entails. Such a change characterizes the compositions of Harry Partch (1949). Western musical instruments cannot produce these microtones easily, and some cannot produce them at all, so conventional instruments must be reconstructed or new instruments must be invented and built. Since the instruments are new, no one knows how to play them, and players must train themselves. Conventional Western notation is inadequate to score forty-two-tone music, so a new notation must be devised, and players must learn to read it. (Comparable resources can be taken for granted by anyone who writes for the conventional twelve chromatic tones.) Consequently, while music scored for twelve tones can be performed adequately after relatively few hours of rehearsal, forty-two-tone music requires much more work, time, effort, and resources. Partch's music was often performed in the following way: a university would invite him to spend a year. In the fall, he would recruit a group of interested students, who would build the instruments (which he had already invented) under his direction. In the winter, they would learn to play the instruments and read the notation he had devised. In the spring, they would rehearse several works and finally would give a performance. Seven or eight months of work finally would result in two hours of music, hours which could have been filled with more conventional music after eight or ten hours of rehearsal by trained symphonic musicians playing the standard repertoire. The difference in the resources required measures the strength of the constraint imposed by the conventional system.

Similarly, conventions specifying what a good photograph should look like embody not only an aesthetic more or less accepted among the people involved in the making of art photographs (Rosenblum, 1978), but also the constraints built into the standardized equipment and materials made by major manufacturers. Available lenses, camera bodies, shutter speeds, apertures, films, and printing paper all constitute a tiny fraction of the things that could be made, a selection that can be used together to produce acceptable prints; with ingenuity they can also be used to produce effects their purveyors did not have in mind. The obverse of the constraint is the standardization and dependability of mass-produced materials that photographers prize; a roll of Kodak Tri-X film purchased anywhere in the world has approximately the same characteristics and will produce the same results as any other roll.

The limitations of conventional practice are not total. You can always do things differently if you are prepared to pay the price in increased effort or decreased circulation of your work. The experience of composer Charles Ives exemplifies the latter possibility. He experimented with polytonality and polyrhythms early in the 1900s before they became part of the ordinary performer's competence. The New

York players who tried to play his chamber and orchestral music told him that it was unplayable, that their instruments could not make those sounds, that the scores could not be played in any practical way. Ives finally accepted their judgment, but continued to compose such music. What makes his case interesting is that, though he was also bitter about it, he experienced this as a great liberation (Cowell and Cowell, 1954). If no one could play his music, then he no longer had to write what musicians could play, no longer had to accept the constraints imposed by the conventions that regulated cooperation between contemporary composer and player. Since his music would not be played, he never needed to finish it; he was unwilling to confirm John Kirkpatrick's pioneer reading of the *Concord Sonata* as a correct one because that would mean he could no longer change it. Nor did he have to accommodate his writing to the practical constraints of what could be financed by conventional means, and so wrote his *Fourth Symphony* for three orchestras. (That impracticability lessened with time; Leonard Bernstein premiered the work in 1958, and it has been played many times since.)

In general, breaking with existing conventions and their manifestations in social structure and material artifacts increases artists' trouble and decreases the circulation of their work, but at the same time increases their freedom to choose unconventional alternatives and to depart substantially from customary practice. If that is true, we can understand any work as the product of a choice between conventional ease and success and unconventional trouble and lack of recognition.

Art Worlds

Art worlds consist of all the people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well, define as art. Members of art worlds coordinate the activities by which work is produced by referring to a body of conventional understandings embodied in common practice and in frequently used artifacts. The same people often cooperate repeatedly, even routinely, in similar ways to produce similar works, so that we can think of an art world as an established network of cooperative links among participants. If the same people do not actually act together in every instance, their replacements are also familiar with and proficient in the use of those conventions, so that cooperation can proceed without difficulty. Conventions make collective activity simpler and less costly in time, energy, and other resources; but they do not make unconventional work impossible, only more costly and difficult. Change can and does occur whenever someone devises a way to gather the greater resources required or reconceptualizes the work so it does not require what is not available.

Works of art, from this point of view, are not the products of individual makers, "artists" who possess a rare and special gift. They are, rather, joint products of all the people who cooperate via an art world's characteristic conventions to bring works like that into existence. Artists are some subgroup of the world's participants who, by common agreement, possess a special gift, therefore make a unique and indispensable contribution to the work, and thereby make it art.

Art worlds do not have boundaries around them, so that we can say that these people belong to a particular art world while those people do not. I am not

concerned with drawing a line separating an art world from other parts of a society. Instead, we look for groups of people who cooperate to produce things that they, at least, call art; having found them, we look for other people who are also necessary to that production, gradually building up as complete a picture as we can of the entire cooperating network that radiates out from the work in question. The world exists in the cooperative activity of those people, not as a structure or organization, and we use words like those only as shorthand for the notion of networks of people cooperating. For practical purposes, we usually recognize that many people's cooperation is so peripheral and relatively unimportant that we need not consider it, keeping in mind that such things change and what was unimportant today may be crucial tomorrow when events suddenly have made that kind of cooperation difficult to obtain.

Art worlds do not have clear boundaries in another sense. To the sociologists studying art worlds, it is as clear as, but no clearer than, it is to the participants in them whether particular objects or events are "really art" or whether they are craft or commercial work, or perhaps the expression of folk culture, or maybe just the embodied symptoms of a lunatic. Sociologists, however, can solve this problem more easily than art world participants. One important facet of a sociological analysis of any social world is to see when, where, and how participants draw the lines that distinguish what they want to be taken as characteristic from what is not to be so taken. Art worlds typically devote considerable attention to trying to decide what is and isn't art, what is and isn't their kind of art, and who is and isn't an artist, 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. (See Christopherson, 1974a and b, for an example of this process in art photography.)

In addition, art worlds typically have intimate and extensive relations with the worlds from which they try to distinguish themselves. They share sources of supply with those other worlds, recruit personnel from them, adopt ideas that originate in them, and compete with them for audiences and financial support. In some sense, art worlds and worlds of commercial, craft, and folk art are parts of a larger social organization. So, even though everyone involved understands and respects the distinctions which keep them separate, a sociological analysis should take account of how they are not so separate after all.

Furthermore, art worlds provoke some of their members to create innovations they then will not accept. Some of these innovations develop small worlds of their own; some remain dormant and then find acceptance from a larger art world years or generations later; some remain magnificent curiosities of little more than antiquarian interest. These fates reflect both the judgments of artistic quality made by contemporary art worlds and the perhaps chance operations of a variety of other factors.

The basic unit of analysis, then, is an art world. Both the "artness" and the "worldness" are problematic, because the work that furnishes the starting point for the investigation may be produced in a variety of cooperating networks and under a variety of definitions. Some networks are large, complicated, and specifically devoted to the production of works of the kind we are investigating as their main activity. Smaller ones may have only a few of the specialized personnel

characteristic of the larger, more elaborate ones. In the limiting case, the world consists only of the person making the work, who relies on materials and other resources provided by others who neither intend to cooperate in the production of that work nor know they are doing so. Typewriter manufacturers participate in the small world of many would-be novelists who have no connection with the more conventionally defined literary world.

In the same way, the cooperative activity may be carried on either in the name of art or under some other definition, even though in the latter case the products might seem to us to resemble those made as art. Because "art" is an honorific title and being able to call what you do by that name has some advantages, people often want what they do to be so labeled. Just as often, people do not care whether what they do is art or not (as in the case of many household or folk arts — cake decorating, embroidery, or folk dancing, for instance) and find it neither demeaning nor interesting that their activities are not recognized as art by people who do care about such things. Some members of a society can control the application of the honorific term *art*, so not everyone is in a position to have the advantages associated with it, if he wants them.

For all these reasons, it is not clear what to include in an analysis of art worlds and what to leave out. To limit the analysis to what a society currently defines as art leaves out too much that is interesting; all the marginal cases in which people seek but are denied the name, as well as those in which people do work that outside observers can see might meet the definition but whose makers are not interested in that possibility. That would allow the process of definition by members of the society, which ought properly to be the subject of our study, to set its terms. On the other hand, to study everything that might meet a society's definition of art includes too much. Almost anything might meet such a definition, if we applied it ingeniously enough....

Though art worlds do not have sharp boundaries, they do vary in the degree to which they are independent, operating in relative freedom from interference by other organized groups in their society. Put another way, the people who cooperate in the work being studied may be free to organize their activity in the name of art, as is the case in many contemporary Western societies, whether they make use of that possibility or not. They may, however, find that they must take into account other interests represented by groups organized around other definitions. The state may exercise such control over other areas of society that major participants in the making of art works orient themselves primarily to the concerns of the state apparatus rather than to the concerns of people who define themselves as interested in art. Theocratic societies may organize the making of what we, from the perspective of our society, would recognize as works of art as an adjunct of activity defined in religious terms. In frontier societies subsistence may be so problematic that activities which do not contribute directly to the production of food or other necessities may be seen as unaffordable luxuries, so that work we might define, from a contemporary vantage point, as art gets done in the name of household necessity. What cannot be justified that way is not done. Before people can organize themselves as a world explicitly justified by making objects or events defined as art, they need sufficient political and economic freedom to do that, and not all societies provide it.

This point needs emphasis, because so many writers on what is ordinarily described as the sociology of art treat art as relatively autonomous, free from the kinds of organizational constraints that surround other forms of collective activity. I have not considered those theories here because they deal essentially with philosophical questions quite different from the mundane social organizational problems with which I have concerned myself (see Donow, 1979). Insofar as what I have to say questions the assumption of freedom from economic, political, and organizational constraint, it necessarily implies a criticism of analytic styles based on it.

Art worlds produce works and also give them aesthetic value. . . . [T]he interaction of all the involved parties produces a shared sense of the worth of what they collectively produce. Their mutual appreciation of the conventions that they share, and the support they mutually afford one another, convince them that what they are doing is worth doing. If they act under the definition of "art," their interaction convinces them that what they produce are valid works of art.

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Editor's Notes on Further Reading

Becker on Art Worlds

Howard Becker's simple but illuminating observation that producing art is a collective enterprise depending on an extensive division of labor and on shared conventions challenges the commonsense emphasis on individual artistic creativity and absolute aesthetic criteria (compare Peterson on rock and roll, excerpted this volume). His book elaborates on the many ways art worlds enable and constrain artistic production—mobilizing resources, distributing products, assigning critical assessments, and influencing editing processes and artistic reputations—as well as on the ways the state may influence art worlds, how different artistic roles are defined in relation to art worlds, and how art worlds change. Becker demonstrates that the "production of culture" perspective is not limited to understanding the outcomes of culture industries involving mass production for the market but also helps understand other sorts of social organization of artistic production.

For a related overview of studies of the arts see Samuel Gilmore, "Art Worlds: Developing the Interactionist Approach to Social Organization," pp. 148-78 in Howard Becker and Michael McCall, eds., *Symbolic Interaction and Cultural Studies* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), and for other approaches to arts institutions see Judith Blau, "Study of the Arts: A Reappraisal," *Annual Review of Sociology* 14 (1988): 269-92; Blau, *The Shape of Culture: A Study of Contemporary Cultural Patterns in the United States* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and Pierre-Michel Menger, "Artistic Labor Markets and Careers," *Annual Review of Sociology* 25 (1999): 541-74. For an example of cultural production which combines both market and aesthetic determinants see Larson on architecture, this volume. For development of similar ideas from perspectives which stress more explicitly longer-term, historical and broader structural forces than does Becker, see for example Vera Zolberg, *Constructing a Sociology of the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art* 2nd edn. (New York: New York University Press, 1993); and Raymond Williams, *The Sociology of Culture*, with a new foreword by Bruce Robbins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995 [1981]).

While Becker's examples are drawn from work in many media, including various musical and literary forms and genre (see notes to excerpts from Peterson and Griswold, this volume), studies of visual art probably provide the richest lode of exemplars, extensions and critiques of the perspective Becker articulates here. On the visual arts see for example Harrison White and Cynthia White, *Canvas and Careers* (New York: John Wiley, 1965); Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Diana Crane, *The Transformation of the Avant-Garde: The New York Art World, 1940-1985* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Leah Greenfield, *Different Worlds: A Sociological Study of Taste, Choice, and Success in Art* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Rosanne Matorrora, *Corporate Art* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang, *Etched in Memory: the Building and Survival of Artistic Reputation* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Albert Bergesen, "A Theory of Pictorial Discourse," pp. 158-68 in Robert Wuthnow, ed., *Vocabularies of Public Life: Empirical Essays in Symbolic Structure* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); Judith Huggins Balle, ed., *Paying the Piper: Causes and Consequences of Art Patronage* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Anne Bowler, "Methodological Dilemmas in the