Sociology Looks at the Arts

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Preface

In the 1980s, when the sociology of the arts really began to take off as a field, sociologists needed to make the case that the arts are thoroughly social. Today, the assertion that the arts are a site of social processes is much less startling than it was three or four decades ago. As “digital natives,” young people have an intuitive understanding of social networks and collaborative media. They are well aware of the collective and social nature of cultural production.

Nonetheless, to understand how art is socially produced and what studying the arts as a social endeavor and social product can tell us more generally about society students need to learn new tools, concepts, and history. The purpose of this book is to demonstrate why it is exciting and important for sociologists to study the arts and to present a series of frameworks for doing so. After being introduced to these frameworks, readers should be able to think about topics and questions concerning the arts from a variety of sociological perspectives.

While the orientation of this book is, broadly speaking, sociological, it is also aimed at students, instructors, and other readers in related areas like visual studies, media studies, cultural studies, and even art history. In the United States, the sociology of the arts has been guided by American sociology’s more general orientation toward pragmatism, positivism, and discrete case studies. Professional sociologists of the arts and culture and graduate students, who hope to join their ranks, tend to produce studies of the arts that have a strong grounding in empirical data. They often eschew grand theoretical claims in favor of more modest, topical conclusions. Such studies
stick closely in language and focus to the disciplinary terrain carved out by American sociology, rarely drawing on terms or traditions from other disciplines or even from European social theory.

Most of the time, however, instructors are not teaching courses in the Sociology of the Arts to PhD students in Sociology departments. In fact, most Sociology of the Arts courses are taught in undergraduate liberal-arts institutions and draw from a wide array of students whose primary interests lie in literature, studio arts, film studies, anthropology, or other fields. Sociologists will sometimes teach these courses, but they are also sometimes taught by academics from other disciplines. In addition, instructors in visual studies, cultural studies, media studies, art history and other disciplines outside of the social sciences want to introduce students to a variety of strategies for understanding the arts as a social process. These instructors may wish to include, but may not be exclusively committed to, the perspective which dominates professional sociology in the United States. With this in mind, I approach questions about the social dimensions of the arts with a broad enough brush to fit a variety of needs. While giving ample attention to dominant US perspectives in the sociology of the arts, I have also included discussions of, for example, the more critical perspectives employed in the British cultural studies tradition as well as broader, less empirically-based theoretical perspectives on the arts and society from European sociology. I also present ideas from African American Studies, gender studies, art history, philosophy, anthropology and other fields from which ideas relevant to the social study of the arts have emerged. Throughout, I present a comparison of the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches and suggest ways that students can combine different tools and strategies to think about the arts as an important site of social activity and meaning.
The challenge and the excitement in writing an introductory text for the sociology of the arts lies in what “counts” as necessary for new-comers is still up for grabs. As I mentioned, professional sociologists of art in the United States proceed, for the most part, according to a set of norms that conform to US sociology more generally. Nonetheless, neither a canon nor a tidy system for presenting this area has been fully institutionalized. Several excellent examples, such as Vera Zolberg’s *Constructing a Sociology of the Arts*, (1990), Janet Wolff’s *Social Production of Art* (1981) and Victoria Alexander’s *Exploring Fine and Popular Arts* (2003), exist, but these books are few. The authors each approach their subject in unique ways, which reflect, in part, their own biography, orientation, and training.

My approach draws on my own training and experience as a painter, my interest in critical sociology and history, and my experience teaching a variety of courses in sociology departments, art schools, and elsewhere that address the arts in terms of their relationship to society. My background as a practicing visual artists means that I am especially able to draw on examples from the visual arts to illustrate ideas. It also means that I have some “insider” knowledge about visual art worlds and am better able to understand what visual artists, rather than musicians or poets, are trying to do in their work. At the same time, I believe that generalizations can be made from one form of art to another within a historical period. While the means or material of various forms of art differ, they all share a connection to the belief systems, economic organization, patterns of social interaction, and institutions from which they emerge.

My experience teaching undergraduate students has shaped the approach that I develop in this book. Students from different cultural backgrounds in different kinds of colleges, universities,
and departments bring different skills, knowledge, background, and interests to courses like the ones toward which this book is aimed. Some students, like those in art schools or media departments have a strong interest in the arts, or media, from the perspective of potential producers. They might know about contemporary art and even something about art history, but may have little or no background in social theory or the social sciences. Others may have taken political science, economics, and sociology courses but know nothing about any of the arts from a practical or historical perspective. Other students may have a very limited background in both sociology and the arts. This book assumes that students will have a very uneven knowledge base, and for that reason I take an integrated and broad-based approach, beginning from the ground up in terms of the history and development of both sociology and the arts. Each section builds on the ideas presented in the preceding section, so that students can see the relationship between various strategies for thinking about the arts and society and how these strategies are related to their own historical period.

Despite my own fascination with history, I understand how impatient students often are with the past. They usually want to focus on the questions and objects that occupy their immediate present. In my mind, showing students how and why certain questions about art and society emerged when they did invites them to formulate interesting and provocative sociological questions about the arts in their own time. Indeed, one of the difficulties for sociologists of art is that the social meanings, definitions, and forms of the arts change so rapidly. Students often have their fingers on the pulse of the now and a refined knowledge about the technologies, styles, and concerns of the present. It is difficult for any textbook (or professor over 30) to keep up. I hope that this book will escape the vicissitudes of fashion by providing frameworks through
which students can formulate questions about the cultural objects, worlds, and institutions that are relevant to their own experience. Thus, though I do spend a considerable amount of time presenting ideas and examples from the past, I have tried to conclude each section with provocative questions that these ideas raise for the present.