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Place and culture-making: Geographic clumping in the emergence of artistic schools



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ABSTRACT

In processes of cultural production, does it matter *where* the producers happen to be – and if so, how? We examine the formative years of 49 twentieth-century schools of painting, focused on the geographical locations of key participants. Our data suggest that in almost every instance, artists identified with a certain school tend to live in the same region or city during its emergent period, and often even in the same neighborhood of a large metropolitan area. This pattern continues throughout the 20th century, despite changes in communication and transportation that would seem to make physical co-location less vital for the formation of small collaborative circles in the arts. We speculate that emplacement is important not only for the emergence of new esthetic norms but also for the recognition of the group as a “school” and for its eventual success in the art market.

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1. Introduction

As visitors to the Tate Modern Museum in London ascend a long escalator toward the galleries, they confront a huge mural on the wall overhead. The mural depicts a time-line of 20th-century art, showing the names of prominent artists and major movements in a kind of road map. Many artistic movements are identified by a place: Harlem Renaissance, School of Paris, Young British Artists, CoBrA (Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam). In this paper, we suggest that using a geographic location to

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name an artistic school is not merely a coincidence or a convenient short-hand way to avoid listing the names of individual members. Rather, we argue that the co-location of artists at a circumscribed geographical location in the immediate presence of diverse material, social, and cultural surrounds – that is, place itself – plays a critically important role in the emergence of artistic schools and in the success of member artists in the art market.

Our paper has four parts. First, we review the literature on place and artistic collaboration. Second, we describe our historical survey of schools of painting from throughout the 20th century, focusing on the geographical location of founding members. Third, we offer a sociological explanation for the century-long persistent geographic clumping of nascent schools of painting by going into detail about how the emplacement of these creative activities matters for the emergence and eventual success of a group of artists. Finally, we illustrate those processes via a detailed discussion of the social contexts for the emergence of three artistic schools chosen from different moments in the century, to put some color on our conceptual canvas.

2. Putting art in place

2.1. Declining significance of place?

Although sociologists have indicated a growing interest in geographical and material aspects of social life, there is no agreement on how “place” is defined or how “place” should be incorporated into sociological interpretations and explanations. For us, “place” has two essential and irreducible elements (Gieryn, 2000): first, it is the assemblage of material and social stuff found at a bounded geographical location. As such, place has architectural and demographic qualities that may be analytically separated only with a loss of understanding of their mutually constitutive character. Place, in this sense, might be usefully distinguished from space: the latter is an abstraction, a point in some Cartesian universe, while the former is everything that is encrusted at that point. Second, place is a resource available for cultural construction and deployment for a wide array of purposes (Cheyne and Binder, 2010). A place has meaning, along with its material and social qualities, and those attributions and understandings figure consequentially in how place structures social and cultural life.

What exactly does it mean to nominate “place” as a cause of the emergence or success of artistic schools? In principle, it would have been possible for us to disaggregate the effects of place into distinct “variables:” propinquity of artists, local presence of cafes or galleries, available organs for spreading the news, and so forth. We choose not to follow that route, common as it may be among sociologists. Rather, we believe that it is theoretically parsimonious to acknowledge that the consequences of each of these conditions may be small when taken individually, but they grow enormously when gathered together – in a place. Place matters precisely in its ability to *amass* the diverse conditions vital for a new group of painters to succeed. Rather than treat each of these circumstances as a distinct “variable,” we prefer to see them all as an indicator of what some places contribute to the ability of artists to produce their work – in this instance, to disaggregate the circumstances weakens the force of their agglomeration in a specific place. The significance of co-location or co-presence is impossible to discern without attention to the places where people gather; their interactions are uninterpretable without attention to the architecture and materialities that structure behavior in fundamental ways (Milligan, 2003).

Growing sociological interest in place may, however, be anachronistic. As the 21st century approached, social theorists pointed to the materially disembedded character of modernity (Giddens, 1990) and argued that the significance of place historically had begun to decline (a pattern expected to accelerate in the future) (Castells, 1996). Such ideas inspired sweeping prognostications such as Bell's (1976) claim for the ‘eclipse of distance,’ and later Cairncross's *The Death of Distance* (2001 [1997]). These scholars assumed that the drag once imposed by physical distance would continue to be reduced by fast transportation and even faster communication with e-mail, videoconferencing and digital file sharing. Places become “closer” in this way and at the same time increasingly homogenized, so that it would matter less and less where anybody happens to be. There were demurrals right from the start: Rheingold (2000 [1993]) underscored the enduring significance of old-fashioned social networks for the emergence of virtual communities. Mitchell (2000)

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