



How cultural capital, habitus and class influence the responses of older adults to the field of contemporary visual art[☆]

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Abstract

This article explores the responses of 38 older people to contemporary visual art through the results of a 28-month study entitled, *Contemporary Visual Art and Identity Construction: Wellbeing amongst Older People*. A framework for the analysis is provided by previous work on the consumption of art and by Bourdieu's constructs of cultural capital, habitus and field. Five groups of older people, with a range of different backgrounds, were taken to galleries and their responses were recorded, transcribed and analysed. It is concluded that participants' responses are influenced by their cultural capital, habitus and class—which, in turn, are affected by their life course experiences. Those who could not recognise the field (e.g., did not view contemporary art as “art”) created their own meanings that they associated with the artworks. Evidence indicates that group dynamics and class mobility are likewise important. Participants also used the experience to respond to real or anticipated age-associated deficits.

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1. Introduction

This article explores how 38 older people experienced the field of contemporary visual art by analysing the results of a 28-month (May 2009–October 2011) study based in northeast England,

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UK. The study was funded by the New Dynamics of Ageing Programme¹—which is an 8-year initiative designed to improve the lives of older people and is supported by five UK government research councils. The project involved recruiting five groups of older people from a variety of different backgrounds, including people who had a history of visiting art galleries and people who did not. The five groups ranged from the homogeneous (of a similar social class and age) to the heterogeneous (of a wider range in social class and age). Once the groups were selected, baseline data—for example, attitudes towards art and demographic information—were recorded, and then each group was taken to view different exhibitions at local galleries three times over the duration of the project. Groups had a guided tour, and their members were then asked (in focus groups) to reflect upon what they had seen—their responses were recorded, transcribed and analysed. As part of this larger project, the present article develops analysis presented by Newman (2013), which was used to interrogate assumptions that underpin cultural policy derived from the New Public Management (Dunleavy and Hood, 1994).²

In order to understand the data provided by the groups of older people, the exhibitions that they attended (and the galleries at which those exhibitions were held) are viewed as having positions within a Bourdieusian field (Bourdieu, 1984; Grenfell and Hardy, 2003, 2007; Reay, 2004; Swartz, 1997). The field positions of the galleries enable them to make specific epistemological propositions and claims with regard to “art”—for example, about the value of a particular artist’s work or an art form.

Responses to contemporary visual art can be seen as being determined by respondents’ cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997), habitus (Bourdieu, 1984; Reay, 2004) and social class (Silva, 2006), which may or may not have changed over their life course. For some people, navigating the field of contemporary visual art may be effortless and unconscious. However, for other people, it may represent fraught terrain because of the perception that contemporary art has elite cultural status while also being opaque in its meaning and requiring special cultural competencies among those who appreciate it (Whitehead, 2012). The above constructs (e.g., habitus), however, do not occur in a vacuum. For example, ageing, period and cohort effects (Alwin et al., 2006, explained below) are understood as impinging upon habitus. While period and cohort effects are not observable in qualitative studies such as this one, the impacts of life course experience and the social, psychological and physical effects of ageing are discernible.

The question that this article addresses is thus as follows: What role do cultural capital, habitus and class play in the responses of the older adults in the research project to the field of contemporary visual art—and are those constructs shaped by aspects of the life course (e.g., ageing)? This article is organised in the following way. Firstly, research on the consumption of culture is briefly explored, particularly that dealing with the visual arts. After this, two studies looking at the consumption of art by older people are described, including one that focuses upon barriers to their engagement. The theoretical model used is then presented, followed by a description of the data and methods, the analysis, and, finally, the concluding discussion.

¹ <http://www.newdynamics.group.shef.ac.uk/>.

² Dunleavy and Hood (1994, p. 9) describe the New Public Management as a “way of reorganising public sector bodies to bring their management, reporting and accounting approaches closer to business methods”.

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