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Who is an artist? New data for an old question



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ABSTRACT

Employment in the arts and creative industries is high and growing, yet scholars have not achieved consensus on who should be included in these professions. In this study, we explore the “professional artist” as the outcome of an identity process, rendering it the dependent rather than the independent variable. In their responses to the 2010 Strategic National Arts Alumni Project survey ($N=13,581$)—to our knowledge, the largest survey ever undertaken of individuals who have pursued arts degrees in the United States—substantial numbers of respondents gave seemingly contradictory answers to questions asking about their artistic labor. These individuals indicated that they simultaneously *had been* and *had never been* professional artists, placing them in what we have termed the “dissonance group.” An examination of these responses reveals meaningful differences and patterns in the interpretation of this social category. We find significant correlation between membership in this group and various markers of cultural capital and social integration into artistic communities. A qualitative analysis of survey comments reveals unique forms of dissonance over artistic membership within teaching and design careers.

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1. Introduction

“I believe that a professional artist means that they work in the industry, with a steady job.”—
Fine arts graduate, 25

“[T]he moment I come off of a tour I don’t stop being an actor. I’m always an actor, paid or not.”—
Theater art graduate, 26

“I consider myself a professional artist because I teach the arts and pursue personal work.”—
history graduate, 44

Employment within the arts is high and has been growing in recent years (Menger, 1999). The Creative Industries Project reports that more than 548,000 arts businesses employed 2.9 million workers in the United States in 2006. That constitutes 4.3% of all businesses and 2.2% of all workers included in the data (Markusen et al., 2008). In the U.S., the number of artists grew at a rate of 127% over the twenty years ending in 1990, more rapidly than the civilian labor force of the country as a whole (Menger, 1999, p. 542).² The 2000 U.S. Census reports that 1.4% of the labor force, or 1,931,000 Americans, are artists (Alper and Wassall, 2006). Another estimate (Florida, 2003, p. 8) describes the “creative class” (including science and technology workers) as including 38.3 million Americans—some 30% of the entire workforce. These varied estimates of the size of the creative workforce illuminate a persistent limiting factor in cross-sectional studies of artists: scholars have not achieved consensus on who is an artist.

How do we go about tracing the boundaries of this social category within the ever-shifting topography of today’s creative landscape? And how do these shifting outlines translate to meaningful sociological differences in the ways that we conceive of this subset of workers? Must you work a certain number of hours and earn money as an artist, or does the label apply to those who create or perform art in their non-work time? Can you cease engaging in the production of art and still be considered an artist? Are designers artists? What about teachers of the arts? Should the appellation “artist” be applied to all individuals who self-identify as artists? If this is the case, what if their identities as artists are contextually dependent? What if there is a lack of consensus from other artists about your membership in this social group? Put simply: who is an artist?

Although these are not new questions, changes in the structure of artistic work have affected their answers, and our interest in them was rejuvenated by surprising data that served as the catalyst for this article. In the 2010 Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP) survey ($N=13,581$)—to our knowledge, the largest survey ever undertaken of individuals who have pursued arts degrees in the United States—substantial numbers of respondents gave seemingly contradictory answers when asked about their artistic labor. An analysis of these responses, which seem to indicate that these individuals simultaneously *have never been* artists and *have been* artists, crystallizes many of the problems with delineating this social category. By looking at these responses in combination with qualitative data from the survey, we are able to trace meaningful differences in the ways varying groups of artistic workers define their labor and to illuminate some of the consequences of these distinctions for scholars, policy makers, and artists themselves.

2. Portrait of the artist as a hologram: prior scholarship, different images

There have been at least five different approaches to defining the boundaries of this category. We conceptualize these as a set of ideal types and label them as follows: the human capital approach, the Census definition (and related approaches which focus on the amount of time spent in artistic jobs), the creative industries approach, the creative environment approach, and the subjectivist approach. Each reflects the objectives of a research paradigm whose focal purpose is not defining the boundaries

² There are a number of factors influencing this growth—such as increased public spending for projects that include creative labor, the expansion of the labor market to include more and new job types, and the rapid expansion of certain industries of late to include computer gaming, audiovisual and new media sectors, and crafts and design services (Menger, 1999, p. 543).

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