

HARRISON C. WHITE

(CAREERS

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CREATIVITY

Social Forces in the  
A · R · T · S

# Careers and Creativity

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Social Forces  
in the Arts

Harrison C. White

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BOULDER • SAN FRANCISCO • OXFORD

*Social Inequality Series*

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# Preface

I develop two basic themes in this book:

1. *The shaping of identities—which includes celebrating and arguing for competing identities—generates and energizes the arts.* These identities are for groups—be they families or clans or corporations or categories such as gender—more than they are personal, even in our day. These identities find expression both in private and to various publics.

2. *Particular artworks emerge from a dialogue between artist and art world.* Artistic production is stimulated and sustained by an art world—a working community of artists and others—not isolation in some garret. Such stimulation and support are emotional and communicative as much as they are material. Shared ways of arguing and seeing, and of using technology, are essential, as are distinctive personal themes and specific triggering events.

*These two themes weave together into narrative of art.* Sometimes this narrative is self-conscious; artists observe and analyze it for us in case studies. Artists typically struggle within, and also depend upon, several overlapping art worlds in order to create or perform on a continuing basis. Informal networks of acquaintance link artists to each other and to various patrons and organizations across these worlds. But so do alliances and divisions over recognition and content—alliances and divisions that become concrete in various and changing audiences and that bind all into broader social formations. Artworks thus are shaped under competing commitments of both artists and audiences into identities of both selves and larger social groups, whether of ethnicity or locale or class or nation or gender.

Particular styles in distinct arts condense out of such narrative process. *I will show why and how styles in arts change.*

Spelling out and backing up these assertions will take up a book. Reading this book will be eased by referring repeatedly to these assertions. They remind you of the central themes while you are following complex arguments and detailed cases in alternating chapters. Field observation reported in case studies is the primary authority, but general argumenta-

tion also is needed about both the arts and the practicalities of social organization. So the readings drawn upon are diverse.

\* \* \*

This socially grounded perspective on the arts can serve interests in traditional art history, musicology, literary criticism, and so on as well as interests in the social sciences. Such perspectives also, I think, can ease and aid the practice of art. The subtitle of this book could be “how to survive as an artist”—especially in college settings that relate art practice to more general liberal education. Yet inversely, art worlds can provide very helpful windows on how social life works in general—on how businesses are administered as well as how priests influence flocks and scientists accomplish research. To look for familiar social logics in apparently different situations is indeed the hallmark of the sociological vision.

You may be interested mainly in current art scenes, which you can examine through fieldwork. Field observation by you is important, in any case, because there are too many arts (and art worlds are endlessly different) to be covered in any one book. Some of your best insights can come from contrasting various arts, various periods, and locales secondhand through reading. Videotapes, reproductions, photographs, and interviews in journals can lessen the gap between book learning and field observation.

You may have little experience of any art worlds and may not know how to observe and keep the observation unobtrusive. Circulating quietly on the fringes of a party or watching others watch, or not watch, facades on buildings or sitting around a painter’s studio—are all examples of unobtrusive observation. The text should help you spot and introduce apt topics. One that is current in artists’ shared talk is the twin motif of careers and rebellion, which is central in the discussion that follows.

The arts have many social faces. Each not only can tell us something about artistic content (and so contribute to appreciation of styles across many arts) but also can offer a fascinating window on social organization, in general, and on the multiplicity of competing claims for identity, in particular. From reading this book you can expect as outcome a heightened appreciation not only of artists and arts but also of the social forces through which art, along with everything else, comes into being.

\* \* \*

My focus is the social surroundings for production in, as well as perception of, particular arts. This means concentration on a middle range in scope and scale. I emphasize how a set of locales interacts to constitute an art world: For example, in the dramatic arts how do dinner theatre and

high school plays fit together with Broadway and how is Broadway foreshadowed by avante-garde experimentalism?

To help readers orient themselves, let me say a bit about what this book is *not*. Art experts' evidence comes from diary and archive as well as from trained perception of the work of art, stroke by stroke, be it painting or other composition. *I shall not do much of such microscopic examination, either of visual or of other arts.* I seek more general patterns and relate each world of art production to social process surrounding it and to other such worlds.

Arnold Hauser, in a multivolume work, draws direct connections between, on the one hand, contents and style of artworks and, on the other hand, social and political processes throughout the environing society. Hauser assumes, in a Marxist vein, a mirroring by art of society and its class structure. *This is an opposite extreme that I also avoid.* And Pitirim Sorokin speculates on an even broader scale about evolution of art, from "ideal" to "sensate," over whole centuries and for sets of societies that he calls civilizations. I shall instead try to be explicit about mechanisms of influence through specific art worlds in particular periods.

What I do aim for is understanding systems of production of art. Much sifting and matching occur among art works and also among artists with differing specializations. These siftings and matchings are made both by (and of) brokers and agents of various sorts. During such processes, several quite different arts may influence each other through overlaps among producers, among audiences, and among patrons. I trace out these claims of overlap and influence and thus uncover the ways and extent to which they become aspects of a system.

\* \* \*

I have kept this book short. Although it can be read by itself, readers will benefit from having the text fleshed out by discussion with some expert who can supply exhibits, add illustrations, and suggest further readings. Or readers can develop supplements for themselves with the aid of the chapter appendixes on readings and fieldwork.

This book started with questions that grew out of discussions, in both my teaching and research, of social facets of several arts: How do arts change? How does an art world get built and maintained? Does art provision flight from everyday life, or instead does art aid control over ordinary life? Can one interpret society, or persons, by their reflections in arts? Today in America, how can artists both survive and be able to grow in stature? I build toward answers to these questions.

Harrison C. White

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The writings of many colleagues in sociology of arts are cited in the chapters that follow, but I also learned much by listening to them, especially to my earlier coauthor, Cynthia White. Professors Vera Zolberg of the New School and Robert Alford of CUNY–Graduate Center and I started a monthly New York circle (artists as well as professors) on social faces of the arts, and I am grateful to them and to all the members for broadening my horizons. I benefited particularly from the session where my draft of Chapter 4 was critiqued. Dialogues with Debra Friedman, John Padgett, and Alessandro Pizzorno shaped my ideas about layers of identity, as did Andrew Abbott concerning layers of contingency. Charles Tilly and Eric Leifer and Robert Eccles were endlessly patient and helpful with my attempts to formulate how identity related to control in social institution. Discussions with Ken Dauber, Carlos Forment, Doug McAdam, Walter Powell, and Jonathan Rieder on rhetorics were helpful, as were discussions with Roberto Fernandez and Cal Morrill on fieldwork.

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H. W.



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# 1

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## Introduction

Artworks shape and are shaped by our very identities, from before a hit song first captures us in adolescence to our being awed by the headquarters architecture of a possible employer. Artworks and performances—be they painting or music or dance or story—help orient us also to who others are. We are brought together and kept apart by social formulas and identities that the arts help to represent and even to shape, whether as flower and dress ceremonials or as oil portraits of founders of some shared corporate identity.

Works of art furthermore help us find who we want to be and how to control, or seem to control, both nature and the social groups that are always being reconstructed around us. Punk rock fans can testify to this and so can tuxedo-clad first-nighters at the Metropolitan Opera. Thus artworks are also coin of manipulation that can serve to embed people and groups into hierarchies, be these of domination or of admiration. Beauty and entertainment are two possible outcomes from the arts, but first the arts serve to overawe and mystify us by imputing new levels of reality.

Long ago, artists emerged as the agents who led the rest of us to artworks, and they developed thereafter as specialist members of distinctive art worlds. In the past few centuries, artists in some fields gained the status of professionals, with claims for cognitive training and expertise greater than that of their clients. Just in the past century, in some arts certain artists also were proffered as geniuses, and certain groups of artists were proffered as making up an avant-garde whose visions and processes of creation should seize our attention as a public. Regardless, the production of artworks continues through all such fireworks to be bound up in networks of brokerage and reception in and across various art worlds.

Both in arts for the populace and in arts for elites, star systems have emerged to offer enormous disparities in reward and recognition across artists and artworks. Such systems compete with alternative systems centered around education or around careers sponsored by governments and other bureaucracies. But even stars, together with their masterworks, re-

sult as much from social machinery as from cultural sensitivities and may be only of the passing moment.

So I aim beyond particular reputations and artworks, and even particular arts, as I build toward a heightened appreciation of how social forces and cultural production in an art shape one another—and especially how they change only together (Chapter 4). In the final two chapters I examine how arts are becoming new vehicles of exploration in identities for selves and for other social formations as new publics develop for new professions. Creativity and career shape but also are shaped by broader socio-cultural constraints and opportunities.

Excitement and entertainment are part of art, which is a matter of the surface as well as the depths of life. Let us begin with a frothy example in which current social life is captured, and dissected, within an art. We will also note backstage arrangements for production and then proceed to introduce in this chapter a sociological perspective for the exploration of social forces in the arts.

### The Small World of Social Networks

As I began this manuscript, I happened to see *Six Degrees of Separation*, a Broadway hit starring Stockard Channing. John Guare's title for the play takes off from some social science results of the 1960s, from Stanley Milgram's probes of what he called the "Small World." Stockard Channing, playing the lead character, Ouisa, muses that you can reach almost anyone else in our country in about six links. Social networks are implicit as the skeleton for this Small World of Milgram and Guare. They also are central to this book.

Like many other plays, this one offers sociology in three layers. First, it portrays, with crackling wit, some very New York types (including a nude male hustler) in interactions that build upon one another in ways that seem universal. Second, the troupe seizes us on behalf of another level, or realm, of reality through its magic, its labor of art—just as sociology and anthropology attempt (in much more ponderous fashion) to convince one of both unseen impacts from a larger context and the fragility and effort going into construction of everyday reality among persons. Third, the play's own scene, its backstage, drips with social stigmata begging for sociological interpretation.

The theater is the Vivian Beaumont within Lincoln Center—on Broadway but not quite "Broadway." Lincoln Center is a quango (quasi-autonomous nongovernmental organization)—neither government nor business but yet not the artists' own either. The only names in lights are those of patrons, affixed permanently on the plazas and buildings their

donations created. Tax dollars did contribute too, but only New York, not the United States, gets name recognition—and even then not in lights.

Arts as wholes come to be, and stay, separate through responses across audiences. Whole separate real arts appear in issue 12 of the ninety-first volume of *Playbill: The National Theatre Magazine*. This magazine licenses issues also in Boston, Dallas, Florida, and Washington/Baltimore. (Note that the word “theater,” as opposed to “theatre,” refers to movies and such.) We learn that the Vivian Beaumont Theater company itself has had a succession of lives, separated in turn by “several dark seasons” before a new director (or, lately, a new producer) steps forward.

Ouisa, in the play, is of two minds. She finds comfort in this six-step closeness to any other person yet is bemused at how to know about one’s own networks. Ouisa and her husband are art dealers, posh art dealers, and they gamble on their skills at making such contacts in the processes of acquiring and then speculating in Sotheby-quality paintings. She orients to ties, just as the male hustler orients to and gambles upon mores of acquaintanceship.

The abstraction of relations as ties in a network has always been true in reckoning kinship, as in “meet my cousin’s wife.” Like the rest of us in current social life, artists are woven together in networks through ties of acquaintance of various sorts—and we all have come to recognize this. Today, sociometry of acquaintanceship has penetrated general consciousness.

A special sort of tie has become equated with particular behaviors and attitudes as reported in stories of relations so that the elements of networks are *stereotyped stories*—such as acquaintance, enmity, dependence. Network becomes a verb, and we tell stories in network terms; so, for example, Ouisa could speak in terms of one network of social acquaintance and another network of business dealings and yet another of personal antagonism. But “networking” is just more dull sociologese until it is brought to life as actual process before one’s eyes in the magic land of theatre.

Sociologists have found that Ouisa’s particular region of the Small World is quite compartmentalized as well as specialized. For one thing, to guard against an expanding supply, a dealer may prefer that the painter be dead; such dealers need never see live artists. These dealers rely on critique of art developed about the swirls of acrylic on the canvas rather than on the social swirls among artists and their students and collaborators in studios.

The pecking order of actors stepping forward in turn for applause at the end of the evening was meticulously kept. This was despite the alphabetical listing in the program of all but the three stars, and these three are

spread out together just below the director and the producer at the top. Yet Stockard Channing, no mistake, is *the* star: She is prime mover, even down to signaling scene changes, and of course she steps up last, to the loudest applause, because this New York audience is knowing.

Succession in roles is meticulously noted. Several slips were inserted into the program identifying the understudies appearing that night for four (of a total of seventeen) roles in place of their usual players. Three of the understudies were proclaimed by career—each had from eight to twenty lines of credits in previous plays, with Broadway productions listed first, then Off Broadway, then Off-Off Broadway, then regional (largely League of Resident Theatres like the Guthrie in Minneapolis), only then film, and last of all television. But at least TV did appear, unlike dinner theatre, summer stock, and other peripheral stage billings. The fourth understudy had actually just moved (up, naturally) to a vacancy, from the role of Hustler to the role of MIT wonk being hustled, so his proclamation of thirteen lines (mostly Off-Off Broadway) was already in the *Playbill*.

The various notes included in the *Playbill* for *Six Degrees of Separation* discuss a variety of arts. There is a piece on college education for future careers of dancers (whose vocation, though consuming, is all too brief in years), followed by reviews of high fashion and, on one of the last pages of the *Playbill*, reviews of the London theatre scene. These latter reviews were written in an in-the-know tone and presupposed audiences widely interested in several arts, both vulgar and refined, pure and applied. If only that were true!

### Ostentation and Exclusion

Celebrations of identities, and accountings of relations, in works of arts come to be mediated by agents of increasing variety and independence, artists and others. These agents do, however, continue to give viewers some focus on and rooting in particularly significant social groupings. This is a continuing process down to our day—a day in which we are likely to think in terms of social strata and classes as the sites of appreciation of particular art.

This process is also a devolution into segregated enclaves, which can be ethnicities—and can also be worlds of science and learning, or of art for that matter. Part of this devolution is defusing and deconstructing sacredness. As objects of personal and home decoration descend from ritual ones, vestiges of sacredness remain. For example, today's split between professional and amateur is a cultural displacement of sacredness that is often explored in art.



Wealth and social prestige are other vestiges of sacredness. Return to the *Playbill* for *Six Degrees of Separation*. In its last pages, the *Playbill* became quite literally a social treasure trove. It listed patrons of the theatre by strata, from \$100,000 and more down through six further levels to \$1,000 and more. Then came a more elegant statement, of patrons for the overall Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, but listed now in *chronological* order, by when they gave. There was a separate listing of corporations that donated, in circles of leadership from Outstanding, at \$150,000 and more, down four levels to Pacesetters, at \$25,000 and more, and three steps later at Donors, which cut off at \$3,000 and more.

Do the arts and their works sustain invidious hierarchy in general? An evolutionary perspective can suggest answers. The central thread of any animal society, among wolves as among chickens, is comparability. Comparability is achieved within these most primitive societies as strict pecking orders. One hen defers to another without explicit fighting or challenging; it defers in eating and walking, not to mention sex. Each such pecking order yields strict interlockings among announcements and celebrations by the contending identities. Pecking order becomes strict hierarchy and as such remains the simplest way to achieve the comparability that is the meaning of the social.

Actions interact with ceremonial formulas for action in and as any social institution such as a pecking order, which may be reflected in artworks. This remains as true today in any of the dozens of art worlds in New York City as it proves to be among aborigines on Groote Eylandt (an obscure island of aborigines off the Australian coast), who have been studied exhaustively by anthropologists. A social institution is some pattern that persists among endless challenges for control. Such a pattern is robust and tends to absorb the continuing fresh actions. In part the pattern does so by celebrating and announcing them by the use of arts.

Tribes don't stay separate. Superdisciplines put tribes together in all sorts of ways, but always tending toward a simplest order—a linear order echoing pecking orders. It might be a caste system or a slave system or later an empire. Art helps to certify being higher and to regulate being lower. Achieving comparability is the key, for without it there are no relations but only physical encounter and destruction. Paradoxically, the simplest way to comparability is strict hierarchy. In more complex societies it becomes a stratification if not a rigid class system. There always are humans, as there are chickens, swarming to be at the top of the heap.

Beyond simple tribes, ostentation seems commonly to be at the root of art. Ostentation is the format of social ordering. Sculpture continues to be a good example. While holding a guide to outdoor sculpture, I can wander all over New York seeing persons (almost entirely men) made great,