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Paula Karhunen

WHO IS A SCENIC ARTIST?

Starting points in the study on scenic artists



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THE UNIVERSITY OF
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STUDYING ARTISTS

The first task in a study on artists is to define the research population. Who is an artist, how is the research population identified?¹ The problem of defining an artist is linked with the central art philosophical problem of identifying what is a work of art². Historical and social factors influence the definition of arts and artists. Some identification marks can be attributed to art. However, they can change in different periods. The art world itself defines art on the basis of three basic hypotheses; that the work of art is unique, that it is made by one creator and that the genius of the artist is expressed through the work of art. The concept of an artist in the western art world is based on an ideal of exceptional talent or genius.³

An artist is defined by numerous quarters: the public, the so-called gatekeepers (arts administration, critics, arts institutions, etc.) and the field of art in question. Public support and planning systems also have a bearing on the definition of an artist. For example, when art education and training are being planned, there must be an idea of what an artist is, what are the aims of training. The groups of gatekeepers both define an artist and influence the position of an artist or a work of art in their respective fields. One group of gatekeepers are those who decide on making a work of art public. In literature, for example, publishing houses are the gatekeepers. In theatre the most important regulator of the right-of-access into the field is the theatre institution, because the majority of scenic artists are engaged in professional repertory theatres.

Of the disciplines, aesthetics and sociology have sought answers to the questions "What is art?" and "Who is an artist?" The institutional art theory (Danto) and Howard S. Becker's theory on art worlds (*Art Worlds*, 1982) offer opportunities of defining and identifying an artist. Bourdieu's theory on an artistic field and its internal struggles have proved to be useful in examining Finnish artists, too. Institutional art theory defines a work of art and an artist through arts institutions. According to Becker, an artist can be distinguished from other professional groups among other things through membership of a professional organization of artists, training and market

¹Heikkinen 1989; Karttunen, 1988; Karttunen & Mitchell, 1991, have studied this problem more thoroughly.

²Sepänmaa 1981, p. 166.

³Zollberg, 1990, pp. 53, 107.

mechanisms⁴.

The artistic field is in a constant flux. This influences the definition of art and an artist. Artistic field accepts new professions or there are changes in demarcation lines between different professional groups. In theatre, an example of a new artistic profession are lighting and sound designers. On the other hand, performance art has blurred demarcation lines between pictorial art and theatre⁵.

The way in which an artist is defined has a decisive influence on the results⁶. The size and composition of the research population can vary quite considerably depending on what kind of definition is used. For instance, the population in the study on scenic artists is quite different if the classification system adopted by the census is used as a criterion from what it is when the criterion is the field's own definition of an artist.

Why study artists?

A practical point of departure in studies on artists is to find out how a person becomes an artist, how artists work, how social support system acts and how an artist survives. Depending on schools, these questions are interpreted in different ways.⁷ The artists' survival is a subject that interests several quarters, including arts administration, artists' organizations and, to a certain extent, the media publicity that wants either to strengthen or abolish the myth of an artist living on the hunger line.

Another starting point is to study the theoretical problems connected with the definition and valuation of art and the artist: How does the mechanism of acceptance in the field function in a given historical situation? It is also interesting to ponder the exercise of power and hierarchy in the artistic field as well as to analyze the (mythical) concept of an artist and the function of art in society. In the final analysis, an artist is a subject of research so as to shed light on what and who an artist is.

⁴Becker 1982, p. 35.

⁵Copeland 1989.

⁶Heikkinen 1989, p. 8.

⁷Zollberg 1990, p. 111.

How to study artists?

There are several methods of studying artists. They depend on the point of departure, field of science, schools and the researcher. Traditionally the humanistics have studied a work of art, whereby the position and significance of the artist is examined through the work of art. Sociological research examines art and the artist as a social phenomenon. Reception has been one of the most common areas of research in the sociology of art. By contrast, psychoanalytical research into artists departs from the artists' intuition and subconscious.⁸ In recent years, art institutions have also been a subject of study in economics (e.g. Baumol 1966, and a project led by Liisa Uusitalo at the Finnish School of Economics).

As a subject of research, an artist can be approached by using different methods, e.g. interviews. Likewise statistical variables can be used. In principle, artist's profession can be examined just like any other profession or social group. However, there is a difference: the problematic definition of art with its value judgments, on the one hand, and the mythical concept of the artist on the other. Biographic works on artists are one way of perceiving different aspects of being an artist.

When an artist is studied, the art he/she has created or performed is excluded. This branch of art is intertwined in the research when the essential nature of art world or an artist's professional image are scrutinized.

THE PRESENT STUDY ON SCENIC ARTISTS

This study in progress has two points of departure: 1) the identification of a scenic artist and finding out how a person gets accepted in the artistic field in question and 2) studying the artist's socio-economic status. The methodological points of departure are Bourdieu's theory on artistic fields and Becker's theory on art world. Statistical data compiled serve as basic material. Data including age, gender, professional training and domicile of scenic artists were collected for the study.

⁸On different approaches, see Zollberg 1990, pp. 118-119.

The multidimensional character of theatre as an art form poses methodological and structural problems when studying scenic artists. Limiting the scope of the study to actors and directors alone does not give a picture of all the factors that a complete theatre performance requires. Theatre as an art form is collective by character and demands input from many professional groups.

The research population of this study encompasses all those who do artistic work in the area of theatre. In the following they shall be called scenic artists. This emphasizes the fact, that the research population also includes others than artists working in the theatre (e.g. those employed by TV and the cinema). The English term "performing artist" might be more descriptive, but in the context of this study speaking of performing artists is misleading. The concept "performing artist" also includes dancers and musicians. Therefore the term is too wide to be used in a study concentrated on scenic artists only. On the other hand, the term "theatre employee" refers to all professional groups in theatre, including non-artistic ones, active in the area of theatre. Additionally the term scenic artist is consistent with studies conducted earlier in Finland.

The focal aim of the study is to find out the scenic artists' present socio-economic status and background. Further points of interest are the training situation, the role and place of the theatre as an institution in the field of culture and the relationship between arts administration and the theatre. To a certain extent, the scenic artists' professional image and artistic identity (the myths and reality) are examined. The role of artists organizations within the internal structure of the field is yet another central feature of examination and so is the importance of various prizes and recognitions to advancement in the career.

OTHER STUDIES CONCERNING ARTISTS

The study on the structure and status of artists in the field of theatre, conducted by Kristina Hautala in 1977 serves as comparison material⁹. Her study examines the income level, educational standards, regional breakdown and the status that the different professional groups of scenic artists enjoyed. The study represents a cross-section of the situation in 1973. Tuomo Sauri's unpublished study from 1985 examines scenic artists' educational and employment situation and the structure of this professional group. Marja Korhonen's study ("Directing the Theatre in Finland") is an economic study on operative models and roles of one professional group¹⁰. There are also regional studies into the social and economic position of artists at the local level.¹¹

Earlier studies on artists and writers elsewhere have mainly been general descriptions and analysis covering all artists and writers or often concentrating on pictorial artists only. The Swedish study on the position of artists and writers (Konstnärrens villkor, 1990) also deals with scenic artists as one professional group. As material for comparison the study is, however, problematic, because the definition of a scenic artist used differs from the one adopted here. The Swedish study is based on census data¹². A research project on scenic artists employed in theatres, "The survey on drama theatres in Warsaw" is under way in Poland, but it deals only with artists working in the institutional theatres¹³. The study by David Throsby and Devon Mills examines the economic position of Australian artists and writers and deals with scenic artists, too¹⁴.

In Finland and elsewhere, research on theatre is mainly concentrated in reception theory, semiotics or theatre history. In recent years theatre anthropology has become a popular trend in research, represented by, among others, the American Richard Schechner (Performance Theory 1988). There is an extensive study on the Turku City

⁹Näyttämö-, tanssi- ja säveltaiteen sekä taideteollisuuden alalla toimivan taiteilijakunnan rakenne ja taloudellinen asema. Valtion taidehallinnon julkaisu No 12. Helsinki 1977. (The structure and economic position of actors, dancers, musicians and artists engaged in the field of applied arts.)

¹⁰Teatterin johtaminen Suomessa. Tasot, roolit ja vastavoimat. Helsingin kauppakorkeakoulun julkaisu. Helsinki 1986.

¹¹Salmenoja, 1984; Keskinen - Penttinen, 1986; Hakanen, 1990.

¹²Konstnärrens villkor, 1990, p. 104.

¹³Ilczuk 1990. Unpublished research project.

¹⁴Throsby & Mills 1989. When are you going to get a real job?

Theatre under way at the University of Turku. In addition to the above-mentioned points of departure, several sociological studies concerning the theatre concentrate on theatre as an institution.

SELECTION CRITERIA OF THE RESEARCH POPULATION IN THE STUDY

Earlier studies on artists and writers ponder to a great extent what the criteria are for defining the research population¹⁵. In her study on Finnish writers (1989) Merja Heikkinen states that a researcher often has to use the definitions of other institutions when deciding on the criteria to be used. She presents several ways of selecting the research population (self-definition, census data, etc.) and problems relating to them.¹⁶

Kristina Hautala points out in her study that there are no problems in limiting the research population "because in the field of scenic art the criteria for professionalism are fairly clear - and the degree of organization - is high"¹⁷. Hautala's population consist of members of professional organizations. Self-definition "I am an artist" in scenic art is more problematic than for example in pictorial art and literature; scenic art is art for an audience."You can't act inside a cupboard" as Finnish director Jouko Turkka once put it.

The so-called institutional definition is used in this study whereby professional organizations and public grant giving agencies mainly define an artist. The decision was taken to include all scenic artist professions in the study. Thus the research population consists of Finnish actors, directors, dramaturgs, set designers, costume designers as well as lighting and sound designers. As far as the two latter mentioned professions are concerned the problem is that they did not exist officially as a separate artistic profession in 1989 which is the period under study. The first lighting and sound designers graduated from the Theatre Academy only in 1990. However, there has been a group of persons who in practice have plied this profession. For this reason and because it was considered interesting to examine the appearance of a new artistic profession, this group is also included. Theatre directors are also included but only

¹⁵Heikkinen, 1989; Karttunen, 1988; Throsby & Mills 1989.

¹⁶Heikkinen 1989, pp. 14-15.

¹⁷Hautala 1977, p. 9.

when it is a question of an artistic director or a person who has done or is doing artistic work.

After this first restriction the research population was chosen on the following bases:

1. A person with professional training in scenic art
2. A person who is a member of some professional union in scenic art
3. A person who has received a state grant to artists or artist's pension
4. A person who is entered in the theatre register of 1983 or 1991

Tabulation 1. Selection criteria of the research population

	percentage
Professional training	52
Union	93
Grant/pension	39
Register	76

The lighting and sound technicians/designers are not included in the training criteria, thus the number is smaller than that of the study group proper. The criteria concerning grants and pensions also includes those lighting and sound technicians who have applied for a state or project grant.

According to these criterias the research population comprises 1 849 persons¹⁸. A large part of the population fulfill several of the criterias used. About twenty per cent of the group meet all the criteria. Another twenty per cent meets only one of the above criteria and mostly this is membership of a union (83%).

For the sake of comparison it is worth mentioning that according the classification of

¹⁸At this stage of the study it is not known whether there is background knowledge available for all of the group nor has the group been compared with census data or data from the National Board of Taxation. Therefore the size of the target group will probably change. Likewise the missing data on training and profession will be supplied later.

the census data a total of 1 447 worked as a film or theatre director-managers and performing artists at the theatre and opera¹⁹. The census classification system is however very problematic because it groups art gallery owners with theatre directors and theatre managers, and opera singers, ballet dancers etc. are included in the performing artists of the theatre and opera. According to the same census classification, dramaturges are included along with writers and critics and set designers with pictorial artists etc. The census classification cannot be used in this study and comparing the number of scenic artists is problematic.

Professional training

Most professional groups within the theatre receive professional training at the Theatre Academy. Therefore it is possible to create some sort of a concept of the collective nature of their profession during training. That it is possible to receive university level training as a theatre director is a manifestation of the difference between the Finnish system and those in elsewhere Europe where it is very seldom that basic training as a director is given.

Professional training plays a central role in defining a scenic artist. The field esteems professional training and those selected for training have overcome the first obstacle on their road to becoming in artist. "The entrance examinations to the Theatre Academy decide who will be doing professional theatre in four years time and onwards. - The smaller the figures for admission the higher the esteem they enjoy later", wrote Meri Aaltonen in *Ylioppilaslehti* under the title "In Finland artists are selected by entrance examinations"²⁰ This assessment, however, does not give the complete picture because many actors are without professional training. It must be said that the evaluation of training and in particular that of a university degree continues to grow. In the field of scenic art a low level of education has been considered a problem for years because training is considered one important criterion for professionalism. In the field of theatre a need to distinguish between amateurs and professionals is clearly emphasized.

¹⁹Liikkanen 1985.

²⁰*Ylioppilaslehti* no 13/1990.

When examining professional training the results depend on how professional training is defined. According to Hautala's study, 50 per cent of Finnish actors in 1973 were without professional training²¹. In her study theatre training in Finland and/or a university level degree is classified as a professional training. In 1985 the situation was the same as in 1973. Tuomo Sauri's study reveals that half of actors in repertory theatres were without professional training²².

In this study training abroad is considered professional when it is clearly a question of a theatre school and the study period is longer than merely individual courses. Other university level academic training is not interpreted as professional except that received at the Tampere University Department of Acting or the Director Course at the Drama Studio.

Training in the following institutes is classified as professional in scenic art:

Finnish Actors' Institute	1920 - 1941
Finnish Theatre School	1943 - 1979
Finnish Theatre School, University-level Department	1962 - 1971
Theatre School of Swedish Theatre	1908 - 1966
Swedish Theatre School	1966 - 1979
Theatre Academy ²³	1979 -
University of Tampere, Department of Acting	1967 -
University of Tampere, Drama Studio	1960 - 1978
Institute of Industrial Arts,	1962 - 1973
which in 1973 became University of Industrial Arts	1973 -
The Lahti and Kuopio Schools of Handicrafts and Industrial arts (costume designers)	
Studies in foreign Theatre schools.	

The training of lighting and sound designers commenced in 1986 and the university level training for costume designers at the end of the 1980s.

The data on training were compiled from theatre registers and applications for grants.

²¹Hautala 1977, p.15.

²²Sauri 1985. Freelance actors are excluded.

²³ Swedish Theatre School and Finnish Theatre School became in the year 1979 Theatre Academy.

Data on education was available for 78 per cent of the research population. This figure does not include lighting and sound designers/technicians because they were still students at the time of this study. Of those for whom training data was available about 66 per cent had professional training in scenic art.

Tabulation 2. Professional training (N=1755²³)

Has professional training	Has none	No data available
52 %	26 %	22 %

It is still possible to gain an access to the profession of scenic artist without professional training and the majority of older scenic artists (especially actors) have obtained their professional competence through practical work. Possible entries to the profession include apprenticeship agreement, experience gained as amateur extras, amateur theatres and courses in the field in Civic Institutes.

Material has been compiled from courses that scenic artists have attended. The most common professional courses are those in supplementary training arranged by the Theatre Academy and courses arranged by Finland's Actors' Union and the TNL Theatre Association.

Membership of an Organisation

The membership of the following professional organizations is examined in the study:

- Finland's Actors' Union
- Association of Swedish Language Actors in Finland
- Union of Finnish Theatre Directors
- Union of Finnish Set Designers
- Union of Finnish Drama Teachers
- Association of Theatre Managers in Finland
- Union of Finnish Theatre Technicians²⁴

²³Lighting and sound technicians/designer are not included.

Helsinki Freelance Actors Association²⁵

Temporary probation members and probation members of the Actors' Union and that of set designers are included in the study. The intention was to include as comprehensive a group as possible in the study of those engaged in scenic art work in 1989.

While collecting the research population students and those residing permanently abroad were eliminated from membership lists. Only those members who have done or are doing artistic work were selected from the Association of Theatre Managers thus managers in administration and finance were excluded. Only those who do other artistic work and/or have received professional training were selected from the Union of Drama Teachers. For example teachers of reciting, singing and physical exercise were excluded.

Lighting and sound technicians/designers were included in the research population from the Union of Theatre Technicians. Naturally not all of them work as lighting or sound designers. Those pursuing the profession of lighting designers are included from among those who participated in the supplementary course at the Theatre Academy. At the moment lighting and sound designers do not have a union of their own but belong to the Technical and Special Trades Union and students at the Theatre Academy are apprentice members of the Union of Set Designers. The lighting and sound designers have applied for membership in the Union of Set Designers.

Members of Finland's Reciters' Union are included in the research population insofar that they fulfill some of the above mentioned criteria. In many cases Finnish reciters are active in other scenic art professions and the membership of the Union is small, thus its influence in the collection of the research population is not significant. As far as the members included in the population are concerned data on their other artistic professions are collected, so if necessary reciters can be excluded from the research population. Likewise Puppet Theatre artists are included only if they fulfill at least one of the above mentioned criteria. Puppet Theatre artists do not have a union of their own.

²⁴Lighting and sound technicians.

²⁵Those members who do not belong to Actors' Union.

Finnish scenic artists are highly unionized. About 93 per cent of the research population belong to one or another professional union and of them about 5 per cent belong to more than one union.

Tabulation 3. Union membership in 1989 (N = 1849)

Belongs to a union	88%
Belongs to several unions	5%
Non union member	7%

The Register of State Grants and Artists Pensions

Data on state grants and artists' pensions were compiled from the archives of the Ministry of Education and the Arts Council of Finland. In selecting the research population only a state grant to artists was accepted as a criterion and the data on grants obtained by the research population covers the whole period of the present arts administrative system. In the research population there were only a few who fulfilled this criterion alone because those who have received a state grant to artists are very often at least union members and in many cases were also professionally trained. The distribution of state grants is examined only from the period of the 1980s when also project grants and grants by Provincial Arts Councils are included. Grants from foundations and cities for the year 1989 are also examined.

As far as lighting and sound technicians/designers are concerned the criterion is that those who have applied for a grant whether they have received it or not and those who have received a project grant or a grant to artists were included in the research population. The reason for this is that lighting and sound designers have not consolidated their position as an artistic profession and yet the intention was to get as wide a coverage as possible for the research population.

Less than 40 per cent fulfill the criteria for a grant.

Theatre Register

The Central Association of Finnish Theatre Associations has published reference books on the field of theatre since 1950's. The register "Finnish theatres and theatre makers" was published in 1974, 1983 and a new one is to appear shortly containing information on Finnish theatre makers from 1991. While collecting the research population both the 1983 register and the new unpublished manuscript were available. The theatre register is an important reference and source material when collecting background data on the research population. Unlike a register for pictorial artists the only requirements for inclusion in the theatre register are working in the field of theatre and returning the questionnaire. This questionnaire was sent to theatres and union members. Apart from personal data the register also gives information on prizes received, vacancies and tasks in the theatre. This reference book includes artistic personnel and both managers in finance and administration. However, only persons doing artistic work and those functioning in the profession were selected from this register for the study. Students were also excluded.

76 per cent of the research population fulfilled the register criterion.

BREAKDOWN BY SCENIC ART PROFESSIONS

The scenic art profession has been and is nowadays becoming more and more multi-dimensional. Many give a combination of scenic professions (such as director-actor, director-set designer etc.) Often trained actors also direct or write manuscripts although they only give the profession they have trained for. Especially young generation actors work in many functions in the theatre. They write manuscripts, music, etc.

The increasing multi-dimension nature of scenic art also influences theatre research. Raisa Rauhamaa wrote in *Teatterilehti* (2/91) about how categories become blurred in the performing arts. "Nowadays its difficult to place the most interesting artists of our

time in any particular category"²⁶. In this sense a rough classification into professional groups partly does injustice to the nature of theatre art. However, from the viewpoint of the aims of this study it is necessary to classify the research population in some way but an attempt was made to take into account the multi-professionalism of scenic artists in the classification.

The profession was known of 93 per cent of the research population. The data was received either from professional unions or theatre registers. Of the population 6 per cent are persons pursuing some other than the scenic art profession proper or their profession is not known. At this stage of the study those pursuing other professions have been included because they have either professional training as a scenic artist or they belong to one or other of the professional unions.

The majority of the research population are either actors or actor-directors etc. totalling 67 per cent. About 12 per cent are directors or director-dramaturges and about 5 per cent set designers or set-costume designers. There are so few that give manager as their profession that this group was included in the combination professions of directors. In defining a profession the criteria was their own evaluation, professional training or union membership. Of the research population 56% were men and 44% women.

Tabulation 4. Breakdown by profession of scenic artists (N=1849)

Actor	64%
Director	10%
Dramaturge	3%
Actor+ other artistic/technical	3%
Director, manager+other artistic	2%
Set designer	4%
Costume designer	1%
Set + costume designer	1%
Lighting + effects	6%
Not known/other profession	6%

²⁶Rauhamaa 1991.

Table 1. Breakdown by gender by professional group of scenic artists

	M %	F%		Number
Actor	55	45	100	1191
Director	63	37	100	168
Dramaturge	37	63	100	57
Set designer	58	42	100	78
Costume Designer	4	96	100	26
Artistic combination professions	58	42	100	119
Other/not known	68	32	100	210 ²⁷
Total				1849

²⁷This number includes lighting and sound designers/technicians of whom more than 90 % are men.

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