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Ritva Mitchell & Sari Karttunen

## WHY AND HOW TO DEFINE AN ARTIST?

Types of Definitions and Their Implications  
for Empirical Research Results



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## 1. Introduction\*

*But what is it, to be an artist? Nothing shows up the general human dislike of thinking, and man's innate craving to be comfortable, better than his attitude to this question."*

*Thomas Mann, Tonio Kröger, 1928 (1903).*

*"What our postmodern age has yet to resolve for itself is its own cultural and social definition of the artist, which may also involve a redefinition of how artists see themselves. -- It may well be that the notion of the artist as a special individual -- has been replaced by a quite different sort of social character, one who prefers to forfeit the charismatic role, and who has scaled down his ambitions to conform to society's idea of the normalized job-holder."*

*Suzi Gablik, Has Modernism Failed?, 1986.*

Recent years have witnessed a growing interest in the study of the arts and artists in the social sciences, particularly in sociology but also in economics and political science. This naturally leads us to the theoretical debate about what an artist is in modern and more especially in postmodern society. It also brings up for discussion the methodological - and more practical - problem how to define who an artist is at a given time and space. The need to contrast "who" and "what" indicates that the study of the artists is due to more than one type of knowledge constituting interest (Habermasian Erkenntnis interesse).

When we ask "who is an artist", we are, as researchers, concerned with the artist as a member of a professional group. When we ask "what is an artist" we are dealing with more existential or ontological problems: what are the inherent characteristics of artistic work and artists themselves.

The dual nature of the issue is also reflected in the use of the term *define*. It can be used to refer to the technical and empirical social science research problem of identifying the members of a professional group. In this case the knowledge constituting interest is usually, that the unambiguous identification of artists as a professional group is needed for assessing the social and economic position of artists.

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\* This paper was prepared for the 6. International Conference on Cultural Economics, Umeå, Sweden, 1990.

'Define' also refers to the aestheticians' more fundamental search, the need to find out what an artist is, to reveal some special quality, capacity or gift which makes a person a true artist, a creative genius. This quality or capacity is usually linked to the artist's ability - and his or her predicament - to see and interpret or reinterpret the world in a new manner.

This paper deals mainly with the first, technical, aspects of defining the artist; and it is, at least to start with, committed to the practical interest of identifying artists as a professional group for empirical social science research. The paper has been inspired by recent Finnish studies on the position of artists and the problems of definitions they have encountered. Finnish data is used to illustrate the argument.

However, the paper has another purpose as well. It tries to point out that the two above-mentioned ways of defining the artist cannot be entirely separated from each other. First of all we cannot answer the question 'who is an artist' without making the value judgement 'what is an artist'; there is no aesthetic neutrality in the definition of the artist even though social scientists are expected not to evaluate or rank artists in aesthetic terms (see e.g. Bird, 1979). Secondly, both ways of defining the artist can also be perceived as having a joint social function. They serve to integrate and demystify (e.g. Becker, Bourdieu, Wolff) or isolate and mystify (e.g. aestheticians) artists' communities from the rest of the society; and they also help to include or exclude individual artists in/from these communities or society at large (see for example Becker 1984; Bourdieu 1969, 1980; Wolff 1981).

Since the pioneering works of Dickie, Danto, Becker, Bourdieu and Wolff it is a commonplace to say that the definitions of art and artist can be conceived as a means of defining boundaries of the art worlds or more or less autonomous spheres of art. These scholars, and others following their lead, have usually aimed at a synthesis which would more or less cover the main features of Western art worlds as a conglomerate of unique professional groups and individuals.

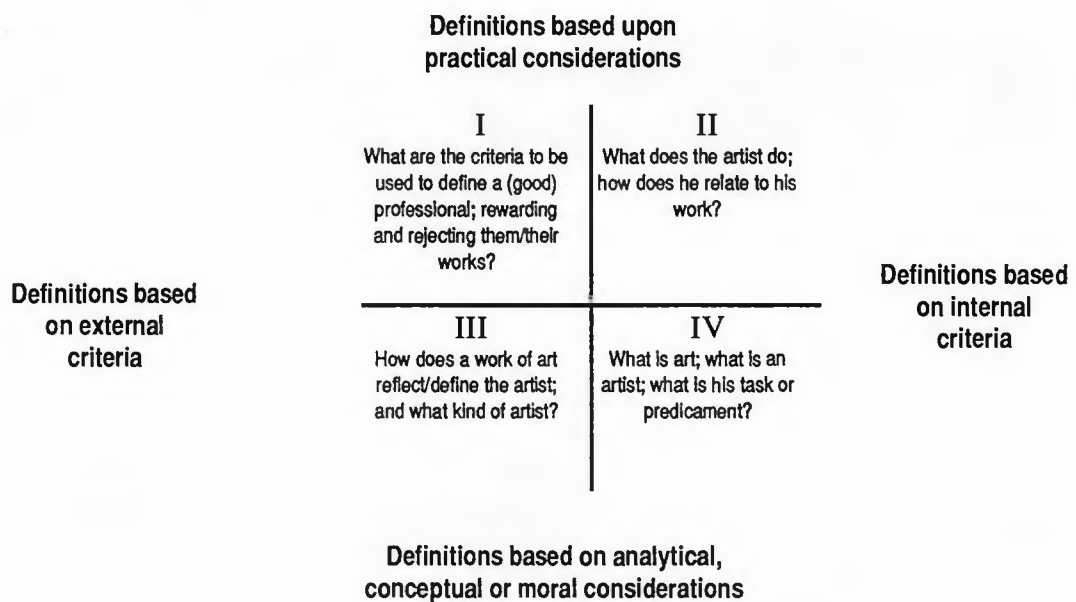
Less attention has been paid to two more specific problems. We can first ask, how different types of definitions actually interact in and influence the formation of concrete professional groups (visual artists, writers, composers etc.) in a given social

and cultural context; and secondly, how different national, regional and cultural definitions produce variations in the composition and structure of and the social and artistic practices within these formations.

## 2. On the Interaction of Different Definitions

The two first passages of this paper already described in a preliminary manner the two dimensions underlying the criteria used in the definition of the artist: the internal - external dimension and the conceptual - practical dimension. The relations and interactions between these dimensions and the definitions they generate can be clarified with the following typology and its model questions.

*FIGURE 1.* Dimensions of Definition of the Artist



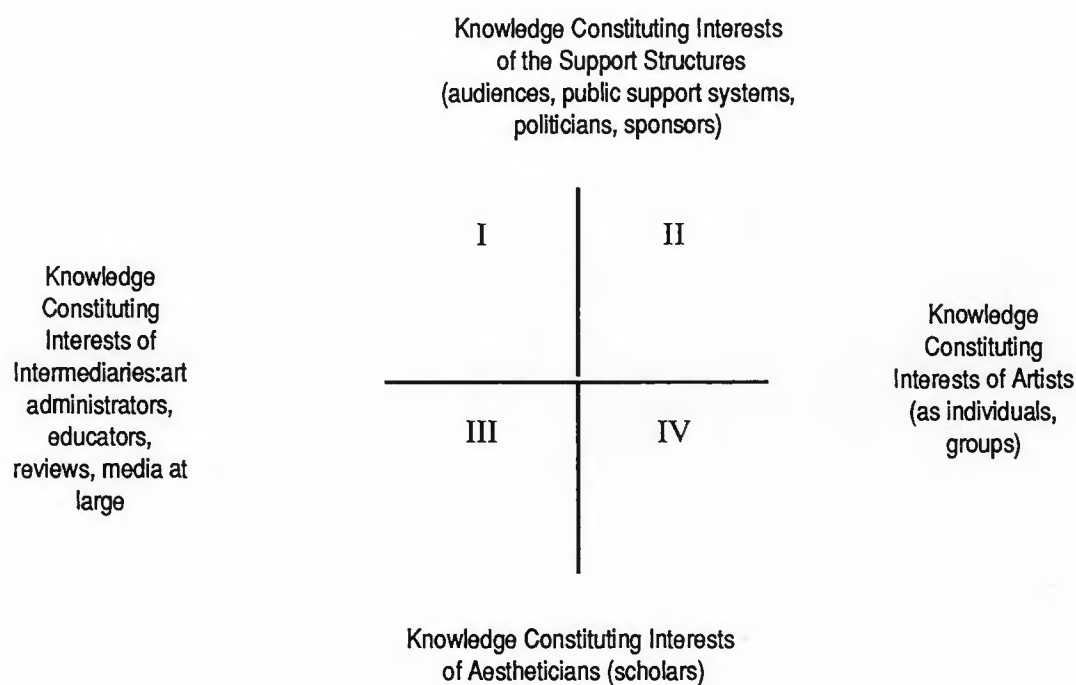
The typology seemingly depicts an artist's "career": from motivation (Cell IV), to commitment (Cell II) and achievement (Cell III); and further to the cultural marketplace (Cell I). We can locate the existential problems of the artist in Cell IV and the famous Tonio Kröger problem, i.e., the relationship of an artist with his work in Cell II. We also know that there is a dividing line between Cells I and III on the one hand and Cells II and IV on the other. All artists are not, of course, engaged in internal



motivational or commitment problems, but take the external professional and vocational definitions for granted: they produce works of art and call themselves artists.

Figure 1 is, however, too general. It does not indicate who carries out the defining. This is done in Figure 2.

*FIGURE 2.* Knowledge Constituting Interests in Defining the Artist.



There is a structural correspondence between the two figures: artists and aestheticians (scholars) usually provide the internal, conceptual/moral and aesthetic criteria for defining the artist, the intermediaries and support structures provide the external and practical criteria. Yet, the correspondence is by no means one to one. Artists' organizations (artists as a group) are often the main source for external criteria too, and scholars, particularly sociologists and economists carrying out empirical research often use these external and often even practical criteria (members of professional associations) while studying artists; and for example supporting structures (both private and public) may and often do define the arts and artists they wish to finance or sponsor in terms of internal criterion (exceptional artistic talent etc).

Figures 1 and 2 can be related to the ongoing discussion of the present state and development of Western art worlds. There are some critical voices which deplore the decrease of the importance of internal, moral and conceptual criteria, and which suggest that artists are increasingly becoming shop-keepers, normalized job-holders or bureaucratized professionals (Gablik 1986). On the other hand, there are other voices, which suggest that the Western high arts have been liberated from unnecessary metaphysics and can now function as free agents in a postmodern society (see e.g. Zolberg 1990). Economists and even cultural policy planners and social engineers are searching for new definitions of art and artists as a societal source of creativity and innovations which must be given their autonomy but must also be more efficiently drawn from for economic and social purposes (economic impact of the arts arguments among cultural economists, see e.g. Andersson 1987).

### **3. What is the Number of Visual Artists and Writers in Finland? Criteria, Numbers and Underlying Definitions**

We can next try to relate the above discussion to concrete case studies by examining the types of definitions of visual artists and writers used in Finnish studies.

The Arts Council of Finland has financed a number of studies of Finnish artists and writers in order to gain information about their economic and social position. One of the foremost problems of these studies turned out to be the criteria to be used in defining the units and populations of the study.

It goes without saying that we are dealing here with studies which are mainly motivated by external and practical knowledge constituting interest; and that different definitions of units give different populations and different results when assessing the relative well-being and status of different artistic professions. Yet the studies also indicated that important information could be gained from the Finnish art worlds by simply examining the different types of criteria and definitions used to identify different groups of artists.

The two most extensive studies until now have dealt with writers and visual artists (Heikkinen 1989, Karttunen 1988). Tables 1 and 2 indicate, how the number of visual artists and writers vary when different criteria of delineating the artistic population were used.

*TABLE 1. Number of Visual Artists by Different Criteria in 1984.*

CRITERION	N
1. Persons who have applied to be included in the professional register (including those who have been admitted; members of professional associations are automatically included in the professional register of visual artists, see the third criteria) or have been awarded state grants for artists or have graduated from the main art schools in 1979-1983	1314
2. Persons who have given visual artist: painter, sculptor or graphic artist as their occupation in census (of 1985)	1910
3. Persons registered in the official register of the visual artists maintained by the Finnish Artists Association	934
4. Persons taxed as professional visual artists (sub-group of the whole population of visual artists used in the study, see the first criterion)	850
5. Members of professional associations of visual artists (painters, sculptors, graphic artists)	723

Source: Karttunen 1988

TABLE 2. Number of Writers by Different Empirical Criteria in 1984

CRITERION	N
1. Persons who have received state or library grants during the ten year period 1976 - 1985 and/or are members of a professional association (see the fifth criterion)	1149
2. Persons who have given writer or critic as their occupation in the census (of 1985)	460
3. Active writers, i.e. persons who have published books, plays for theatre, radio or TV during the five year period 1980 - 1984	715
4. Persons taxed as professional writers (sub-group of the whole population of writers used in the study, see the first criterion)	350
5. Members of professional associations of writers	874

Source: Heikkinen 1989

The criteria used in identifying the units and populations in Tables 1 and 2 are based on the available sources of information. Definitions of units and populations of the two groups of artists were made as comparable as possible. At the same time comparability in respect to earlier studies both in Finland and in other countries were aimed at (e. g. Atzmüller 1981; Brighton & Pearson 1985; Filer 1986; Fohrbeck & Wiesand 1980; Hartmann 1984; Fria kulturarbetare 1981; Moulin et.al. 1985).

The criteria used are thus based on rather technical considerations. Yet, the criteria also reflect more generally the different ways of defining the artist/writer. Before looking at the frequencies, we can ask, what kind of deeper definitions - or even ideologies - underly the criteria, and how do they relate to discussions condensed in Figures 1 and 2.

From the criteria used in Tables 1 and 2 we can derive at least the following types of definitions and their background ideologies:

**1. *Self-definition*:** an artist is a person, who says or otherwise indicates that he/she is an artist. This can take place as self-labelling, e.g. by giving an artist or a writer as one's occupation in census (the second criteria in tables 1 and 2). This can also take place when a person considers himself/herself an artist or a writer and asks for legitimation or right for this status by applying for a membership in a professional association, or by applying for grants or for inclusion in official or semi-official registers of artists/writers (included in the first criteria in tables 1 and 2). We can, of course, consider these criteria "internal", yet they usually have little to do with the problems of motivation and commitment depicted by Cells IV and II in Figure 1. Self-labelling usually reflects a sense of achievements ("I can already call myself an artist/writer") or need to legitimize the self-perception ("I am good enough to gain membership/to be included in the register").

**2. *Definition based on production*:** an artist is a person who carries out artistic activities and produces works of art. This definition usually assumes serious artistic activity and full-time production during a whole life-span. This definition underlies criteria 1 in both tables and even more distinctly criterion 3 in Table 2.

Additional assumptions of collective control by the artistic community, media/critics, audience reception and commercial interests are, however, usually attached to this definition. Thus artists' activities are assumed to follow the same modes and patterns as that of other artists; and their works are expected to be exhibited (in exhibitions, performances) or disseminated (published, reproduced) by an established arts institution ( an art museum, a gallery, a publishing house, a theatre etc.). They are also expected to have an audience, if not immediately, at least sometimes in the future; and they are often expected to be, at least to a certain extent, commercially successful. By and large this definition corresponds to that of Cells I and III in Figure 1.

**3. *Definition of the artist by society at large*,** i.e. recognition of artists as distinct subgroups of society with their own rights and obligations. They carry out special types of transactions with the rest of the society, have the right to do that and must provide for social costs accruing from that. This kind of definition is reflected in criterion 4 in tables 1 and 2. Some of these rights and obligations are the same as those of the population at large or any professional group (e.g. status as tax-payer, as receiver of social benefits), the others can be special privileges or sanctions (right to decide about the direction and time of work, artistic freedom, grants, censorship). Some of these rights and obligations are official, legislatively or administratively stipulated; but some are unofficial, dictated by the expectations and norms of the population at large. This definition corresponds best to Cell I of Figure 1.

**4. *Definition by peers*:** an artist is a person whom fellow artists recognize as their legitimate colleague. This definition can imply conformity to activities and modes and

patterns of work in the given art world; but has also some formal criterion (training, certain demonstration of having reached the status of a professional) and quality and quantity of production is expected before the recognition of colleagues is gained.

This recognition is often institutionalized and even bureaucratized, that is, it is given by artists associations which define the criteria to enter a professional association or to be included in a register of professional artists. This kind of formalized collective definition of artists underlies the fifth criterion in Tables 1 and 2. This type of definition can be related to the definitions in Figure 1 only in a vague manner. It can be suggested that an artist lets colleagues define his/her relation to his/her work (Cell II); or artists' organizations can be conceived as mediators which assess the quality of an artist's work (Cell III).

If we compare the number of artists in different units in Finland, we can notice that the *production criteria* and *criteria based on self-definition* give the highest number of artists and writers. This was particularly the case with female visual artists (the share of female artists in the whole population of visual artists used in the study was 39 % when the criterion of self-definition was used and 31 % when the criterion of membership in a professional association was used). We can also see that the two professional fields differ considerably as to their internal institutional and organizational structure. This is reflected both in the criteria and the figures in Tables 1 and 2.

The field of visual arts is defined professionally rather strictly in Finland; and the field is also more guild-like and more closed than the field of literature. This is reflected in the fact that the number of members in the professional associations of visual artists is rather low when compared to the whole population of visual artists used in the study. The high number of those who call themselves visual artists and give it as their occupation in a census indicates that there are persons, who work as full-time artists, but are not admitted (or in case of younger artists do not wish to belong) to professional organizations. Literary work, in contrast, is more often a second profession; and the criteria of admission to the ranks of a professional writer - at least in terms of the membership in professional associations - are rather lenient and the profession is more open.

We can elaborate the picture with Tables 3 and 4. They give information about the average income and grants received by Finnish visual artists and writers.

*TABLE 3.* Average Income (FIM) and Grants (% of those who received grants within the unit) Received by Finnish Visual Artists in 1984 by Different Empirical Criteria. (The same criteria are used as in Table 1.)

CRITERION <sup>1</sup>	N	INCOME	GRANTS %
1	1314	63.900	29
3	934	72.800	36
4	850	63.900	35
5	723	75.000	42

<sup>1</sup>No available data as regards criterion 2 (self-definition, census data).

Source: Karttunen 1988

*TABLE 4.* Average Income and Grants (% of who received grants within the unit) Received by Finnish Writers in 1984 by Different Empirical Criteria (the same criteria are used as in Table 2).

CRITERION <sup>1</sup>	N	INCOME	GRANTS %
1	1149	110.000	59
3	715	116.000	74
4	350		81
5	874		64
Full-time writers	252	117.000	87

<sup>1</sup>No available data regards criterion 2 (self-definition, census data) in neither respect; criterion 4 and 5 as regards income. As regards writers' incomes the study concentrated on division between fulltime writers and part-time writers.

Source: Heikkinen 1989

The figures indicate that in the field of visual arts both income and grants received are the function of institutional and organizational position of the artist: those who are more institutionalized in the professional system earn more and receive more grants and rewards especially from the state. Visual artists belonging to professional associations received 97 % of all state grants awarded to visual artists in 1984. In the case of writers the division exists more between full-time writers and those who write as their second profession (part-time writers). Only some 250 writers in Finland

presently earn their living solely from their literary work and these writers are very dependent on state grants. Of full-time writers 87 % received grants in 1984. In order to understand fully the significance of Table 3 and 4 one should be reminded of the importance of the system of state grants to artists in Finland. Since the end of the 1960's (Arts Promotion Act of 1967) Finland has had an extensive system of state grants for artists and writers. The system allots a basic tax free monthly salary as 1, 3, 5 or 15 year grants to artists. Annually over 400 artists and writers enjoy these grants. In addition there is a library compensation system for writers (compensation is given as a grant to writers and not as a compensation based on borrowing figures). These systems have of course increased the knowledge constituting interest of the Arts Council of Finland, the nine National Councils for the Arts and the Ministry of Education in defining who an artist/writer is.

Our empirical illustrations relate only to a limited extent to the more general discussion 'who' and 'what' an artist is, discussion which was outlined at the beginning of the paper and condensed in Figures 1 and 2. Empirically oriented research needing to identify entire professional groups of artists must resort to external and practical criteria to define who is an artist; and therefore not much can be said about different sub-groups or "true artists" in terms of aesthetic judgement, motivation, self-reflexion and commitment of an artist. On the other hand, empirical cases indicate the restraints of artistic freedom and different external interests in defining who an artist is.

#### **4. Finnish Ideology of Supporting Artists as Intellectual Resources of Society**

The definitions in Tables 1 and 2 and the figures in Tables 3 and 4 also reveal something general about Finnish ideology as to the social role of artists and the use of the arts as an intellectual resource of society. This ideology can be labelled corporativist-statist, where professional organizations and public (central government) support systems interact in defining and supporting the core of artistic and creative capacity.

This ideology is also organizational and nationalistic. It is organizational in the sense that the definition of the artist by organized peers is crucial, and it is nationalistic in

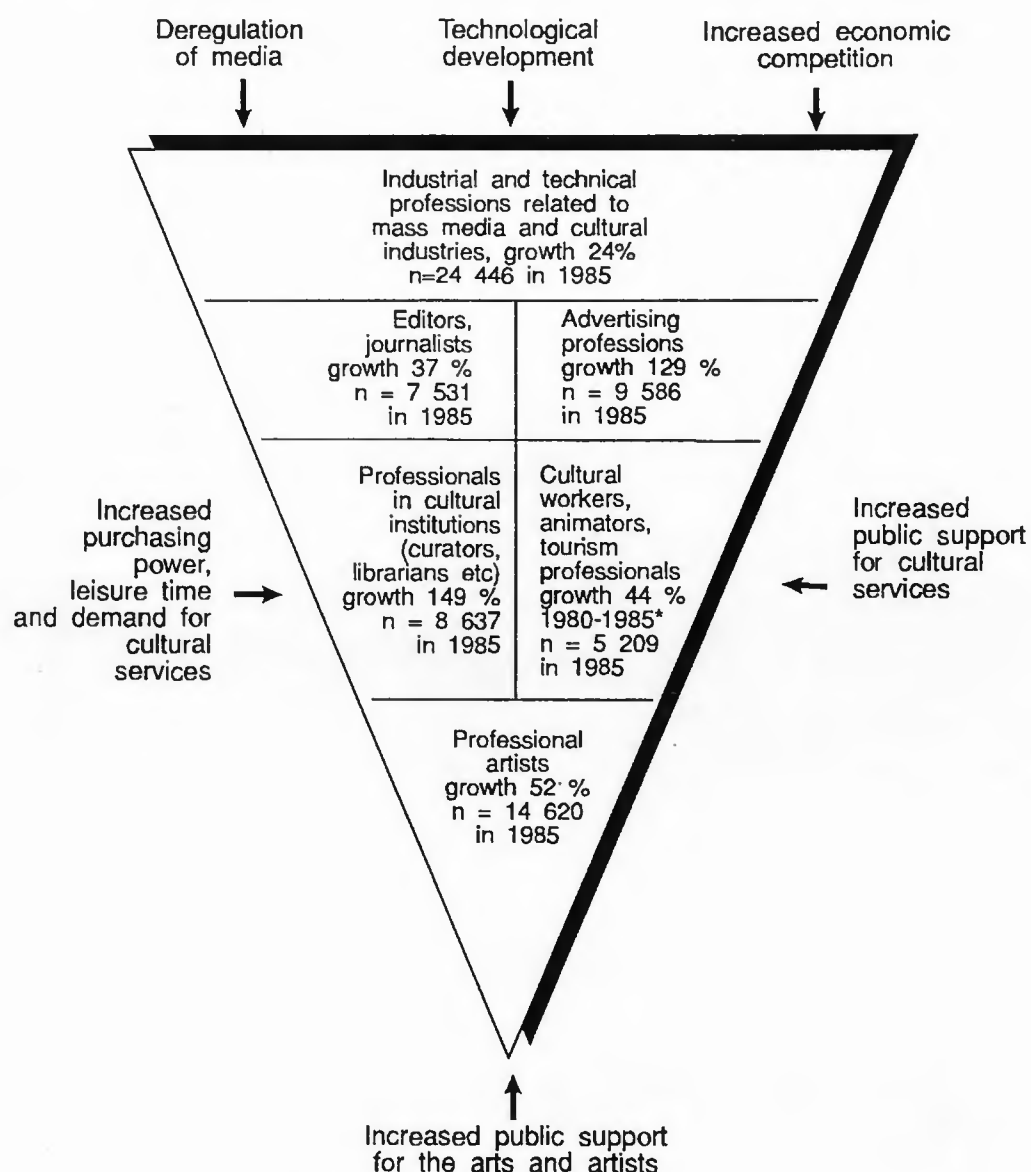


the sense that a rather extensive and well-organized grant system aims at supporting professional Finnish artists and their production which have to compete with foreign cultural production. Even the self-definition of artists themselves are formulated and honed against organizational and nationalistic definitions. Only commercially successful or internationally renowned artists can escape them. Yet, this organizational and nationalistic grasp obviously varies from one artistic field to another as the comparison of visual artists and writers indicates.

This Finnish ideology in supporting the artist is, of course, the product of socio-historical conditions: cultural heritage, limited arts markets, closed language area, a unique culture at the crossroads between West and East and the ideology of a welfare state. Finnish artists need, in order to survive, grant systems and strong professional organizations to bargain with cultural policy makers; and the nation needs artists for the maintenance of a national cultural identity. The submission of the arts and artists to an organizational and nationalistic system is thus an outcome of socio- historical and cultural conditions.

These conditions do, however, change with time and they have changed a great deal in Finland. Figure 3 depicts some of these changes and provides some additional information to Tables 1 - 4. The Figure is based on census data and indicates that according to self-definition the number of artists (both creative and performing artists) has increased in Finland during the last 15 years four times faster than the number of gainfully employed population as a whole. Some trends of cultural, political, technological and media development which have possibly affected this growth are depicted in the Figure. From the Figure we can also see that the market sector within the support structure has increased its importance in defining artists and the arts in general.

**FIGURE 3.** Growth in the Number of Artists (per cent) and Some Related Professions in Finland in 1970-1985 (The growth of all gainfully employed population in 1970-1985 was 14 percent.)



\* Growth in 1980-1985, no data for 1970-1980 available.

Source: Mitchell 1989, data in the figure is based on Official Finnish Statistics (Liikkanen).

Even though the market sector within the support structure has increased its importance the new upsurge of private financing and particularly corporate sponsorship has had until now only some minor effect on the Finnish ideology of

public support. On the other hand, the development of neighbouring rights and copyright systems, with an emphasis on legal licence, has further strengthened the role of artists' professional organizations. It also seems that the need to include all intellectual property right owners in a common front relaxes the organizational definitions of the artist. An indication of this is that the need to cooperate more closely in the field of copyright and neighbouring rights problems has brought the professional organizations of high and popular culture closer to each other. There are some 26 000 copyright holders in Finland, whereas the number of professional artists and writers in census data was 14 000 in 1985.

The above description of the Finnish ideology suggests that professional artists in Finland are as yet "bureaucratized professionals" in the sense of Gablik's criticism. It must, however, be noted that the above analyses are based on formal external definitions and data. If aesthetic judgements or some motivational criteria or criteria of commitment to the profession of artists were used, the picture would be naturally quite different.

## 5. Conclusions

Our empirical illustrations address only indirectly the more general issues of defining the artist. They do not provide information about the commitment or motivational factors shaping artists' careers and his or her inclusion/exclusion into artists' communities and society at large. The Finnish studies referred to provide some information about the professional career of visual artists and writers, their production and reward systems; but more through analyses of how internal factors and self-reflection shape artists' careers and his/her other role in society would require different research approach and techniques.

Yet, the type of studies reported here may remind one of certain things forgotten in more general theoretical discussion. Organizational and cultural factors - socio-historical conditions - shaping the definition of the artist and his or her position are important while studying artists. An artist is always a socio-historical construction as is art.

Variations between different art forms and between different countries should also be taken into consideration while studying artists. As our empirical cases illustrated there are differences between definitions of artists in different art fields even in the same country during the same time period.

An artist as a creator can be subjected to a universal philosophical scrutiny; but when we examine him or her as a professional and when we are interested in the social and economic prerequisites and effects of his or her work, we no more can speak about him or her without taking these cultural and socio-historical contexts into consideration.

The final comment takes us to the question in the title of this paper: why and how to define the artist. The answer seems simple: "why" refers to our theoretical need to understand; "how" to our practical need to compare. To understand what the artist is, what kind of a "source of creativity" he/she actually is, we must discuss and try to solve the type of problems referred to in our background discussion. Yet, in order to actually find this source of creativity, we must be able to identify persons who function as this source. For this purpose international comparisons and comparisons between different artistic fields (art worlds) in time and space are important. In these comparisons we must not aim only at formal comparability which allows the use of quantitative data. It is equally important to compare the criteria and definitions used, different responses to the question: who and what is an artist?

As the above discussion indicates different definitions of artists can serve as a useful research object to be read and interpreted while studying art worlds: both artists and institutions defining their position.

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