

Feiwei Kupferberg

Malmö University

Teachers' Education

S- 205 06 Malmö, Sweden

e-mail: Feiwei.Kupferberg@lut.mah.se

Artistic Creativity as an Elementary Social Form. The forms, conditions and rules of creativity

As often happens in creative work, my thinking on the overall topic of this paper, Artistic creativity as an elementary social form, has changed since I sent in my abstract. The subtitle is now called "The forms, rules and conditions of creativity."

The basic idea of the paper is the same. By studying artistic creativity as an elementary form in the sense the concept is used by Durkheim in his study "The Elementary forms of Religious Life" you learn something more general about creativity. All or most of the elements in the general phenomenon can already be found here.

But if that is indeed the case, why haven't sociologists been more interested in studying artistic creativity? As noted by Victoria Alexander in a recent book on the sociology of art, "a key aspect of the work of artists is the creativity..that is reflected in their work. Yet this aspect is often completely set aside in the sociology of art." If and when sociologists do indeed mention artistic creativity they tend to dismiss this aspect as irrelevant for understanding art.

Thus Becker in his seminal work "Art Worlds" from 1982 suggested that only mavericks try to be creative and have to pay the price by being rightfully ignored. Becker mentions the sobering tale of a composer who invented his own tonal system. Merely in order to play that one work, he had to hire an orchestra who spent months only to learn the new system. Who else would be so generous? So most of the work this unfortunate but creative composer had spent on his artistic work turned out to be meaningless because it would probably never be played again apart from this one-time experience.

Had that unfortunate composer been a sociologist, he would have known the elementary fact that people in society always do things together. This also puts a break on artists who attempt

to be “too creative.” Most artists though, Becker suggests, have indeed a spontaneous sociological knowledge within them and do not repeat the mistake of the maverick composer. They simply ignore the attempt to be creative and go on “doing things together” as everyone else.

But how do we know that Becker’s sweeping statement is empirically correct? What makes us take the anecdotal evidence Becker presents in the book for dismissing artistic creativity for granted. How do we know that his description of the art world is reliable, valid and representative? This does not mean that I would deny that there is always a social element in art work as well, but shouldn’t we at least ask ourselves the open question of what this social element consists of and whether this social element is indeed all one can meaningfully say about artistic processes?

Maria Arana who interviewed a number of writers for her book *The Writing Life* arrived at the following somewhat more complex view of how the social intertwines with the non-social in writing: “If readers carry away one lesson from this book it should be that writers learn their craft above all from other writers. From reading. From immersing themselves in book.. it is in essence lonely work; isolation is what they must learn to savor.” (Arana, 2003, p. xix – xv). Joyce Carol Oates too notes this inherent duality or paradox of writing as an occupation. It is indeed a craft, and in order to learn the craft you need to be in the presence of the masters. These are of course rarely physically present, you approach them by reading novels or short stories or poems by these eminent writers. So there is clearly a social element here but it has little to do with “doing things together.” The social here takes the form of imitation. Gradually by imitating other writers the writer eventually finds their own, unique style, fitting the type of experiences, moods, memories, emotions etc. the writer seeks to convey. But in order to come that far and find your own, personally unique or original style, the writer has to be able to work alone, not in the presence of other people. Which is why Joyce Carol Oates in her introduction to a book of essays on writing starts with the sentence: “writing is an awfully lonely work.” (Oates, 2005, p. 9).

In his autobiography, Stanislavsky describes the moment when he realized the small but important difference between the amateur actor and the professional actor. The latter was able not to be awed by the presence of a large audience, having gathered to watch the performance with certain expectations that we bring with us everytime we go to the theatre. In his instructory books on the technique of action, Stanislavsky calls this the learned ability of the actor to be able to fully concentrate on his acting and hence in a certain sense forget the

audience. “Stanislavsky calls this...psychophysical state “public solitude. In it actors turn out anything external to the play. They behave in public as in private.” (Carnicke, 2000, p. 18)

Obviously actors have to cooperate with other actors, and during rehearsal on stage, we probably will find a lot of what Becker called “doing things together.” But somehow this does not capture the essence of acting. The actor proves his or her ability to act not during semi-private rehearsals, but at the opening night and the nights to follow with an audience in front of them. Although an actor might forget a line and get help from a person hiding in a booth and there are also other elements of working together, the crucial test is the ability to glide into the state of “public solitude” just as the author in order to write, compose novels, short stories, poems, that is create, has to find time to be alone with the task of writing.

Beckers dismissal of the creativity of artists by emphasizing the need to “do things together” could probably be explained by his personal experiences as a jazz musician. These rarely work alone, on the contrary they enter the playful mood and learn to improvise precisely by working together. But this working together in this case, does not make the jazz musician less creative. Obviously Becker was using the concept creativity in a somewhat narrow sense. To be creative does not mean that you have to be a Stravinski or a Picasso. Creativity is a much more ordinary type of activity which you can find among most children although our schools have the unfortunate tendency to kill that natural creativity after a few years.

So what is creativity in a more general sociological sense, how can we recognize it if we see it? Durkheim in his book on religion argued that what any religion did, its most elementary form, was to make a distinction between the sacred and the profane. In art, a similar elementary form of creativity seems to be “play.” According to Joyce Carol Oates “ art originates in play – in improvisation, experimenting and phantasy. To its essence it remains playful and spontaneous, an exercise of phantasy that is similar to exercises of the body, without any other goal then bodily liberation.” (Oates, 2005, p. 47).

The resemblance between artistic creativity and bodily exercises has been noted by Czikszentmihalyi who introduced the concept of “flow.” He defines flow as some kind of optimal experience, characterized by a strong feeling of presence but also a delicate balance between what a person is capable of and what is required of that person in any given situation. When these two aspects fit, we get the feeling of flow.

We have so far looked at the most elementary form that creativity takes, that is how we recognize creativity when we see it. I will now look at a different level of creativity which we could call the conditions of play. What does it take to allow an artist (or a child or scholar or

teacher or entrepreneur for that manner) to enter such a playful mood? There are several aspects involved here. One has to do with time. Writers do not immediately enter the state of flow. They have to establish regular working-habits, such as four hours every morning, in order to enter the desired mood. They tend to sit there, day after day perhaps for a year or two until the novel is finished. As they sit there, they realize it is not only a question of play, writing as any creative work is indeed very difficult and requires an enormous amount of discipline. Orwell in his essay *Why I write*, complained that writing a book was “like a long bout of illness.” A novel has to be composed, one has to find exactly how to tell the story, that is when to reveal what information in what order, which takes a lot of work. Work and play here somehow go together (this is the crucial difference with children’s play).

Another aspect has to do with motives. In order to be engaged in such long, self-disciplined work trying desperately to reach those intermittent moments of flow, one has to be equipped with a strong motive. Amabile talks of creators as driven by “intrinsic motivations” rather than “extrinsic motivations.” It is not external rewards that drives a creator but something inside that creator, something which could probably be found in the biography of that creator. These personal experiences are often seen among film-directors. As emphasized by the so called *auteur-theorists*, film-directors tend to make the same film over and over again. Other film-directors talk of their artistic demon which is probably rooted in some kind of crucial experience early or later in their lives or both. One of the artists interviewed by Kuh in her book on the artist’s view emphasizes that art often starts with some vivid personal memory that the artist seeks to recreate. Writers are often driven by some crucial event in their lives, a kind of turning-point. Jane Austen had written numerous girlish novels but what transformed her into a great novelist was a life crisis. She was rejected by her young, handsome and rich suitor Tom Leary for pure financial reasons and the chock gave her the topic she needed to write grown-up novels.

A third aspect of the dimension conditions of creativity is something we could call “tolerant environments.” This is a topic we will return to later when we talk of creative cities, but it should be mentioned that “critical mass” is a relative concept, particularly among artist. There were probably not more than a dozen Impressionists and the Bloomsbury circle included even less people. I don’t know how many took part in Stanislavsky’s experimental theatre in Moscow, but they were probably not so many either. What distinguished these artistic and literary milieus was that they constituted tolerant environments. This tolerance did not constrain itself to technical issues but concerned life style as well. Bloomsbury developed out of the philosophical circle of the Apostles, which taught a particular ethical creed which

precisely worshipped all kinds of tolerance. The Scottish Enlightenment, which did not produce very much in the arts but the more in science and industry, owed much of its blossoming of creativity to the fact that it was the most tolerant part of Europe in terms of religious tolerance. As we know religious intolerance is not a very good breeding ground for any kind of creativity, including the religious one.

I have mostly talked of artistic creativity, but art is not the only type of creativity, there are many others. So what distinguishes art from other types of creativity? One suggestion would be that art seems to be a very unruly type of creativity, but this is not a good diagnosis. Elements of creative chaos appears in all professions and could indeed be said to be one of its conditions, apart from the other aspects mentioned. The difference is that artists do not do much to hide this creative chaos. On the contrary they willingly embrace it whereas scholars are somewhat embarrassed by it as it goes counter to the idea of science as an hypothesis-testing enterprise and you cannot hope to test a hypothesis unless you state it clearly at the beginning of the research process. Teachers are not too happy about creative chaos either as they would like to be in control of what goes on in the class room and often come to class with a well-planned agenda.

But if that is indeed the case, if creative chaos is indeed a general condition for creativity, why are only artists prone to embrace it? One possible explanation suggested by Pierre Bourdieu is that the prevalence of creative chaos in art reveals that there are no inherent aesthetic rules that govern the art world. Whereas there are relative strict rules concerning for instance what an academic piece of work should look like and teaching is as a role tightly controlled by the national and local authorities, it is difficult to find similar strict rules in the arts. Bourdieu complains about this inherent unruliness of art, arguing that it makes the process of social recognition of talent unrelated to any aesthetic concerns. Instead he suggests that what determines processes of recognition of art is the hidden effects of social capital of various sorts. The dominance of a particular aesthetic style cannot be explained by any aesthetic criteria. It is rather the dominant aesthetics of the dominant classes that through myriads of hidden mechanisms work their way through the artistic field and determine which artistic works (and creativity) get recognized and achieve symbolic status or become carriers of symbolic capital.

I think Bourdieu's hypothesis has some validity, at least concerning the visual arts that have always been somewhat elitist and dependent upon rich patrons. At the same time Bourdieu seems to confuse specific aesthetic criteria, which of course vary endlessly, with certain aesthetic ground rules defining modern art which are surprisingly stable. There are indeed

certain aesthetic expectations artists have to live up to if they want to enter artistic careers. These expectations do exist, but they have mostly been ignored by sociologists. This can easily be seen if we compare artistic creativity with other types of creativity. Through such a play of ideas we find that there might be certain aesthetic ground-rules that do govern artistic creativity after all. Thus a modern art work is first of all expected not to be utilitarian as an industrial product. Rule number 1. We should enjoy art for the aesthetic pleasure it gives us and no other reason. Rule number two. A modern art work must avoid to be didactic, it must not tell the audience how to interpret a piece of art. This also means that art works must be somewhat ambivalent and difficult to decode or the pleasure of decoding it would disappear. Rule number three. A modern art work must reveal a unique and original voice or style, it cannot simply imitate its masters but has to go beyond them. In this sense no art work can be “too original.” There are no mavericks in art, or rather one is either a maverick or one is not an artist. But this again suggests that for artistic creativity to take place certain conditions such as “public solitude” or a certain “isolation” often has to be present. For all creativity the most basic form is play. But artistic play is different from other types of play. This is because the rules of the artistic play is different from other types of play and this in turn influences some of the conditions of artistic creativity as well.