Research on the Individual Artist: Seeking the Solitary Singer

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Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself.
(I am large. I contain multitudes.)
—“Song of Myself,” Leaves of Grass, Walt Whitman

In the past half century researchers have learned a great deal about artists, and researchers who study artists have a few things in common with their subjects. Both are at times creative, often eclectic, occasionally controversial, and can be said to contain Whitman’s multitudes. Although accused, like T. S. Eliot’s Prufrock, of trying to categorize the makers of the ephemeral, researchers have provided insightful and sometimes contradictory information. In this article, I present an overview of the kinds of information that researchers have produced, drawing international comparisons where appropriate and delineating some of the frustrations that still exist in creating an accurate profile of American artists.

In 1986, economist Randall Filer wrote an article based on 1980 census data on the earnings of artists in the United States. In “The ‘Starving Artist’—Myth or Reality?” Filer said there was little indication that “artists earn less than they might expect to earn in other jobs” and that “the average artist

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earned about 10 percent less in 1979 than he or she would have in nonartistic employment" (Filer 1986, 59, 73). Although some researchers dismissed Filer’s notion at the time, evidence emerged in 2003 that puts artists squarely in the middle class (Alper and Wassall 1996; Galligan and Alper 2000; Throsby and Mills 1989; Throsby and Thompson 1994; Jeffri and Greenblatt 1997). Although this is true in economic terms, artists earn their middle-class income from multiple jobs, sometimes simultaneous with their art jobs.

Economists describe the unusual characteristic that trades personal achievement, innovation, and freedom for regular, market-rate income. Sociologists such as Pierre-Michel Menger remark on the simultaneous rise in employment and unemployment among artists. And most academics, whatever their discipline or country, profess the large oversupply of artists. Some have challenged this view by suggesting that, in trying to develop programs to help artists, funders and policymakers overstate the situations and needs of artists.

STATUS OF THE ARTIST

In 1998, Sari Karttunen wrote an article summarizing countries that have adopted status-of-the-artist policies. These range from socially invested countries, such as those in Scandinavia that offer employment counseling and social benefits specifically for artists, to Quebec, Canada, where a 1986 status-of-the-artist report proposed to recognize and redefine the artistic profession in Canadian life. Policies that attempt to recognize the status of artists and integrate them into societal aims and norms have long been the envy of policymakers in the United States.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), an entity with an extremely broad definition of artists, continues its World Congress on the Status and Rights of Artists.

CENSUS

Economists Neil Alper and Gregory Wassall have done extensive research on artists as they are represented by the U.S. census (Alper and Wassall 2000, 1996). The census has some well-known caveats:

- Respondents are defined by the occupation in which they have earned income in the “reference week.”
- There is no opportunity for respondents to report multiple jobs or, if their occupation is artist, multiple art forms.
- The categories of the census combine different kinds of artists, making it impossible to get accurate information on specific occupations (for example, musicians, composers, actors, and directors), some of which have changed over time. For example, before 1970 “Painters, Sculptors, and
Craft Artists” were included in the category “Artists and Art Teachers”; from 1970–1980, the same category became “Painters and Sculptors.” In 1980, “Craft Artists” were added; then the category became “Painters, Sculptors, Craft Artists, and Artist Printmakers,” and in 2000 these became “Artists and Related Workers,” making direct comparisons impossible.

- Job titles include marginal, fringe, and seemingly arbitrary occupations (the 1980 census included cardpainters, music autographers, and tattoo artists in the “Painters and Sculptors” category) (Jeffri and Greenblatt 1996, 60–61).

Alper and Wassall’s work (1996) with the Current Population Survey, gathered monthly, deepens their work with census data.

**DISCRETE STUDIES**

To balance the unsatisfactory picture recorded by the census and other official sources, numerous studies have been done that rely on the following kinds of sampling methods to reach artists:

*Location Sampling* involves identifying locations where members of the population can be found and then deploying interviewers. However, location sampling is practical only for large and public locations, and such large public scenes tend not to draw a representative sample of the artist population.

*Institutional Sampling*, the most common form of sampling in discrete artist studies, relies on institutions to draw the sample. Official directories, lists, and union or organization memberships provide the basis for this sampling method. Unfortunately, not all artists join institutions or appear on official lists. In fact, it might be said that certain kinds of artists who function on a more grassroots level are likely to be under-represented or not to be identified at all, biasing these studies toward the “joiners.”

*Chain-referral sampling*. The best-known form of chain-referral sampling is snowball sampling, a form of convenience sampling, which, again, cannot claim representativeness. Much ethnographic research relies on this method. Researchers contact an initial “seed” and obtain a network of personal contacts from the seed, pursuing them as subjects. The Urban Institute’s recent study of artists, *Investing in Creativity*, has some of these characteristics, relying on a small number of artists in a wide variety of disciplines.

The biases inherent in this method include nonrandom choice of initial subjects; volunteerism (more cooperative subjects agree to participate in larger numbers); masking (less cooperative subjects are under-represented); differentials in recruitment (some groups recruit more peers than others); differentials in network size (referrals occur through network links and groups with larger personal networks can be oversampled) and the tendency toward in-group recruitment and the oversampling of those subjects (Heckathorn and Jeffri 2001, 309).
WHAT WE KNOW

Regardless of the sampling method used, certain common information has emerged.

*Education and Income.* It is common knowledge that artists are highly educated. The education level of artists is higher than that of the general population and, in fact, is comparable to the high education level of arts audiences. After World War II, bachelor's and master's of fine arts programs became big business in higher education; they have continued to expand and take in more students, regardless of the students' chances in the marketplace. Galligan and Alper argue that formal education “has a positive impact on both career advancement and economic success when artists worked at jobs related to their art, such as teaching, but not necessarily when they worked in their art form” (2000, 184). Jeffri and Throsby (1994) and others have described a negative correlation between education and income for artists.

In the Research Center for Arts and Culture's (RCAC) study of jazz musicians, musicians with a college education earned the same as any other professional with a ninth-grade education (Jeffri 2003).

Artists train at an early age. In Alper and Galligan's study of Rhode Island artists, artists said they began training, on average, at 14.1 years old (Alper and Galligan 1999). In the RCAC's Information on Artists II (IOA II) study, the age was 15.74; for multicultural artists, the age was 16 (Jeffri and Greenblatt 1997).

Even with their high level of education, artists set great store in self-teaching. The Urban Institute study (2003), Galligan and Alper (2000), Jeffri (1988), and Jeffri and Greenblatt (1997) confirm this. Sixty-two percent of IOA II multicultural artists were self-taught, as were 61 percent of the Artists Training and Career Project (ATC) painters and 72 percent of the ATC craftspeople (Jeffri et al. 1991a, 1991b).

*Grants.* Discrete surveys confirm that grants from public and private sources in the United States, unlike in some European countries, are far from an option for sustenance. The average grant for IOA II artists was $1,000; for IOA II multicultural artists, it was $2,000 (Jeffri and Greenblatt 1997). For Rhode Island artists, it was $1,000 (Alper and Galligan 1999). However, grants have an imprimatur value and often increase artists' visibility in the marketplace.

*Multiple Jobs.* Slightly more than one-third of the artists in Alper, Wassall, and Davidson's (1983) study of New England artists did work unrelated to the arts to support themselves; 78.4 percent of IOA II artists worked at other jobs to support their art.

Although multiple job holding has been seen in the past as work that takes artists away from their art, some artists find synergy between their different jobs. In the RCAC's Artists Training and Career Project (ATC), 46 percent of
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painters, 28 percent of craftsmen, 25 percent of union actors, and 14 percent of non-union actors felt their other employment reinforced their art work. In other cases, second jobs may represent something the artist can easily forego for an artistic gig (Jeffri, Greenblatt, and Sessions 1992). The 1981 national surveys of performing artists conducted by Ruttenberg et al. and referred to in Kay and Butcher found that more than half the actors with second jobs worked in sales, clerical, or service jobs.

...jobs with a history of low pay and benefits. Fewer than 15 percent held professional jobs as their supplementary occupation and the majority indicated that pay of their secondary job was less than their pay in performing arts. Most of those with a second job tended to choose those jobs that gave them the flexibility needed to pursue an arts career. (Kay and Butcher 1996, 102)

These examples may indicate a deep difference between types of artists—printmakers or ceramists, for example, who teach at universities that can afford expensive equipment versus actors who, as Kay and Butcher indicate, choose waitering, taxi driving, and jobs they can forego quickly for a performance opportunity.

Unionization. The effect of unionization on artists has been documented by unions themselves (Actors’ Equity Association, Screen Actors Guild, and American Federation of Radio and Television Artists do their own annual surveys of their memberships). As mentioned above, Ruttenberg et al. did an important study of performing arts union members in 1977 and 1980, and Ann Kay and Stephyn Butcher did an analysis from 1970–1990 that takes into account these union studies and the census. Kay and Butcher also commented on the dangers of concluding that performing artists earn less than other professionals with similar experience and education (the starving-artist myth again). In the RCAC’s study of jazz musicians, union musicians earned twice as much as non-union ones (Jeffri 2003). The study surveyed musicians in two samples—one taken from the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) union, the other through a method new to the arts called respondent-driven sampling (RDS). Fifty-two percent of all RDS jazz musicians earned their major income in the last twelve months as musicians with a mean of $15,560 and a median of $9,501. The mean income for union musicians from work as a musician was $33,486; the median, $20,000. For comparative purposes, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that the average male with a bachelor’s degree earned $52,985 (NCES 2001). Seventy percent of the RDS musicians do not belong to the AFM. Thirty percent of these musicians belonged at a previous time. When asked why they no longer had union membership, 17 percent said the union does not represent the interests of jazz musicians, 12 percent said the union does not provide enough benefits, and 15 percent said membership will not help them get work.

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Whereas unions themselves are undergoing substantial change, performers’ unions, depending on both the art form and the city, seem to be taking on different roles—in San Francisco, the AFM acts as a booking agent for jazz musicians, an activity that might be seen as a conflict of interest with the field.

Age. Even over the past few decades, the mean age of artists has remained in the very late thirties and early forties, both in the census and in many discrete studies. The average age of authors in the 1990 census was forty-three; the average age for ATC painters was forty-four; for IOA II multicultural artists, the average age was forty-one. Although there is variation according to art form and race (Asian artists in IOA II had a mean age of thirty-five), more investigation into career paths would elucidate how long people stay in the arts.

Race, Ethnicity, and Gender. We know far too little about how loaded categories such as race, ethnicity, and gender relate to differences in artists’ incomes, opportunities, venues, audiences, and reputations, Alper and Galligan’s Rhode Island study did not reveal significant differences in income, but the fact that more than 90 percent of the respondents were white left a fairly small sample to study in terms of racial diversity (1999). In IOA II’s multicultural sample, 61 percent of the respondents were white. This may be a reflection of institutional sampling—the preponderance of joiners often, according to the data, are white.

In the RCAC’s study of jazz musicians, 46 percent of the RDS musicians said they had been discriminated against because of race when seeking employment as a jazz musician. However, Alper and Galligan point out that the percentage of artists who felt they were discriminated against with regard to hiring or the performance or display of their art differed according to art form (1999, 199). In the RCAC jazz study, some female jazz musicians spoke about “babe-ism” in the jazz world. Additionally, some of what is defined as discrimination may depend in part on the access artists have to different professions in the arts—why, for example, are so many female jazz musicians vocalists?

Very much like arts audiences, more women than men seem to become artists. This may be due to the low income prospects, among other factors. In certain occupations—ballet dancers, for example—the proportion of women is even higher.

Attitudes Towards Artists. A 2002 survey by the Princeton Survey Research Associates and commissioned by the Urban Institute in nine cities and several rural areas provided insight into the public’s perception of artists. Preliminary findings indicate that 98 percent of adults are moved or inspired by art, 74 percent seek out new work by specific artists, and 48 percent believe that artists make their communities better places to live. Yet, only 27 percent say artists contribute “a lot” to the general good of society, far fewer than teachers (82 percent) and construction workers (63 percent). Although not
seen as negative or harmful, according to this study, artists often are seen as irrelevant (Urban Institute 2003).

Informal Arts. Referred to by the American Assembly as the “unincorporated arts” and by the Chicago Center for Arts Policy (CCAP) at Columbia College as the “informal arts,” these categories are an attempt to define or at least collect information on those arts activities that are in neither the commercial nor the nonprofit sectors. CCAP conducted an ethnographic study of the Chicago metropolitan area that looked at the integration of the arts in the community and administered a survey on the arts in everyday life. They found that artists practicing in informal settings are representative of the pluralism of U.S. society and come from all walks of life. These artists, like the RDS jazz musicians, seem to be connected to the grassroots and the bedrock of their communities (Wali, Deverson, and Longoni 2002, ix).

Synergies Between Sectors. Joni Maya Cherbo and Margaret J. Wyszomirski (2000, vii) and others have written about the connections between the commercial and nonprofit sectors, and Galligan and Alper (1998) have delineated some major differences in education, income, and other characteristics of artists in these sectors with some salient points. In the commercial sector, for example, actors and musicians earn more and dancers earn less. The CCAP study also points out that both the formal and informal arts are on a two-way continuum and that artists have a strong role in forging these links (Wali, Severson, and Longoni 2002).

Social Service Benefits. Whereas Scandinavian countries provide extensive social benefits for their artists, including job banks and government salaries, in the United States, the subject of health care and other benefits has been an issue of debate for several decades. Exacerbated by the AIDS crisis, health and medical care have been an active concern in the arts community since the 1980s. Discrete studies have yielded mixed results. According to the RCAC, in IOA II and the study of jazz musicians, 89 percent of IOA II artists and unionized jazz musicians have health or medical coverage, a higher number than the national average, which shows that about 83 percent were covered. For jazz musicians, the union pays only 7 percent of the cost and employers pay 30 percent; employers under contract pay 5 percent. For RDS musicians, 37 percent have no health or medical coverage. This jibes with a 1991 American Council of the Arts study (Monheit 1991), which reported that in large cities 30 percent of literary, performing, and visual artists had no health insurance.

Although more information is needed, artists resemble the workers depicted in a 2001 Urban Institute report, “Workers Without Health Insurance: Who Are They and How Can Policy Reach Them?” (Garrett, Nichols, and Greenman 2001). Of 16 million uninsured workers in the United States, those most likely to lack health insurance include workers in small firms, low-wage
earners, part-time workers, and those employed for a short tenure. Many artists fit these categories.

**International Studies.** Ruth Towse in the United Kingdom, David Throsby in Australia, Pierre-Michel Menger in France, and Sari Karttunen in Finland are well known for their research on artist populations. In addition to these and other scholars, investigators continue to produce discrete studies for political agendas in support of a new or emerging cultural policy. Artists’ unions and service organizations study and report on their memberships and constituencies.3

Occasionally, artist studies are adapted from one country to another. In the 1990s, the Institute of Social Sciences at the University of Lisbon adapted the RCAC’s Information on Artists for yourg Portuguese artists under thirty-five years of age (Pais, Ferreira, and Ferreira 1995).

**WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW**

In summer 2003, artist Nicole Eisenmann made an on-site mural at the Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University—her first solo exhibition in the United States. Titled “The USS Williamsburg Crashing into the Shores of Fame,” the mural was a comment on the thousands of people seeking to become artists. The Williamsburg was named for the neighborhood in Brooklyn—new, trendy, and increasingly gentrified, it is said to house more artists than Venice from 1700–1800.

Economist Hans Abbing pins the oversupply of artists on artists’ receiving poor or misleading information. Others fault the many undergraduate and graduate fine arts university degree programs where tuition may take precedence over talent.

According to the census, the number of artists is growing. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2001, 2.1 million artists were employed in primary jobs (72,000 more than in 2000), and an additional 315,000 held secondary jobs in artist occupations (National Endowment for the Arts 2002). Yet study after study relates that artists achieve high levels of education and correspondingly low wages from art. From 1970–1990, the number of artists grew at a rate of 127 percent, much faster than the civilian labor force. This growth was accompanied by an eventual and severe downturn in the budget and effectiveness of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), as well as the elimination of grants to individual artists. Many state arts councils are currently suffering the same fate as the NEA, or worse. Corporations have trimmed back, and foundations, in a stressed economy, are less likely to focus on artists. The art market is sporadic: the United States is losing its edge to the United Kingdom; Broadway is producing more and more revivals; and a difficult economy means a tightening of all belts.
The growth in numbers and the decline in real support provide an important opportunity to better understand the areas that remain unresolved, both for economic and advocacy reasons.

WHO LEAVES THE FIELD?

Our information about artists is directed solely to those engaged in their art, whether or not their work is for economic reward. We know little about those artists who choose to leave the field, their reasons for leaving, and the timing of their departures vis-à-vis their career track. The aDvANCE Project, a current international study of career transition for professional dancers at the RCAC, will give us some insight into a population of artists for whom transition to other careers is critical.

For reasons of confidentiality, sampling from institutional lists requires anonymity by the respondents. For this reason, it is difficult to return to the same sample for information over time. Qualitative studies do not provide the representativeness required to draw general conclusions. The RCAC’s IOA II included an additional postcard asking respondents if they would be willing to volunteer to be contacted over time. This list will be used for future longitudinal work.

LONGITUDINAL STUDIES

Although some discrete studies have been updated or administered over time in the same general population of artists, even when geographically specific, there are almost no true longitudinal studies that track the same individuals over time. In the mid-1960s, psychologists Jacob Getzels and Mihaly Cziksentmihalyi studied more than two hundred students while they were enrolled at the Art Institute of Chicago and for five years after they graduated. It seems quaint now that they found career entry represented by “getting a loft,” and although the five-year timeline was telling in relation to who went into commercial art and who did not, a study spanning a twenty to thirty year period would reveal a great deal more. Not only would this tell us about the career patterns of artists, but it also would help funders and policymakers in areas like “mid-career” grants.

Such studies might explore the relationship of grants, awards, and other kinds of recognition to the overall economic success of the artist and the career paths of artists in relation to these awards. For example, 36 percent of the ATC painters received early validation for winning awards (Jeffri et al. 1991a). We need to know more about the relationship between artistic reputation and artistic success and the perception of such awards in the field and marketplace and among audiences and peers (Alper and Galligan 1999, 198).
PROFESSIONAL ARTISTS

The subject of professionalism has long been a bane for artist researchers. Although self-definition, the UNESCO definition, and membership in a particular union or organization are frequently touted, other definitions have emerged. In the jazz study, through focus groups in the field, six criteria were developed for jazz musicians to select from when defining themselves:

1. Do you consider yourself a jazz musician?
2. Did you earn more than 50 percent of your personal income in the last six months as a jazz musician or in jazz-related activities?
3. Have you been engaged in your art/jazz more than 50 percent of the time during the past year?
4. Have you performed in/with a jazz band for pay at least ten times in the past year?
5. Have you performed with or without a jazz band for pay at least ten times during the past year?
6. Have you produced a documented body of work that is considered (self or externally) jazz? (documented output = performances, compositions, collaborations, arrangements, recordings)

In IOA, IOA II, ATC, and the jazz survey, a series of definitions were presented to artists in three categories: the “marketplace” definition (I make a living/intend to make a living from my art); the “education and affiliation” definition (I have been educated as an artist, I belong to an artist’s guild or union); and the “self- and peer” definition (I am recognized by my peers as an artist, I consider myself to be an artist, I spend a substantial amount of time making art, I have a special talent, I have an inner drive to make art, or I receive some public recognition for my art). Artist were asked to select these categories for themselves and for someone else. There is still some speculation on the “sour grapes theory”—that only artists who earn a substantial amount of money choose the marketplace definition.

HOW MANY ARTISTS?

If there is a question that lay people and journalists ask most frequently, it is “How many artists are there?” Although census data provide one set of answers, the shortcomings, as described above, indicate that the data have limited reliability. In the jazz study, for the first time in the arts, this question has been answered through respondent-driven sampling (RDS), which employs a statistical formula called capture-recapture; the study shows that there are 33,003 jazz musicians in New York, 18,733 in San Francisco, and 1,725 in New Orleans (Jeffri 2003).
Although RDS is not necessarily suitable for use with all artist populations, it will be used again in a national study of storytellers conducted by the RCAC.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF ARTISTS TO THEIR SOCIAL NETWORKS

By understanding in detail who artists hang out with and who they have as mentors, apprentices, and colleagues, we gain a much stronger sense of how integrated the artist community is. Ethnographic studies such as those undertaken by CCAP and the Urban Institute do this to a degree, as does the RCAC’s recent jazz study. More research that explicates artists’ networks will help both policymakers and funders understand the needs of those communities.

COORDINATION OF INFORMATION

*Internationally*. Coordination of information across countries, sectors, and types of artists would be invaluable. Uncovering practical solutions across borders and sharing information would be a service to the arts community at large. For example, the Swiss performers’ union developed a “passport” for performers with contact information in all the signatory countries where artists can get expertise in legal and contract issues.

*Nationally*. We also need to relate our research findings to information from U.S. institutions. A 1995 report by Joan Hocky surveyed a diverse group of New York City arts institutions and funders to understand how they serve artists of color. The report described dilemmas that affect how we create and appraise the policies for definition of art, American art, artistic excellence, and avant-garde art. It also uncovered problems with multicultural realities, access, equity, and community. Urban Institute and CCAP studies target these issues, but there is a need in the field to coordinate and disseminate that information.

At the state and local levels, service organizations such as Americans for the Arts and the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, unions such as the Actors’ Equity Association, and many local arts councils and groups have diverse information about artists. However, these data have never been collected in one place.

One resource is the Center for Policy and the Arts National Data Archive (CPANDA), a collaboration between Princeton’s cultural policy center and library. CPANDA houses and maintains data sets on the arts, audiences, and artists and makes them accessible to researchers and others (see http://www.cpanda.org).

CODA

The beauty of the American system is that it affords us innumerable perspectives on almost everything, including society, policy, and the arts. The
same is true for artist studies. We now have a solid body of research, and the field and the academy have different methods and uses for information that can affect everything from artists' salaries, to performance and exhibition venues, to health insurance coverage. Perhaps the biggest challenge, especially in a tight economy, is the foresight for both the conceptualization and the support of such research, not in competition with support for arts activities, productions, venues, and institutions, but, in fact, as the very underpinning of what artists do and why they do it.

NOTES

This article was presented at the Social Theory, Politics and the Arts Conference, Ohio State University, October 10, 2003. The studies conducted by the Research Centers for Arts and Culture referred to in this article are Changing the Beast: The Worklife of Jazz Musicians (referred to as "the jazz study" and "the study of jazz musicians"); the Artists Training and Career Project (ATC); Information on Artists and Information on Artists II (IOA I; IOA II); and the ADVANCE Project: A Study of the Career Transition of Professional Dancers.

1. UNESCO defines an artist as ". . . any person who creates or gives creative expression to, or recreates works of art, who considers his or her role as an essential part of his life, who contributes in this way to the development of art and culture and who is or asks to be recognized as an artist, whether or not he is bound by any relation of employment or association” (see http://www.unesco.org/culture/laws/artist/html_eng/page2.shtml#1).

2. Examples include the Alper, Wassall, and Davidson (1983) study of New England artists (1983); the work of Throsby and Mills (1989) and Throsby and Thompson (1994) regarding Australian artists, which identified artists through the Australia Council; the work of Jeffri (1988) and Jeffri and Greenblatt (1997) in a variety of cities and arts forms using organizational lists.

3. Two examples are the Ontario Arts Council publication Occupation Artist (1992) and the annual survey done by GEIDANKYO, Japan’s performers’ union. Some of these have been documented by Princeton University’s Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies in an annotated bibliography compiled by Donnell Butler.

4. For more information on capture-recapture, see a PDF of the executive summary of the jazz study, available at http://www.tc.columbia.edu/centers/ccac.

REFERENCES

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