

Functions of art in life. A work-in-progress report

Poster presentation by Els Andringa & Mirjam Oskamp (Utrecht)

Aim of the study: Exploration of functions of (narrative) art in the lives of adults who are not professionally or academically dealing with art or art theories.

Points of departure:

- . Assumptions or claims about the functions and effects of art have been developed in philosophy and art theories since the ancient era. However, the attempts to verify them empirically are still rare.
- . Although we dispose of detailed sociological studies on cultural participation and the time people spend on the arts, the media and reading, psychological research on functions and effects of the arts is usually restricted to children and adolescents.

Main questions dealt with in this poster are:

1. How do competent adults judge the importance of existing art theories?
2. What functions do they find important for themselves?
3. Are there connections between 1 and 2?
4. Do reports of important individual experiences with narrative forms of art (films, written stories) confirm our conclusions about the connections between 1 and 2?

Method: Combination of quantitative and qualitative data

1. Questionnaire with closed and open questions (n = 58),
2. Unstructured interviews following the questionnaire (n = 6)

Informants: **select** sample of people with non-professional interest in art. Age between 20 and 70

Some results:

Table 1 shows the rated importance of a series of art functions. The items are meant to reflect art conceptions which have stayed important over the years. For example: The concept of "Katharsis" was operationalized by the statement "Art frees the emotions", and the Formalist's concept of de-familiarization by the statement "Art makes the ordinary things of life special".

NB: It is, of course, a strong simplification to represent an important concept of art in one single statement. The interpretation of Aristotle's "Katharsis" has been interpreted over and over again and still scholars do not agree on its exact meaning. The items should, however, give a first indication about the personal psychological relevance of theoretical concepts.

Table 2 shows a series of personal motives and experienced art functions in their order of rated importance. The ratings are sum scores over nine different art forms. The arts were: Going to the cinema, watching a movie on TV or video, going to a classical concert, listening to classical music at home, going to the theatre, going to a dance performance, going to a Pop concert, reading fiction, and going to a museum or exhibition. The arts could be distinguished in "going-out" and "staying-at-home" arts, in narrative and non-narrative arts. Going to a Pop concert was the only "popular art"; our selected group of informants hardly responded to this form of art.

NB: The different arts showed a different order of importance. Nevertheless, the deviations from the order showed by the sum-scores were rather small.

TABLE 1: Theoretical conceptions in order of rated importance (n = 58)

<u>[Art Theory]</u>	<u>Item</u>	<u>Order</u>	<u>Mean Score (Sd)</u> <u>4 > S > 1</u>
["Katharsis"]	Frees emotions	1	3.29 (.86)
[Impulse to reflection]	Incites reflection	2	3.12 (.70)
[Addition to life]	Lends lustre to life	3	3.10 (.95)
[Metaphysical dimens]	Expresses the unspeakable	4	2.98 (.91)
[De-familiarization]	Makes ordinary special		2.98 (1.10)
[Subj. express. artist]	Expresses artist's sentim.	5	2.81 (1.15)
[Window to world]	Reveals visions of life	6	2.74 (1.07)
[Sociological]	Reflects history	7	2.69 (.82)
["Delectare"]	Provides delight	8	2.55 (.98)
[Social engagement]	Raises social problems	9	2.36 (.87)
<hr/>			
["Mimesis"]	Imitates life	10	1.64 (.89)
["Autopoesis"]	Reflects theory of art	11	.81 (1.02)

TABLE 2: Personal motives to read, watch or listen to works of art in the order of frequency of mentioning (sum scores for all forms of art: n = 58; forms of art = 9).

Relaxing	Emotional arousal	Experience of beauty	Forgetting worries
1 (290)	2 (214)	3 (209)	4 (190)
Curiosity	Exp. of innovation	Exp. of tension	Learning something
5 (163)	6 (115)	7 (112)	8 (100)
Exp. unusual	Leave one's self behind	Social contact	Withdraw from society
9 (94)	10 (71)	11 (56)	12 (55)

Table 3 shows part of the correlations between the art conceptions from table 2 and the personal motives & functions.

TABLE 3: Correlations between art conceptions (clustered*) and personal motives & functions for four of the arts (cinema, theatre, literature and museum)

	<u>Relax.</u>	<u>Emotions</u>	<u>Beauty</u>	<u>Forget</u>	<u>Curios.</u>	
	Cinema	Cinema	Cinema	Cinema	Cinema	Cinema
	Theatre	Theatre	Theatre	Theatre	Theatre	Theatre
	Liter.	Liter.	Liter.	Liter.	Liter.	Liter.
	Museum	Museum	Museum	Museum	Museum	Museum
Metaphys. experience	-.05	-.14	-.04		.06	.07
	-.19	.23	-.03		.08	.06
	.06	.03	.07		.21	.12
	.13	.01	.07		.06	.27
Cognitive interest-.05	-.22	-.08	-.08		.07	.00
		-.08	-.24	-.09		.08
	-.26	-.17	-.18		.02	.12
	-.09	.07	.10		.06	.03
Relatedness to reality	-.07	-.23	-.35**	.02		-.05
	-.18	-.21	-.15		-.08	.00
	-.02	-.16	-.24		.14	.27
	-.20	.07	-.08		-.06	-.05

* Factor analysis showed three factors which were interpreted as Metaphysical experience, Cognitive interests and Relationship between art and reality. Accordingly, clustered variables were built by addition (reliability scores were $\alpha = .73, .68$ resp. $.47$).

** $p < .05$

Conclusion from the quantitative data: The correlations are extremely low. Art conceptions and Personal Motives & Functions as measured here are practically unrelated.

Support from the qualitative material:

Several open questions were meant to provoke personal opinions about the nature and meaning of art. Some of them show a 'double perspective' which reflects the contrast between a theoretical option and a personal view. For example:

Question: Do you regard a teabag framed by an artist as a work of art?

NB: This "work of art" was realized by Joseph Beuys.

. Not really. It's just cleverly done, commercially, if it has been framed well (2).

- . No, I think this is cheap. It is a work of art simply because of the frame (8).
- . Yes, but only if it has been done by an artist and hangs in a museum. On the wall at home, I think I would not regard it as a work of art any more (4)
- . It is possible, as a trick in a movement of art or to shock the audience. No, not as a trick to sell (26).
- . I discussed this with my son aged twenty. He found it a dull joke. I think that if the attention is drawn to something which is used every day, it strikes you because it is taken out of its normal context. In that respect Marcel Duchamp's bicycle wheel has been an eye-opener (45).

Some open questions evoke answers mainly reflecting either a more abstract concept of art (C) or a more subjective engagement (S).

Question: Do you regard an (auto)biography as a work of art?

- . S: Only if it is more than a life story, if, for example, the emotions are expressed well, in short, if it keeps me 'away from real life' for a moment (6)
- . C: I find an (auto)biography a work of art only if the language is 'literary' and the story offers more than facts about the personality (such as an image of the time or an image of the psychological and contextual factors determining the course of his/her life) (17).
- . C: Rather not. It depends, first, on the literary quality of the book; if this is low, a (auto)biography is an informative work in first place. Second it has to represent a kind of universal value. This may depend on the personality the book deals with (28).
- . S: Only if it is captivating and well written and if the story contains elements which make you think, so that it is useful for yourself (32).
- . S: A life story can be art to me, because someone else's life story may evoke recognition and lead to a feeling of alliance. Also, if the author reveals insights in an unconventional manner, this can be an eye-opener for the reader. Thus, when a biography becomes a 'document humaine' I regard it as a work of art. For example, Etty Hillesum's autobiography (40).

Conclusion from the qualitative data:

Our informants seem to balance in mind two rather independent "schemata" of art:

- . One is based upon abstract concepts of what is and means Art. This is probably part of knowledge acquired in socialization processes, learnt at school, or taken from discussions in the media, essays or whatever.
- . The other is based upon personal experience. It originates from the subjective pleasure and usefulness works of art have given, and from the functions the subjects

derive from them as individuals.

Finally, we looked at other open questions and the interviews for further evidence of these findings. Do the interviews reflect traces of both schemata, or of one of them? We expected that, if informants talk freely, the subjective experience will dominate over the more abstract conceptions. Some response seemed to confirm this expectation. The following excerpts, for example, show how strongly art is integrated in the informants' individual world and personality. No "interesseloses Wohlgefallen", no "de-automatization", no "autonomy", but existential values and pragmatic functions seem to prevail.

(Woman in her sixties, retired psychiatrist):

"I have read so many novels in the area of psychology, psychological novels. It was worth to me because I could better understand other people and myself too. I think that reading psychological novels is a much better way to achieve judgement of human nature than studying psychology.

[...]

I have always liked books from foreign cultures. I am interested in how people actually experience the same things in different ways. To learn about the world.., yes I think this is what happens when you read a book, but.. I think that books have helped me to learn about my own feelings and behaviour. At least in a certain period of my life.

[...]

And now, now reading is, I think, a means to make the small world I live in bigger. I have plenty of experiences that way.

(Question 18, informant 11)

I cannot give just one example. There are so many smaller ones. It makes that I feel myself part of the world. I am not alone. When the world around me 'is stuck' I am craving for art. This is the 'Thanks heaven that it does still exist' -effect.

(Woman, aged 28, grew up in an orthodox Christian milieu; psychologist)

I think that I came to know the world by means of the arts, well, also by talking to people, but by means of the books that I have read too, and the films and the theater. In the village and at home the world was really very very small. I get a feeling of oppression when I think back... It was sultry. People were .. to call it like that.. self-satisfied, I guess.

[...]

I could not do without [the arts] any more.. this is strange.. I simply want to see and read new things all the time..