Different worlds

A sociological study of taste, choice and success in art

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Introduction

This book is a sociological study of stylistic changes, patterns of success, judgment and taste in two art worlds: the world of abstract avant-garde art, and the world of figurative painting, which is aesthetically traditional. The two art worlds are the two subsystems in the social structure of Israeli painting. This case-study in the sociology of art is meant for anyone interested in culture and society.

Sociology of art may have two orientations. On the one hand, one can use sociology to deepen one's understanding of art; on the other hand, art can be used in order to add to one's understanding of social reality. It is the second orientation which lies at the basis of this book.

Art is, of course, a social phenomenon. Besides being a product of a specific activity, it is, at any given time, this activity itself, patterned and performed by people assuming certain roles and acting in the framework of certain norms and expectations, which is related to a certain set of values. This amounts to a definition of a social institution. Being a social institution, art is as good a subject for the study of society as any other social institution – say the family, or science. But, like these, it is also a social institution *sui generis*, and is, therefore, more suitable for some studies and less suitable for others. The nature of its specificity will not concern us here (this subject demands more than a few passing remarks); suffice it to say that art is a cultural institution which is explicitly concerned with the production and manipulation of symbols.

All human social relations are intrinsically symbolic. The specificity of human societies, as we have recognized at least since Weber, consists in that these societies are also, by necessity, cultures. Created culture, a human artifact, performs for us the function which instincts perform for other species. Systems of symbols vary, and societies are shaped in accordance with this variation. I do not want to imply that culture is the only factor in the formation of specific social systems; various structural conditions, that is the non-symbolic parameters of situations, environmental and economic, undoubtedly contribute to this too. But one cannot deny the extraordinary

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importance of the symbolic sphere in this context, without at the same time severely limiting the significance and the scope of applicability of one's sociological explanations.

Being explicitly concerned with the production and manipulation of symbols, art is in fact a better subject for the study of the immensely important sociological problem of the effects of values in social systems than many other social phenomena, which, on the face of it, may look more "sociological." Furthermore, even among the symbol-producing institutions, art has important research advantages over some of the better-studied ones, such as science. Sociology of science is, probably, the best-developed area in the sociology of culture. Unlike the sociology of art, it can boast of a distinguished tradition built by several generations of scholars, which can serve as a foundation for further research. Yet, science only rarely provides us with a possibility to study ways in which socially significant symbols, values and norms, are produced, as well as to observe the variation in the effects they may have on social structures among, and behavior of, people adopting them. The symbols produced in it have, for the most part, only scientific significance (although they may, of course, have social implications). The social values of science are the same for different scientific disciplines, sciences of different societies and periods. One can be more or less optimistic as to the nature of truth and the possibilities for objective knowledge, but there is a consensus that, however realistic such an orientation, science is *about* the understanding of empirical reality. Sociologically speaking, there is one science; this is why, for most ears, expressions like "bourgeois biology" or "Aryan physics" sound absurd. And because of this uniformity of social values, science is not well suited for the study of socially significant symbols.

The symbolic structure of art is infinitely more variable than that of science. In art, socially significant symbols vary together with aesthetically significant ones. Different values and norms correspond to every artistic style and, in fact, enter its very definition. In most cases, one can separate what is aesthetically significant from what is socially significant in a style only with great difficulty. Every style, unlike a scientific theory or even a subdiscipline, is a social institution in itself, and each one offers us a possibility to study the crucial interactions between culture and social behavior. Of course, art is not the only such phenomenon; political ideologies, religion and law, for example, may provide similar possibilities. But then, art is a convenient subject for explorations of this nature, in which significant comparisons are readily available and which, not being directly involved in

the bread-and-butter matters of the world, evolves relatively unimpeded by exigencies which more "serious" phenomena constantly encounter, and provides better possibilities for analytical isolation of important variables.

I hope it is possible to discern, behind the analysis of the case chosen here – namely, the social system of the art of painting in Israel – issues preoccupying sociologists of any area. These are: the effects of *anomie* and possibilities for charismatic leadership; the conditions for and structural effects of rational versus "social" (namely, determined by social influences)[1] behavior; the implications of these essentially different types of conduct on the part of the non-elites for the nature of the complementary elites and their attitudes towards the led. Another set of issues of general sociological interest concerns the nature and social determinants of creativity and freedom: the structural conditions of innovation and their effect within different ideological frameworks on its character.

The central problem of the book is a Weberian one of the interaction between different systems of values (or ideologies broadly defined) and social structures, and of the effects of these ideologies on the structures and on the social behavior of people acting within them. It is concerned with the social implications of, on the one hand, ideologies which treat conflicting sets of values as equal, precluding the formation of commitment to any one of them and, on the other hand, of ideologies in themselves representing a commitment to one or another set of values.

The specific aim of the book is to arrive at a theoretical framework necessary for the systematic explanation of artistic careers and factors in the formation of sets of preferences, or taste, in art. With this target in mind it depicts a *complete* system in which art is created and evaluated, taking into account its artists, "gatekeepers" (such as curators, critics and dealers, who mediate between artists and the public), government officials responsible for the allocation of government support for art and the public of this art. The relatively small scale of Israeli society made it technically possible to investigate an entire, largely self-sufficient, modern art world – an undertaking that would certainly be unrealistic in any of today's major art centers. The unusual history of the Israeli art world, as the reader will see, provided a unique possibility of isolating the social system which supported avant-garde art from the one formed around figurative painting. This, combined with the similarity, if not identity, between the styles developed in other Western nations, such as France or the United States, and in Israel (the art history of which represents in a compressed form the general history of Western art in the last 120 years) justified the sometimes implicit treatment of the two

Israeli art worlds as ideal-types of the social structures corresponding to abstract avant-garde and figurative styles, and their use as a basis for theoretical generalizations.

At the basis of the theoretical framework suggested here lies the assumption that art worlds connected to different styles – and therefore different artistic ideologies – may differ radically both in terms of the factors that affect the formation of taste, the process of evaluation and patterns of success in them, and in terms of the nature of the influence these factors exert. The art worlds differ in accordance with the variation in the value-systems guiding both the production and the consumption of art, namely in artistic ideologies and outlooks or perspectives of the public. The difference can be expected to be especially significant if in one case the values make possible rational action, while in another they are conducive to "social," or charismatic, behavior. Rational action is here defined as behavior consisting of choices between alternative paths of action, made by individual actors on the basis of their knowledge. This is, in essence, individual action. "Social" action, in distinction, is such in which acts of the individuals are acts of compliance with social influence. The significant (and independent) actor in this case is the group. A predisposition to "social" behavior seems to be a necessary condition for the emergence of structures of charismatic authority, and thus is characteristic of followers of the charismatic leaders. For this reason, and also to avoid confusion (since the word "social" will be frequently used in this book in other meanings), we may sometimes refer to expressions of "social" action as "charismatic."

More precisely, the argument is guided by the following considerations. The rationality of the public is expressed in the ability of its members to provide reasons for their decisions concerning acceptance or rejection of works of art, which they derive from a system of criteria for the evaluation of, or relatively definite requirements towards, such works. When the public can be characterized as rational, the artists addressing such a public are accountable to it, since without meeting the requirements of the public, they cannot succeed; the public will not sustain them. The judgment of the public represents an important factor in the determination of the artists' success. The system of criteria is provided, however, at least in part, by the artists themselves, by the artistic ideology.

In contrast, when the behavior of the public is "social," when the public searches for and willingly submits to charismatic leadership in art – it will lack definite requirements towards artistic performance. Therefore, artists will not be responsible to their public, the judgment of the public will not be independent and artists themselves will to a great degree determine their

own success. The nature of this determination will depend on whether the artistic ideology corresponds, or does not correspond, to the predisposition of the public, namely on whether it too is or is not conducive to "social" behavior.

The behavior of the public will affect:

a The activity of the "gatekeepers." In the case of the rationally behaving public, "gatekeepers" will have to take the opinion of the public into consideration while making decisions concerning promotion or rejection of artists. The opinion of the public in search of charismatic leadership will not be considered; instead, the preferences of the "gatekeepers" will be forced upon it.

b Patterns of success and career routes of the artists. We would expect to find elements of competition in the careers of artists appealing to the rationally behaving public, for their success depends upon answering the public's requirements and these can be answered in a more as well as in a less satisfactory fashion. The artists' careers, in this case, would fit the model of "contest mobility." In contrast, a public, whose behavior is "social" or charismatic, in itself has no effect on the artists' careers; it serves merely as a condition making possible almost anything in this regard. At the same time, when such behavior on the part of the public is combined with an artistic ideology also conducive to "social" behavior, we would expect that the elements of competition among the artists will be absent and that, instead, their success will depend upon the identification with and the affiliation with an elite artistic group. In this case, the artists' careers would approximate the model of "sponsored mobility."

c The nature of artistic production. The behavior of the public will reinforce tendencies present in the artistic ideologies of a corresponding nature. In the presence of a public possessing relatively definite criteria for artistic performance, we would expect the success of styles conceiving art as endowed with objective meaning. We would also expect that in such a case emphasis will be on the individual work of art to embody this meaning. In the presence of a public searching for charismatic leadership in art, we expect a dramatization of the artist's personality expressed not in an individual artistic work, but in other forms of activity, and the success of styles in which art is regarded as having a subjective meaning only.

The interplay between the behavior of the public and artistic ideology is complex and cannot be described in terms of an unchanging causal connection. Both serve as necessary conditions for each other, with the rational public playing a more active role than the charismatic one, and "charismatic" artistic ideology having much more influence on its public, than the

"rational" one. The reason for the rationality of the public's outlook and behavior versus its longing for charismatic leadership – apart from the availability or lack of evaluation criteria in corresponding artistic ideologies – we expect to find in differing social backgrounds of people belonging to the two publics.

A few words on the data and the organization of the book are in order here. The data necessary to answer the questions posed in this book were collected in the following manner:

1 Biographies of all (477) Israeli painters who lived, worked and achieved at least minimal recognition in Israel between 1920 and 1980 were analyzed. These biographies are kept in the Israeli Art Archives of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Painters were classified according to the forms of training (school, apprenticeship), prizes, gallery shows, exhibitions in museums, length of career routes (short–long), the share of painting in the overall income of a painter and the style in the framework of which the painter worked. The subject's style was defined as the style in which the artist worked at the time of his or her first success (whether an exhibition in a gallery, a show in a museum or a prize). However, changes of style in the course of a career in this population were so rare, that it is possible to disregard them. Painters were also classified according to their output, the frequency of exhibitions and the prices of paintings, as well as according to the sequences of successes in the course of a career: the character of the first exhibition, whether it was abroad, in a museum, in a gallery, in which type of a museum or a gallery it was, whether an exhibition was preceded by a prize, what kind of prize. These data made possible the depiction of the patterns of success, career routes and the factors affecting success of artists.

2 Thirty-one painters considered to be the most prominent representatives of their respective styles were interviewed in open interviews. Sixteen of the painters were representatives of the abstract styles, while fifteen others represented figurative painting (for classification of styles see chapter 2, pp. 42–44). These interviews were made in order to obtain information about professional ideologies of different styles and about their characteristic conceptions of the functions of art and artists. In addition, the interviews with artists helped to illustrate and refine by concrete examples the picture emerging from the analysis of the painters' biographies.[2]

3 Articles and reviews dealing with group exhibitions in daily newspapers since 1950 were surveyed for the purpose of constructing a picture of the aesthetic "spirit of the age" and its changes. 1950 was chosen as a starting point, because before that date the data were scarce. The following news-

papers were surveyed: *Haaretz, LaMerchav, Zemanim, Heruth, Haboker, Yedioth Ahronoth, Maariv, Davar, Hazofe, Masa, Mevooth, Al Hamishmar, Jerusalem Post*, as well as local newspapers of the central cities, such as *Haifa Haovedeth* and *Hadashot Tel-Aviv – Jaffo*. These materials were also placed at my disposal by the Israeli Art Archives of the Israel Museum.

4 Twenty art critics (representing the entire population of critics writing in Hebrew who were active in 1980) and ten curators (including all the head curators and curators of Israeli art at the three central museums, as well as curators of international exhibitions, appointed by public institutions) were interviewed in open interviews. Open interviews were also conducted with fifty-seven art dealers – owners of private galleries. During the period of the research the Israeli Association of Gallery Owners listed sixty-four galleries. It was intended to interview every one one of the owners. For various reasons, such as the absence of a number of dealers from Israel and the lack of technical possibility to arrange a meeting with three galleries in Beer-Sheva, only fifty-six were interviewed. The owner of the only gallery which was not a member of the association (he considered it a useless body) was also interviewed.[3]

5 Open interviews were conducted with spectators at the show openings, which took place during the exhibition season of 1979–1980 (400 interviews), and with the relevant officials of the Ministry of Education and Culture. These interviews were undertaken in order to investigate the patterns of judgment characteristic of the publics of different styles and to assess socio-economic characteristics of these publics.[4]

6 In order to follow the developments in the exhibition opportunities, exhibition-forums (private as well as public) that were active during any period between 1940 and 1978 were counted. The data for this purpose were obtained mainly from the biographies of the painters and the survey of daily newspapers. However, literature dealing with Israeli painting and professional journals (referred to in the next article) were also helpful.

7 Selected catalogues, in most cases including manifestos of different artistic groups, of exhibitions held in Artists' Houses and museums, as well as professional journals (such as *Gazit* – the oldest of the art journals in Israel, *Painting and Sculpture, The World of Art* and *Line* – all in Hebrew) and the secondary literature discussing Israeli painting helped to obtain some general notion about the course of Israeli art: the sequence of events and the appearance of styles. The secondary literature on this subject consisted of little more than a handful of picture albums, supplemented with a few lines of biographical material and short introductions locating the artists included in them in Israeli art. Two detailed monographs on the

history of Israeli art appeared in 1980. One is a book by G. Efrat and D. Levite, edited by B. Tammuz, *The Story of Israeli Art*. It is a lengthy and accurate account (although manifesting a clear ideological bias) of the stylistic developments in Israeli painting up to 1980. The other is a book by G. Blas, dedicated to the history of "New Horizons" and bearing the name of this group. (Both works were written in Hebrew.)

Before the publication of these histories there existed only two general historical articles (both in Hebrew), short summaries of the developments in Israeli painting up to the date of their publication. The one is "Painting and sculpture in Israel: artistic creation in Palestine during the last 50 years," by Haim Gamzu, published in 1957.[5] The other is Jonah Fisher's "Painting," which appeared in the book *Israeli Art*, edited by B. Tammuz and published in 1963. In addition, there was a book by Karl Schwartz: *New Jewish Art in Palestine*, published in 1941.

The information gained in this way was supplemented by interviews with people who had lived through this history for many years[6] and by the original research of developments in the art market and exhibition-forums. The resulting historical picture furnished a background for the sociological analysis of the contemporary art world.

The three sections of the first chapter of the book are devoted to this historical background and attempt to explain why and how two different social systems emerged in the Israeli art world. They are followed by chapters devoted to each of the factors related to the production and consumption of the art of painting in Israel. Several chapters (2, 3, 7 and 8) deal with artists: their demographic characteristics, career routes and patterns of success, as well as their conceptions of art and definitions of the artist's role. Other chapters (4, 5 and 6) are devoted to various "gatekeepers," art critics, curators and art dealers: the way they function, the bases of their judgment and the patterns of decision-making characteristic of them, their definitions of their roles and their attitudes towards the artists, on the one hand, and the public, on the other. Chapter 9 deals with the publics of different styles (including the officials of the Ministry of Education and Culture); it discusses the forms of art consumption and patterns of judgment characteristic of these publics. The focus of the concluding chapter is the general picture which emerges on the basis of the juxtaposition of the separate descriptions and analyses of each of these factors. The analysis of all the factors of this complex system and the conclusions derived from it make possible the formulation of some general theoretical suggestions which, it is hoped, will be of interest to students of culture, whatever the specific area they choose to study.