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# Art and the State

## The Visual Arts in Comparative Perspective

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and

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*To Katherine*

V.A.

*To AJ, Bella, Noe, Solomon, and Talia*

M.R.

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# Preface

This book was conceived at a meeting between the two of us at the American Sociological Association's (ASA) annual conference in Washington, DC, in 2000. Although we had read each other's work, we had met only briefly at a conference in Montreal in 1998. At the ASA, we at last had an opportunity to speak in person and at length. As we talked, we realized that we were concerned about a number of similar issues in the sociology of art; moreover, we discovered that we both had a series of surprisingly similar projects underway or in planning. These interrelated projects, each on an aspect of 'art and the state', cried out to be explored together.

From the extensive literature on the sociology of art, and from our own research, we knew that art is not just about artists and artworks. Artists create art within a social context – within an 'art world' or 'artistic field', as Howard Becker and Pierre Bourdieu put it – that is situated in the wider society. A host of factors from the art world and the society affect the production of art.

The state is an important actor (or more accurately, a collection of actors) in the social world, and actions of the state are profoundly important for art worlds, artists, and artworks. The state influences the production, distribution, and reception of art, and it can shape the life chances of individual artists. The state can affect art and artists in many ways. For instance, a state may support artists directly through salary, fellowships, or grants. It may purchase artworks. It may fund art museums and galleries, either directly through line-item or project grants or indirectly through tax incentives. It may repress artists or censor artworks that criticize it. Or it may do none of these things. Its legal climate, favorable or unfavorable to free market ideology, to private property, and to intellectual property rights, will affect the distribution strategies of artists. Its ability to maintain civic order influences artistic subject matter, as well as the ability of artists to work safely in their studios. Its educational policy affects not only the training, and employment, of those interested in becoming artists or those identified with particular visual talents, but also the reception of artworks by the general public who are educated in the state's system.

The importance of the state in art worlds has not gone unnoticed. However, we believe that the state and its effects have been understudied

in relationship to other aspects of the art world. Comparative studies of the topic have been especially rare. The connections between art and the state that have found the most attention are those in authoritarian regimes, where art is often used for political purposes, where observers see art as highly regimented, and where art, in some of its expressions, is harshly repressed. But as we discussed Rueschemeyer's work, we thought that even here, the importance of the state to art goes well beyond the issues of freedom and control that are most commonly mentioned. Many other factors are affected by political and cultural policies of authoritarian regimes, for instance:

- which art forms become known,
- whether artists receive support enabling them to spend concentrated time on their work,
- the level of intellectual and financial access to the arts either for small segments or for broad swathes of the population,
- the relationship between intellectually and aesthetically demanding and innovative art, on the one hand, and popular art that is enjoyably ornamental, on the other, and
- the intensity with which different audiences follow artistic developments in official art – or in underground art, which may be stimulated precisely by state efforts to control it.

While there is no doubt that regime type matters, the state policies in open, pluralistic political systems also affect these and similar issues. Just as the complexities of 'art and the state' within a given setting are often overlooked, so too are the similarities across countries with very different governmental structures. In 'free' countries, as in authoritarian ones, state control of art and artists is an issue. In the west, public art, the public place of art, and even the kind of art supported by public funds can be (and has been) subject to controversy that escalates into 'culture wars' which, in turn, can lead to cultural policy that, in many respects, shades into censorship.

In discussing these ideas, we found that our ongoing research addressed the subject of art and the state in complementary ways. We hoped, therefore, that we were in an excellent position to contribute to the literature on art and the state, in a truly comparative way.

In 1996, Alexander moved to England, having just finished a large project on American art museums. She was struck by the relative similarities between American and British art museums, especially in such matters as marketization, commercialization, and the prevalence

of special exhibitions and traveling blockbusters, which existed despite the differences in the arts policies of the two countries. She started to look into state funding of museums to explore how arts institutions came to converge on a similar, international model. This project has expanded into Chapters 2 and 3 of the book.

Meanwhile, Rueschemeyer's own work had been moving in directions which explored similar themes. She spent several sabbaticals abroad where, among other interests, she explored the social situation of artists, the reception of their work by different audiences, and how their creative lives are affected by state policy. She had co-authored a book on Soviet émigré artists and she continued this line of research as additional possibilities for work arose in the New York area and in Israel (now Chapter 6 in this book). An earlier project on East German artists was undergoing an update to take account of the changes brought about by the unification with West Germany (Chapter 5). Her interest in gaining a fuller comparative perspective led her into work, while in Bergen and then at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences, on art and the state in Norway and Sweden (Chapter 4).

We thought that our various projects highlighted a set of important understandings about the nature of cultural policy, especially state funding of the visual arts. Indeed, each project made up a single case study that provided the basis for a comparative perspective. We decided that it was most sensible to proceed with our individual case studies independently, though with an eye to our common interests. As the work progressed we kept in touch and read drafts of each other's chapters. We also decided that it would be best to collaborate on the Introduction and the Conclusion. In these chapters we wished to bring out the themes and ideas highlighted by the case studies.

The Introduction (Chapter 1) discusses the general topic of cultural policy with respect to the visual arts. In this chapter, we point out the various dimensions along which cultural policy may be measured. We suggest that a comparative perspective clarifies a number of issues, a key one being the degree of state control of artists and institutions involved in cultural policy. We suggest that a set of textured, comparative studies will show that issues of artistic freedom and state – or market – constraint are complex and do not fall along a simple continuum from free market states with a high degree of artistic freedom to autocratic states with a high degree of censorship and control.

The Conclusion (Chapter 7) draws out the lessons learned from a comparative reading of our five projects. This chapter, the most explicitly

comparative in the book, brings to fruition the initial discussion we had at that ASA meeting several years ago.

Throughout the process of writing the book, both authors have learned a lot and enjoyed the collaboration. Though Alexander's work focused initially on art institutions, especially museums, and Rueschemeyer's on artists and their associations, we found that our interests encompassed all of these aspects of the art world. Indeed, it is difficult to study arts institutions without considering artists, and vice versa. Our differing research methods (Alexander drawing on documentary analysis and Rueschemeyer on interviews with artists, gallery owners and managers, and policy makers) and writing styles have proved to be useful levers with which to lift additional insights from the data. In writing this book, our aims were to examine the texture and complexity within the art-state relationship in individual countries and, through our collaborative chapters, to present our ideas on art and the state and to integrate our insights from the case studies. We hope that readers will find the five empirical chapters interesting in themselves and that the Introduction and Conclusion not only demonstrate the coherence and unity of the ideas behind the book but that the comparative perspective they present enriches each individual case.

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Rueschemeyer is deeply appreciative to the artists, gallery owners, and managers as well as officials in unions and government that she interviewed, often under difficult conditions. She would also like to thank the Rhode Island School of Design for its ongoing support and encouragement of her projects on the arts, the Watson Institute at

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