

Excerpt from:  
 "[A New Art Form: Hypertext Fiction](#)"

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Art Worlds

Exploring the problems of "old," "new," and the conditions of artistic change requires a conception of what sustains an art form, a conception of an *art world* which I have analyzed at length elsewhere (Becker, 1986). Though people often speak of art worlds in a loose way, I mean the term in a technical sense, which encompasses the following ideas:

All art works involve the cooperation of everyone whose activity has anything to do with the end result. That includes the people who make materials, instruments, and tools; the people who create the financial arrangements that make the work possible; the people who see to distributing the works that are made; the people who produced the tradition of forms, genres, and styles the artist works with and against; and the audience. For symphonic music, the list of cooperating people might include composers, players, conductors, instrument makers and repairers, copyists, managers and fundraisers, designers of symphony halls, music publishers, booking agents, and audiences of various kinds. For contemporary painting, an equivalent list would include painters, makers and purveyors of canvases, paints, and similar materials, collectors, art historians, critics, curators, dealers, managers and agents, such auxiliary personnel as, say, lithographic printers, and so on.

Why make such a list? Because each of these *cooperating links* is a point at which the people making the art have to consider how to take into account how the person at the other end of the link will cooperate--what they will and won't do, and on what terms--or suffer the consequences. They have, for instance, to think about what it will mean to paint a canvas of a size that will fit into a home comfortably as opposed to one that will only fit in a corporation headquarters or museum. Taking the anticipated reactions of others into account, artists can decide to tailor what they do to what others will likely do. They can decide to paint a canvas that is two by three meters because they know it will be easier to find a home for it than one ten by twenty. In the same way, a composer might decide to write a string quartet rather than something for two ocarinas and bassoon, in part because there are many more string quartets than two-ocarina and bassoon combinations. If artists decide not to do what others want, they pay another price. Instead of giving up some of their freedom to choose, they must give up time to do themselves what others might have done for them if they were more cooperative; train others to do it for them; or do without. In each case, the work shows the effects of their choice.

All the people who cooperate in making a work of art do that by using mutually understood conventions. All sorts of aspects of art works are governed by conventional understandings as to how they can be done. Some common examples are: musical scales, which are a conventional choice of just a few from all the tones available; the three act play; the sonnet; the history painting; and so on. Such questions as size and shape, length and appropriate subject matters are all decidable by reference to conventional understandings as to how things should be done. Conventional knowledge is what makes it possible for musicians who have never seen each other to play as though they had known each other for years. It is what makes it possible for knowledgeable viewers or listeners to respond to a painting or musical work. Because you know what *ought* conventionally to happen, you can be surprised by an innovation which would otherwise be meaningless. It meant nothing special to hear Bob Dylan play electric guitar unless

you knew that he had always played acoustic guitar. Using conventions makes it easier for people to cooperate and get the work of art done. Changing or ignoring them makes it harder and lessens the possibility of getting others to cooperate.

An art world, to give a technical definition, consists of the network of cooperative activity involving all the people who contribute to the work of art coming off as it finally does, using the conventional understandings they share. Most work gets made in art worlds. Some does not, whether it is the innovative work of art-world mavericks (e.g., a Charles Ives or Conlon Nancarrow) or the naive work of a Simon Rodia (the maker of the Watts Towers), who never heard of such a thing as the art world and wouldn't have cared much about it if he had.

As the conditions of an art world's existence--who gets recruited to the various roles, what kinds of resources are available, what kinds of audiences there are for its works--change, its internal organization and characteristic products change as well. Published fiction, and the organized world that produced it, changed radically when eighteenth-century England developed a new class of literate servants and business people who could read such work and wanted to. The modern novel was born.

One implication of this analysis is that, if we remember that one of the cooperating parties in the production of any work of art is the audience, we can think of a work as coming into existence anew every time someone looks at it, reads it, or hears it. This reminds us, and gives us a way to think about, the fact that the physical object is in a real sense not the whole art work, which is always being reinterpreted. The interpreter helps to create the work's character as a result.

Art works get their value from art worlds. I don't mean that art works aren't agreeable or instructive or edifying or enjoyable,, only that they don't have these qualities *in themselves*, but rather as they are commonly interpreted to have them, in a world of like-thinking people. Great works are great to people who know enough to understand them for what they are, as David Hume suggested. And we must remember that art worlds often reinterpret works, finding some valuable that they had thought less so, and vice versa. The works haven't changed, but their value has.

Perhaps the most controversial thing to be said here is that the quality of a work is not affected by the kind of system it is made in. Good work (generally so recognized) has been produced under every sort of system, including the most vulgarly commercial. Think of the Hollywood film. It is hard to imagine, given the conditions under which movies are made, that there are any good films at all, but we know that there are. Or consider the Victorian English novel, whose authors had to take into account what publishers insisted on if they wanted their works to see print. J.A. Sutherland (1976: 114-16) has shown, for instance, how Thackeray's *Henry Esmond* got some of its finest qualities from the intrusion of George Smith, a literate and concerned publisher, who wouldn't pay the author until he took more care than was his custom.

Perhaps the most important thing to be said is that the participants invest the whole apparatus with an aura of "rightness," so that this way of producing art seems moral and other ways immoral. Using classical ballet steps is moral and proper, while using more ordinary motions like running, jumping, and falling down is somehow wrong, an insult, a disgrace--to people attached to the world of classical ballet. To adherents of the world of modern dance, of course, it is another story.

## References

Sutherland, J.H. *Victorian Novelists and Publishers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.