

# One size fits all? A methodology to assess the image of the contemporary artist

## Abstract

What is the image of the contemporary artist? There is relative consensus on the notion that contemporary artists (i.e. those who have gained prominence since 1960) have, today, a shared image, on a western scale. There is, however, no empirical evidence of what exactly defines this image. The goal of this paper is to propose a methodology to draw up a measuring instrument that allows us to ascertain what constitutes the image of the contemporary artist – understood as a set of descriptors that are associated with her – and, simultaneously, to validate its western dimension.

## One size fits all?

### A methodology to assess the image of the contemporary artist

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## 1.

In contemporary art, where, theoretically, “everything can be a work of art,” art passes through a complex process to establish its status. In contrast to what happened in other times, these atypical objects do not automatically become works of art. Behind them the figure of an artist must be recognised: the “whatever” of contemporary art cannot be produced by “whoever.”<sup>1</sup>

Resisting the prediction of its death and the deconstruction of the creating individual, which

(1) Raymonde Moulin, *De la valeur de l'art* (Paris : Flammarion, 1995), p. 176.

post-structuralism celebrated, the artist has recently reappeared in force in art theory. Radical positions are outdated: no universal geniuses aloof from society, according to the romantic and modernist image of the cursed and misunderstood artist, or frivolous managers of the remains of the cultural past, as suggested by a certain melancholic vision of the artist's post-modern condition.<sup>2</sup> Recognition is now accorded to artists' intentions,<sup>3</sup> to individual style<sup>4</sup> and to the subjectivity and identity inherent in their social and cultural contexts.<sup>5</sup> To address both the increasing complexity of relationships in the art world, where institutional recognition and the market are essential for success and the fierce competition simultaneously oppresses and stimulates artists, they tend to create a "brand image," a guarantee that their works will be identified and assigned greater value.

In line with this "charismatic ideology of the artist," the "signature" becomes more important than the work.<sup>6</sup> Will this theoretical reevaluation of artists be reflected in a return of the aura, in a romantic sense, or is it a question of their humanised figure, as post-modern theory suggests? These are questions that the literature do not address properly and, according to the perspective adopted in this paper, art publics should respond to.

## 2.

Artists have been the object of various studies. Basically, we can distinguish two types: those that favour the theoretical perspective<sup>7</sup> and those that associate them with a strong sociological component.<sup>8</sup> Most of these studies are dedicated to the artist of earlier times. The contemporary artist is addressed as a social representation, in Moulin,<sup>9</sup> in essay form, in Kuspit<sup>10</sup> and in a

- (2) Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991); Donald Kuspit, *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- (3) Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: a Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge and Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981).
- (4) Richard Wollheim, "Style in Painting," in J. McAllister and R. Van De Vaal, eds, *The Question of Style in Philosophy and the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 37-49.
- (5) Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge and Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996).
- (6) Raymonde Moulin, *L'artiste, l'institution et le marché* (Paris: Flammarion, 1992), pp. 364-6.
- (7) See on the matter Geraldine Pelles, "The Image of the Artist," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Criticism* 21 (1962): 119-37; Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artist: An Historical Experiment* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979); Kuspit, *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist*; Idalina Conde, "Artistas. Individuo, ilusão óptica e contra-ilusão," *Sociologia. Problemas e Práticas* 19 (1996): 31-65; Catherine M. Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
- (8) Moulin, *L'artiste, l'institution et le marché*; Nathalie Heinich, *Être artiste* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1996); Nathalie Heinich, *L'élite artiste: excellence et singularité en régime démocratique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).
- (9) Moulin, *L'artiste, l'institution et le marché*.
- (10) Kuspit, *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist*.

theoretical and systematic manner, in Conde.<sup>11</sup> Moulin analyses the sociological profile of the contemporary artist in the chapter "L'image de l'artiste."<sup>12</sup> She includes demographic data and information on social origin, the circumstances surrounding the discovery of a vocation, and training. Although of undeniable interest, the study is based on a conception of the image as a social characterisation – a different approach from that of our project. The image of artists will be researched from the perspective of the public and their subjective perception of them as creators of a series of art works, with recognition of the receiver's decisive contribution to the conceptualisation of the set of stimuli transmitted.

Kuspit presents a dichotomy: the image of the neo-avant-garde (post-modern) artist is evaluated negatively and, basically, appears in contrast to the avant-garde artist's image, which is judged positively. The latter is seen as a symbol of heroic resistance to everything oppressive and corrupt in bourgeois society: authenticity, integrity and originality are the hallmarks. The former is described as narcissistic, merely interested in fame and fortune, an impostor, a parasite and someone for whom a charismatic image is more important than the work.<sup>13</sup>

Kuspit's position is Manichaeic, conservative and poorly grounded. It starts from an error regarding artists' ability to clearly separate what they are and the way they are perceived (i.e. the ability of an artist to construct an image that is independent of the intrinsic value of his/her work). Ironically, the romantic values of originality and authenticity, which Kuspit uncritically and obstinately worships and post-structuralism saw as an ideological fallacy,<sup>14</sup> are brought back in more recent theory, from a critical and problematised perspective.

Conde considers the issue of the artist's subjectivity as "situated creativity." Originality regains sense, as long as it is understood from a viewpoint of "the adaptation of the sociological biography in a model to a time that contextualises and restores the subject's idiosyncrasies."<sup>15</sup>

The new focus on artists' singularity forces us to consider them as a shared and socially apprehended individuality. Thus, in line with the perspective adopted in this paper, the "image of artists" takes, precisely, their social context into consideration, as a condition of their existence: the artist does not exist without a public or without an image. This "image" takes form somewhere between the stimulus and the receiver and measures their interaction, i.e. it defines the symbolic relationship between artist and public.

The external component of the concept of image (i.e. the perspective of the public), adopted here, considers that the receiver's contribution in conceptualising the set of stimuli transmitted is decisive: the image is not what artists believe they are transmitting but what the public thinks or feels about the artists, on the basis of their experience and observation, of their knowledge regarding the artists' work, reputation in the marketplace and institutional recognition, and of what artists say about themselves and others say about them. As a synthesis of the reality of artists, allowing various degrees of abstraction, "image" becomes the structural equivalent

(11) Conde, "Artistas. Indivíduo, ilusão óptica e contra-ilusão."

(12) Moulin, *L'artiste, l'institution et le marché*, pp. 299-302.

(13) Kuspit, *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist*, pp. 1-27.

(14) Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge and Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985).

(15) Conde, "Artistas. Indivíduo, ilusão óptica e contra-ilusão," p. 35.

of their identities: a mental representation that may vary from simple recognition to profound knowledge of their particularities.

This perspective also allows us to surmount another basic epistemological difficulty. Existing studies on artists have a marked tendency to generalise, partly because they seek, a priori, a universal and essentialist definition of the artist and partly because they are based on standard art-theory texts where this generalisation already exists. Sociology has made an important contribution to reversing this trend. However, in seeking a social model that explains the artist's condition, it ultimately interferes with the more effective revelation of his or her singularity.

Our proposal for an empirical approach is related, precisely, to the recognition of this limitation and the intention to overcome it. By extending the research scope to contemporary western artists, this paper aims to contribute to draw up an image-measuring instrument that tends towards universality and allows us to identify the degree of their singularity. On a scale between a hypothetically uniform image of artists – in which the public's appreciation would be completely undifferentiated – and one of total fragmentation – in which it would be impossible to establish any connections in their appreciation – we should expect to find models, analogies, tendencies and trends.

### 3.

The fundamental methodological characteristics of a study like this are: firstly, an extensive survey of the issues raised by art theory, via documentary research and a literature review, in order to define the conceptual framework and prepare the fieldwork; secondly, an empirical component, where we distinguish two stages – qualitative and quantitative – in the research, on the basis of two exploratory and complementary studies.

#### 1. Concepts specification and operationalisation (qualitative stage)

The first stage is aimed at specifying and operationalising the concept of the “image of contemporary artists.” The image is researched from the perspective of a specialist public (stakeholders), with the research consisting of two sequential phases. The first is aimed at exhaustively identifying the descriptors associated with artists by the public and the second at classifying and grouping these descriptors in order to create an instrument for measuring the “image of contemporary artists.”

#### Objectives:

- to establish a set of descriptors associated by the public with contemporary artists;
- to validate and complement the information obtained from the literature review;
- to identify the structuring dimensions of the image;
- to create an instrument for measuring the image.

**Method:**

The approach in question – based on the assumption of the image as a set of mental associations stimulated by comparison with a particular referent or its representation – habitually presupposes a set of sequential procedures.<sup>16</sup> Thus, it is important, firstly, to identify the set of associations that help to form the image of artists. In this phase, this process depends on a qualitative approach (i.e. of “comprehension of the image”).

This approach is not only considered appropriate but also fundamental when the research is carried out among individuals whose psychological and physical distance from the object (“artists”) allows us to expect a reasonable degree of elaboration of the image, i.e. complex and hierarchically organised images.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, recognition of the image as a “compound of meanings” resulting from subjective cognitive processes suggests detection techniques that do not demand – as happens in structured approaches – terminology, attributes or dimensions that are predetermined by the researcher. Thus, quite differently from earlier research, it is advisable to use a method that allows us to obtain, accurately, the specific perceptual framework of the art public, i.e. the actual public image of artists, in contrast to what may be suggested on their behalf by only a specific category of specialists (e.g. art critics). Simultaneously, the techniques to be used should also pay attention to recommendations on initial procedures for the development of robust psychometric measures, in order not to limit, from the outset, potential quantitative studies (i.e. of the “description of the image”) to be carried out later.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, methodologically, this phase of the research focuses on characterising the concept “image of contemporary artists” (in an exhaustive statement of the group of descriptors associated with contemporary artists), as well as on grouping and classifying the items that capture it and drawing up a measuring instrument that allows it to be operationalised.

For this purpose, in the main centres of western contemporary art – London, Berlin and New York – a set of in-depth interviews (around 20) should be held with specialised publics: critics, theoreticians, curators, gallery owners, auctioneers, collectors and specific art-loving publics. This approach allows, freely and with a certain degree of individuality, to stimulate the judgements, attitudes and opinions that each of these privileged interlocutors reveals about what, nowadays, constitutes the image of contemporary artists.

Besides acquiring possible general contributions to greater clarification of the research problem, the researcher should, through direct questions, try to identify the emerging image and, simultaneously, seek to determine also the latent image, i.e. the one that is not spontaneous and depends on recourse to projective methods to be revealed.

In accordance with the goal of as comprehensive a coverage as possible of the semantic universe of the field, the transcription of relevant information should firstly make use of “content

[16] Emílio Távora Vilar, *Marketing Bancário: Um Modelo de Imagem da banca* (Lisboa: Quimera, 2008), pp. 41-7.

[17] Theo B. C. Poiesz, “The image concept: its place in consumer psychology,” *Journal of Economic Psychology* 10 (1989): 457-472.

[18] Gilbert A. Churchill Jr., *Marketing Research: Methodological Foundations* (Fort Worth: The Dryden Press, 1995).

analysis;<sup>19</sup> the “method of judges”<sup>20</sup> would then be used for its categorisation and classification, in order to determine the structuring dimensions of the image of artists.

Finally, the measuring instrument should be operationalised in the form of a questionnaire, include all the image dimensions identified at a preliminary stage and allow the testing of a considerable number of scales. Besides allowing classification of the dimensions of the image [specific and overall], it should allow to ascertain the importance attributed to them. The questions should be grouped according to the dimensions of the image to be evaluated; each dimension, though not being subject to direct observation, would be associated with a set of indicators, expressed as statements and measured on Likert or semantic differential scales (the most common for evaluating images and most suitable for the field in question). During the design and development process, the questionnaire should be pre-tested in order to assess its internal consistency and boost the psychometric properties of the scales in terms of validity and reliability.

## II. Application of the measuring instrument (quantitative stage)

In this second stage, the measuring instrument would be applied to a sample of specialised publics, with the aim of statistically validating the options taken in the preliminary research, determining the structural composition of the image, ascertaining the relationships established between its specific dimensions and the overall image, and analysing potential image profiles resulting from the segmentation carried out.

### Objectives:

- to confirm the “image of contemporary artists” as a multi-dimensional reality;
- to validate/rectify the structuring dimensions of the image;
- to ascertain its relative complexity and importance;
- to analyse the relationship between the specific dimensions and the overall image;
- to ascertain and analyse the alteration in the image in accordance with the socio-demographic differences of the respondents;
- to verify the validity and reliability of the measuring instrument and adjust it as necessary.

### Method:

The choice of a quantitative approach in this phase arises from the need for an effective operationalisation of the concept of image that allows, for example, its comparison with other variables (e.g. the institutional recognition of the artist and his/her reputation in the marketplace) and the adoption of correlational analyses.

Methodologically, in this second stage a questionnaire survey would be carried out with a view to applying the instrument measuring the image of artists. The survey should be administered on

(19) Richard H. Kolbe and Melissa S. Burnett, “Content-Analysis research: an examination of applications with directives for improving research reliability and objectivity,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 18 (1991): 243-250.

(20) William D. Perreault and Laurence E. Leigh, “Reliability of nominal data based on qualitative judgements,” *Journal of Marketing Research* 16 (1979): 135-148.

a present-in-person basis to a sample of publics participating in three of the main European contemporary art fairs – Art Basel (Basel), Frieze (London), Arco (Madrid). The respondents should be characterised according to gender, age, occupation, educational qualifications, relationship with the art world, nationality and residence.

With respect to the specific dimensions of the image, the respondents should refer to the contemporary artist that they would know best, identify him or her and give a classification on the scales in the questionnaire: e.g. the statement “the contemporary artist is innovative” would be classified on a 7-point Likert scale, from “totally disagree” to “fully agree;” the question “is the contemporary artist abstract or figurative?” would be answered on a 7-point semantic differential scale, from “totally abstract” to “totally figurative.” As another example, to gauge the importance given to the indicator “innovation,” the respondent would classify the statement “in the contemporary artist, innovation is...” on a 7-point Likert scale, from “not at all important” to “very important.”

The “overall image” factor, as a general, affective and summarising dimension, demands more abstract qualifiers, related to the empathy, liking and emotional component associated by the respondents with the artists and contemporary art. Processing and analysis of the information and data gathered would be carried out using descriptive and inferential techniques, in particular, “principal component analysis,” to reduce the information and detect the image dimensions, “cluster analysis,” to ascertain the way in which the artists are grouped, and “linear regression” to model the relationship between the image dimensions and its overall component.

#### 4.

This study would allow us to compare the empirical data obtained and the ideas of the theory on contemporary artists and artists of other times. In addition, its results would have an undoubtedly instrumental nature, representing an indispensable intermediate step towards future research. Given the relational, dynamic and developing nature of the image, its operationalisation as it is proposed here would allow to:

- monitor the actual development of a particular artist;
- make comparisons between artists;
- detect image changes in accordance with geo-demographic or time-related variables;
- ascertain how far the image of artists is correlated with variables such as their reputation in the market place or institutional recognition;
- understand whether a globalised image of artists exists and thus assess the effects of globalisation on the art world.

A genius, impostor, innovator, plagiarist, idealist, businessman, nonentity or superstar: the same image for all or one for each of them?