



HOW STUDENTS PERCEIVE ART BASED ON THEIR LEARNING EXPERIENCES

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Abstract:

This article examines how students in the vocational qualification of media and visual expression in Finland perceive and define art based on their learning experiences. The research task was addressed by drawing on institutional and functional definitions of art that define the subject in terms of its relation to artistic tradition and its purposes. Twenty-eight final-year students of media and visual expression at an upper secondary vocational college for culture studies in Finland participated in the research examined herein. Through reflective writing, these students commented on the definitions, functions, and contributions of art. The data were analyzed via a thematic analysis, and the results indicate that these students' perceptions of art included aspects of both institutional and functional definitions in that they paid attention to materials, techniques, and conventions of artistic expression as well as art's purposes, such as self-expression and the questioning or criticism of social phenomena. These students considered art a form of communication capable of connecting people as well as promoting tolerance and appreciation between various individuals and cultures.

Keywords: art, institutional definition, functional definition, media and visual expression students, vocational education and training, thematic analysis

1. Introduction

What is art? Why is something considered art? These are the questions students of media and visual expression have asked me time after time over the past twenty years that I have worked as a teacher of art history and visual culture studies in vocational upper secondary education and training in Finland. This study is based on an initiative in which final-year students of media and visual expression started discussing the definitions and meanings of art when studying images of Marcel Duchamp's readymade artworks that seemed to challenge their conceptions of art. Instead of firstly

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answering the questions myself, I regarded them as an opportunity to invite students to themselves reflect upon the topic of what constitutes art based on their experiences. In the vocational qualification of media and visual expression, these students had studied diverse media of visual expression, such as painting, sculpting, graphics, and photography, and had additionally participated in art history courses. For this reason, I believed reflecting back upon their studies and using their own experiences as resources for constructing their understanding of art might prove instructional. It is important that the holders of the vocational qualification in media and visual expression simultaneously develop an understanding of the diverse meanings of art and become aware of their own conceptions of art (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2017).

The vocational qualification of media and visual expression is a studio arts-based program in which students learn practical skills in visual expression. During their studies, they learn to apply several materials, techniques, and media of visual expression. Thematically, the assignments approach visual expression and artistic creation from diverse perspectives that range from anatomy studies to advertisements and works that are critical of current society. In addition, the studies include an internship that last several months and wherein students learn skills of visual expression in the workplace. Most students enter the degree program at the age of fifteen or sixteen years after they have completed their compulsory education at a comprehensive school, although most study groups also include older students and adult students who wish to change their careers. The three-year study program provides students with the eligibility necessary to apply and pursue further studies at scientific universities and universities of applied sciences (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2017).

This research is interested in determining how final-year students of media and visual expression in an upper secondary vocational college in Finland understand art. More specifically, the research questions are:

- 1) How do students define art?
- 2) What do they regard as functions of art? and
- 3) How do they understand art's contribution in contemporary times?

Students' views regarding these questions are discussed in the literature frame concerning the definitions of art and the curriculum for the vocational qualification in media and visual expression.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Approaches to Defining Art

When reading literature on the definitions of art, it is easy for one to agree with Isrow's (2017) notion that defining art is a complex task. Rather than a consensus, one is confronted with a number of definitions that approach art from different theoretical frames and premises. In addition, scholars may apply diverging concepts when referring to the same or similar approaches to defining art. This literature review

attempts to sketch some basic coordinates of the approaches to defining art based on the classifications asserted by Adajian (2018), Gracyk (2012), and Isrow (2017) (see Table 1).

Table 1: A summary and comparison of approaches to defining art based on Adajian (2018), Gracyk (2012), and Isrow (2017)

Adajian (2018)	Gracyk (2012) and Isrow (2017)
Conventional definitions - institutional - historical	Institutional definitions
Traditional definitions - aesthetic functions - other functions	Functional definitions - aesthetic functions - other functions
	Expressionist definitions
Hybrid definitions	Cluster definitions

Several scholars' definitions of art make a distinction between approaches that on one hand refer to the artwork's relation to artistic tradition as the definition's basis and on the other hand focus on art's functions (e.g., Adajian, 2018; Davies, 2015; Gracyk, 2012; Isrow, 2017). This division is conceptualized via several diverse terms according to different scholars. For instance, Adajian (2018) differentiates between conventional and traditional definitions. For him, conventional definitions refer to institutional and historical definitions in which art is defined in the frame of artistic tradition, art genres, and forms of art recognized within a certain culture at a certain period of time. In turn, traditional definitions regard the aesthetic function or some other function(s) that is (are) definitive of art. According to Adajian (2018), art possesses both historical and cultural features that vary across diverse cultures, periods of time, and trans-historical and pan-cultural features that refer to a more stable "aesthetic core" across those cultures and historical periods.

A similar kind of classification is proposed by Gracyk (2012) and Isrow (2017); resembling that of Adajian (2018), the authors distinguish a class of institutional definitions in which art is related to the artistic tradition as well as the social and institutional conditions surrounding art that are developed in the long term (Gracyk, 2012; Isrow, 2017). Comparable with Adajian's (2018) traditional definitions of art, Gracyk (2012) and Isrow (2017) introduce the group of functional definitions that refer to the purposes or tasks that art fulfills, including aesthetic and any other functions. In addition, Gracyk (2012) and Isrow (2017) differentiate the group of expressionist definitions that highlight art's potential to communicate creators' intentions and generate feelings within the audience. In Adajian's (2018) classification, this aspect might be regarded in line with the traditional definitions in that expression is one of art's functions.

In addition to the aforementioned definitions, Adajian (2018) introduces a class of hybrid definitions and Gracyk (2012) and Isrow (2017) a class of cluster definitions, both of which combine features of different definition classes. Hybrid definitions combine features of conventional (institutional and historical) and traditional (aesthetic or some other function) definitions; for instance, Longworth and Scarantino's (2010) definition relates art to institutions of art in terms of their belonging to a recognized art form and simultaneously characterizes artworks as creations that possess aesthetic properties. Stecker (2005), for his part, combines functionalist and institutional definitions that state the functions art fulfills are culturally and historically specific. In the following section, two groups of definitions are elaborated upon more thoroughly – namely institutional and functional definitions.

2.2 Institutional Definitions of Art

Arthur Danto (1964) laid the foundation for the institutional definitions of art and coined its basic concept as the “artworld,” which refers to the basic tenet of institutional definitions of art as well as artistic traditions and conventions (Adajian, 2018). More specifically, the artworld can be understood as the tradition of artworks, artistic styles and genres, forms of art, and art institutions (Davies, 2015). Hence, the artworld conceptualizes art in terms of artistic objects, practices, norms, and conventions developed through the course of time (Adajian, 2018). Carrol (2008) associates the artworld with social order and regards art as a means for maintaining, challenging, and reconstructing the artworld. Institutional definitions of art closely relate to the discipline of art history and presuppose the existing knowledge of artistic tradition (Davies, 2015).

Institutional theories regard art as creations that can be acknowledged as art within publicly recognized artistic traditions or the artworld (Adajian, 2018; Davies, 2015). This requirement implies the existence of a socially and culturally shared understanding of art. As Davies (2015) states, institutional definitions are not universal, but may rather vary from culture to culture since different cultures may hold differing artistic traditions. Thus, the artworld is a contextual concept that refers to a particular culture and period of time (Danto, 1964; Davies, 2015), although a connectedness to artistic tradition does not imply that contemporary art was determined by said tradition; rather, the artworld is in the process of constant reconstruction (Adajian, 2018).

In terms of artistic creation, institutional definitions presuppose that artists possess knowledge about the materials, techniques, genres, forms of art, and conventions of artistic expression “*with a significant degree of aesthetic interest*” (Adajian, 2018, p. 2; see also Davies, 2012). Institutional definitions consider the making of art as a deliberate and intentional process wherein artists intend to create art and consciously relate to the tradition of art. At the audience level, institutional definitions of art presuppose an understanding of how a particular work of art relates to the artworld (Davies, 2015).

2.3 Functional Definitions of Art

As Davies (2015) states, art has served a number of functions throughout history. Functional definitions of art are based on the purposes, tasks, and functions art fulfills. Some of these functions may relate more closely to individual persons, whereas others may operate on a more societal level (see, e.g., Adajian, 2018; Curtis, Reid, & Reeve, 2014). Expressing and exploring an individual artist's ideas and emotions—that is, one's self-expression—and appealing to or generating an individual perceiver's emotions may be regarded as one type of art's individual functions (Adajian, 2018; Schein, 2013). However, these expressive and emotional qualities make art an arena of sharing that connects people of different ages, classes, regions, and ideologies (Milbrandt, 2010). Hence, by appealing to individual people, art may also strengthen their sense of togetherness and communality (Curtis et al., 2014; Kay, 2000).

Diverse social functions of art include, for instance, informative, educational, ceremonial, religious, propagandist, and practical functions (see Adajian, 2018; Davies, 2015; Milbrandt, 2010). Art and its reflection shape people's conceptions and attitudes (Curtis et al., 2014). According to Milbrandt (2010), art forms a central forum in which social values, ideas, and norms as well as social and cultural identities are expressed and constructed (see also Carroll, 2008; Curtis et al., 2014; Desai & Hamlin, 2010; Kay, 2000). However, as several scholars point out, a central function of art also involves criticizing, opposing, and revising social values and norms as well as broadening people's perspectives, worldviews, and conceptions of social reality (Milbrandt, 2010; Schein, 2013). Through these functions, art is regarded as capable of challenging habitual ways of thinking and acting as well as broadening people's "*behavioural repertory, and our flexibility of response*" (Schein, 2013, p. 2). In this sense, art may promote social change (Curtis et al., 2014; Kay, 2000; Milbrandt, 2010).

In terms of art's social functions, recent research pays attention to art's potential as a means for appealing to marginalized people in societies as well as promoting both their inclusion within their communities and their involvement in social issues (Kay, 2000). Hence, art/art-based projects may promote togetherness, tolerance for, and appreciation of human dignity (Kay, 2000). On the other hand, Curtis et al. (2014) perceive art's ability to generate emotions and empathy as an opportunity to personally engage people in current social and environmental matters, thereby enhancing their social and ecological sustainability.

Functional definitions of art can be classified into two broad categories. Functional theories of art regard the functions of art as culturally and historically contextual, whereas aesthetic theories of art pay attention to aesthetic functions of art irrespective of culture and time (Adajian, 2018; Davies, 2015; Parsons & Carlson, 2008). However, several scholars—as is typical for hybrid definitions of art—do not regard these two theoretical approaches to the functions of art as mutually exclusive (see, e.g., Brix, 2015; Milbrandt, 2010).

2.4 Definitions of Art in the Curriculum for the Vocational Qualification in Media and Visual Expression

The curriculum for the vocational qualification in media and visual expression does not explicitly define art, although the descriptions, aims, and evaluation criteria of each study module or competence area implicitly point toward particular definitions of art. Firstly, the curriculum relates art to one's knowledge of and skills associated with using materials and techniques. Secondly, the curriculum relates art to one's knowledge of the means of visual expression, such as color, composition, light and shadow, and space. Thirdly, art is associated with expression in terms of one's ability to apply one's skills and knowledge of materials, techniques, and means of visual expression to intentionally construct an image that expresses one's feelings and thoughts or views on diverse matters. Thus, art is fourthly associated with consciousness and intentionality. Fifthly, the curriculum presupposes that the students possess knowledge of art history and are able to understand, locate, and discuss their creations in the frame of artistic tradition. Lastly, art is understood as a form of public communication and participation in societal discussion because students are trained to display their creations in exhibitions, write and speak about their creations, receive constructive feedback, and explain their views and choices of visual expression (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2017).

When the aforementioned guidelines are observed in the frame of the definitions of art presented in Sections 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3, one may notice that they possess elements of both institutional and functional definitions of art. One's knowledge of artistic techniques, materials, and art history as a basis of creating art as well as one's ability to participate in social discussion through art presuppose one's familiarity with the artistic tradition and cultural context. One's expression of thoughts and emotions as well as one's active participation in social discussion through art connect the curriculum guidelines to the functional definitions of art. The disjunctive approaches to art meet the characteristics of hybrid (Adajian, 2018) or cluster (Gracyk, 2012; Isrow, 2017) definitions.

3. Method

3.1 Participants and Setting

Twenty-eight students in an upper secondary vocational college for culture studies in Finland participated in the research examined herein. All students were in their third (and final) year of the vocational qualification in media and visual expression and specialized in visual arts (eight students), photography (twelve students), and audio-visual communication (eight students). The group of participants included twenty-four female and four male students whose ages ranged from eighteen to twenty-nine years; twenty-three students were between eighteen and twenty years of age, while five were between twenty-one and twenty-nine years of age. The students were participants in two art history/visual culture courses taught by the researcher. The information

concerning the participants is summarized in Table 2, and the participants' distribution by gender and age is typical for the final-year study groups at the college in question.

Visual arts studies focus on developing skills of visual expression and artistic creation using diverse materials and techniques. In addition to traditional drawing and painting by hand, visual arts studies also include, for instance, photography, animation, and digital art. Studies of photography and audio-visual communication include the basics of diverse materials and techniques of visual expression, although photography students familiarize themselves with a number of approaches to photography, such as documentary, photojournalism, commercial photography, and artistic photography. In turn, audio-visual communication students study illustration, graphic design, package design, and web design using digital tools. In addition, the studies of visual arts, photography, and audio-visual communication include courses on Finnish, European, and Non-European art history. Hence, despite their specializing in different media of visual expression, all participating students had taken courses on methods and techniques of artistic expression as well as art history.

Table 2: Information about the participants

Participants	
Third-year students in an upper secondary vocational college for culture studies	
Study field	Number of students
photography	12
audio-visual communication	8
visual arts	8
Gender	Number of students
female	24
male	4
Age	Number of students
18–20 years	23
21–29 years	5

3.2 Data

Based on the students' initiative to discuss the definitions of art, they were arranged an opportunity to reflect upon their understanding of art via a writing assignment on an art history lesson. The students wrote their reflections in Finnish, which were translated into English afterward, according to the following three questions: (1) How do you define/understand art? (2) What purposes/functions does art have? and (3) How can art contribute to contemporary times? A period of sixty minutes was reserved for the assignment, which took students thirty to forty minutes to complete. In total, the data included 29 typewritten pages, and the length of a typical answer was approximately eight to one hundred words; however, the length of one student's answers could vary significantly. For instance, student 3 answered question 2 in 48 words and question 3 in 264 words. In terms of content, a typical answer included one's reflection upon a couple themes or aspects related to the question's topic. No significant differences were detected between the answers of female and male students or between the students younger and older than twenty years. Judging by the versatility in the answers, the time

spent on the assignment, and each answer's length, the assignment seemed to motivate the students to reflect on the meanings of art. The students were informed that the teacher was willing to use the written material as research data, and thus all students provided their written permission that their answers be used for research purposes.

3.3 Analysis

The data were analyzed via a thematic analysis. As a method that focuses on identifying themes within qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Maquire & Delahunt, 2017) and examining research participants' perspectives (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013), thematic analysis was regarded as suitable for exploring the ways students understand and make sense of art. Rather than merely summarizing the data, thematic analysis aims at interpreting and understanding the data by identifying the themes and mapping the way participants make sense of the research topic (Maquire & Delahunt, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017). Clarke and Braun (2018, p. 107) define themes as *"key characters in the story we are telling about the data."*

Braun and Clarke (2006) make a distinction between semantic and latent themes. While semantic themes refer to those that participants articulate verbally, latent themes are not ideas participants overtly explicate, but are rather those the researcher infers from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maquire & Delahunt, 2017). Thematic analysis can be conducted either deductively or inductively (Marquise & Delahunt, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017); whereas a deductive approach examines the data from a theoretical or conceptual frame, an inductive thematic analysis forms a bottom-up approach in which themes emerge from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Federay & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

In this research, the questions posed to the students segmented the concept of art into definitions, functions, and contemporary contributions. In a sense, these three segments served as themes that themselves guided the students to reflect upon their understanding of art from certain "thematic" points of view. The themes "definitions," "functions," and "contributions" may appear as representative of institutional and functional definitions of art discussed in the literature review (see, e.g., Adajian, 2018; Gracyk, 2012; Isrow, 2017). However, rather than attempting to direct the students to define art from certain theoretical perspectives, these three questions or themes of reflection were intended to make the topic more graspable and concrete than the mere question "How do you define art?" would have done.

Although the three questions may furnish the study with qualities of a deductive approach (see e.g., Federay & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), the study is primarily interested in the themes the students related to or associated with the definitions, functions, and contributions of art based on their own knowledge and lived experiences. In this sense, the thematic analysis applied in this research can be defined as inductive in that it pays careful attention to themes that participants expressed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These semantic—that is, verbally explicated—themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) are considered to provide insight into the ways students understand art (see Lehtomäki, Motate, & Posti-Ahokas, 2016). The study's design is illustrated in Figure 1.

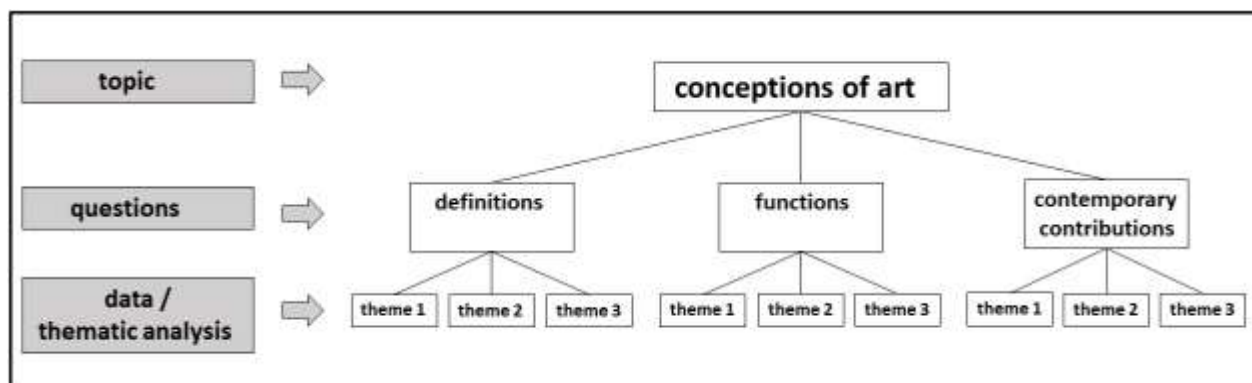


Figure 1: The design of the present study

Braun and Clarke (2006) understand thematic analysis as a process that comprises six phases: becoming familiar with the data, mapping initial codes, looking for themes, checking themes, determining themes, and writing them up. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) model as a basis, the data were analyzed in several phases (see also Lehtomäki et al., 2016; Nowell et al., 2017). Students' answers were initially read through several times in order to form a general view of the data's thematic landscape, during which the preliminary themes were identified. Because this research does not analyze large amounts of data, the coding phase was simplified such that all themes detected from the data were coded via a descriptive label. In order to review and crosscheck the coded data, this analysis stage was repeated across the data after two weeks. In the next phase, the coded data were clustered into more "overarching" themes that illuminated the students' conceptions of art. The afore-elucidated procedure was considered to operationalize not rigid models of coding, but rather what Clarke and Braun (2018, 10) describe as an "organic approach to coding and theme development."

4. Findings

Although the concept of art was not defined in the assignment, the students understood the concept as visual forms of art. This interpretation is understandable, as all students studied media and visual expression and the data were collected from an art history lesson.

The presentation of the findings is divided into three sections based on the three questions posed to the participating students. The themes identified in the data are elucidated with excerpts of data, and a figure that summarizes the themes detected from the data is depicted at the end of each section.

4.1 How do You Define Art?

In students' opinions, art embraces both institutionalized and popular art forms. The students believe art is not exclusively found in museums and galleries, but is also present outside art institutions. Art was conceptualized as objects and forms of art on

one hand and as a process of visually reflecting upon life on the other. Based on these notions, art was not regarded as distant or special, but as rather an integral part of everyday life.

"We can see art everywhere in the streets and museums—paintings, sculptures, crafts, fashion. Each culture has its art and art changes with the times." (Student 13)

"Art is a way for people to see and interpret the world—some do it verbally, others visually." (Student 27)

The students defined art as various artworks with communicative purposes. Although they mentioned artistic and technical skills as part of artistic creation, they shared the opinion that all people can generally create art and regarded one's ability to visualize ideas as more important than one's possession of technical skills. In this definition, art was perceived as the communication of thoughts and emotions through visual means and artistic activity as both a profession and a hobby.

"Art includes technical skills and skills of self-expression. However, skills of expressing an idea are more important than technical skills...For artists, art is a job through which they make their living...But art can also be a hobby." (Student 5)

"Art is something that everybody can create—not just professional artists. When ordinary people express their thoughts and emotions visually, they make art." (Student 18)

Students regarded art as a form of visual communication in that it is a means of both expressing one's thoughts and emotions as well as evoking one's thoughts and emotions among spectators. Communication in relation to art, however, was characterized in two dimensions. On one hand, students regarded communication as an art maker's desire to influence his/her audience and transmit his/her views, while on the other hand, students additionally perceived crowd-sourcing responses generated by artworks as visual communication. In the latter case, art was understood as a process through which spectators communicate with themselves.

"Artists can express their emotions and things important to them through art. Art can also be a means of influencing people's thoughts, experiences, and emotions." (Student 7)

"Art is a means of reflecting on oneself, other people, hardships, sorrow, joy...life in general, with the help of artworks." (Student 21)

Students characterized art as an arena of thoughts and emotions, although emotions seemed to outweigh their conceptions because they were specified and named more elaborately compared to thoughts, which were referred to as “ideas” or “views.”

“Art is a way for people to express their thoughts and emotions. Similarly, it generates thoughts and emotions among those who observe art. Admiration, wondering, annoyance, anger, happiness, joy.” (Student 1)

Figure 2 summarizes the themes detected from the students’ reflections upon the definitions of art.

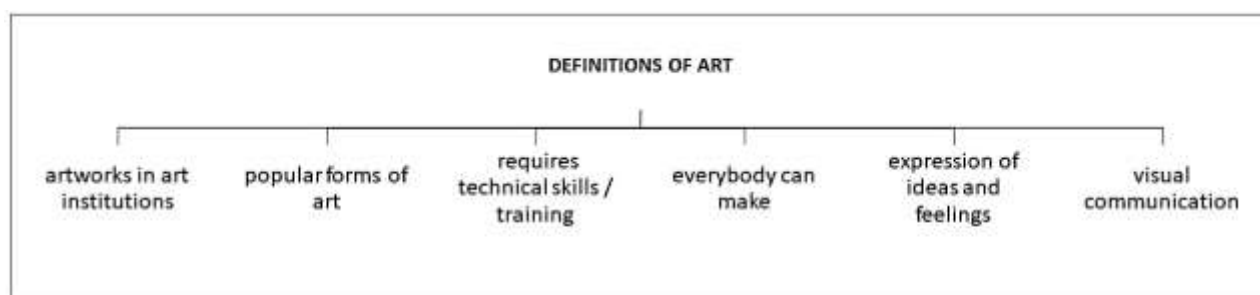


Figure 2: A summary of the definitions of art

4.2 What Functions/Purposes Does Art Have?

Students regarded art as having a number of purposes and functions that range from entertainment to the critique of social matters; conversely, the bringing of joy, pleasure, and relaxation were regarded not as minor functions of art, but rather as an important opportunity for rejuvenation in people’s daily routines. Art was additionally perceived as a means of making one’s living environment more pleasant.

“Art entertains, brings joy and relaxation. People need this so that they can cope with their everyday lives.” (Student 22)

“Works of art decorate and make dull environments more pleasant. I believe people feel better in comfortable and pleasant milieus.” (Student 25)

When reflecting upon art’s purposes or functions, students emphasized art’s potential to express and communicate art makers’ thoughts and emotions as well as evoke thoughts and emotions among spectators. In this context, students explicitly mentioned and discussed art as a means of influencing people and contributing to change.

“People can speak out and express their opinions on the matters in the society. Through art, people can criticize things and pay attention to grievances.” (Student 8)

“Art that is critical and deals with problematic issues in life can open people’s eyes, which in turn may change their way of thinking and acting. Through influencing people, art can change societies.” (Student 23)

Students considered art makers as being capable of observing life closely as well as noticing and addressing problematic issues through visual expression. These functions were regarded as important in terms of opening spectators’ eyes to both perceive elements that previously went unnoticed and become aware of their habitual ways of thinking and acting.

“The most important function of art is to question things, thoughts and opinions taken for granted. It makes people rethink and reflect on their—old and safe—habits.” (Student 6)

“Arts express and evoke thoughts and feelings, criticize societal matters, create beauty, shake people’s habitual ways of thinking...and shape or influence people’s thoughts.” (Student 10)

Art’s potential to describe and commemorate people, events, phenomena, societies, cultures, and periods of times was regarded as its key purpose and was associated with its ability to teach people by presenting and communicating the lives of past generations. Art seems to create a stock of human experiences and encounters from which people can learn. In this way, individual artists seem to create something collectively valid and precious that can help contemporary people make sense of their lives.

“The function of art is to express thoughts, ideas, emotions. Another important function is to depict and commemorate important things, events, phenomena, and people. It commemorates historical eras and cultures.” (Student 2)

“Art also familiarizes us with the past. Through observing and analyzing art, we can learn about people and their cultures...Through art, we can also learn about ourselves and the present.” (Student 9)

Another aspect that emphasizes the social dimension of art was its potential to connect people. Through art, students familiarize themselves with different ways of life from past and present eras and cultures.

“Art brings people from different cultures together, and they can learn from each other through art.” (Student 12)

“Through art, people can share their points of view and discuss matters important to them. In this sense, art promotes interaction between people.” (Student 21)

Some students wrote that artworks generate feelings of empathy. They felt they could identify themselves with the thoughts and emotions of both the artists and the people being depicted in the artworks, through which the students felt connected with both involved parties.

“Sometimes works of art generate such strong emotions that you feel the artists’ presence in the images as if you were connected with them.” (Student 2)

“Art is a means of expressing myself and identifying myself with other people—both the artist and the people depicted in works of art.” (Student 16).

However, the students did not solely perceive art as a way of familiarizing themselves with people and their habits from other periods of time or cultures. The unfamiliar elements depicted in paintings seemed to act as a basis for the students to reflect upon their own period of time and lives as well as their own thoughts and experiences. The unfamiliar elements presented and detected in artworks seemed to increase and motivate the students’ self-exploration.

“For me, art is like a mirror that reflects both the past and the present. It generates questions and thoughts...It tells about people. Other people’s lives...But when you observe other people in artworks, you observe and analyze your own life at the same time.” (Student 10)

Students wrote that studying art and art history had changed their relationships with art. Their knowledge of the artistic tradition and their improved skills in analyzing art seemed to make their studying of art more meaningful. In addition, students experienced that art history had improved their visual literacy skills, which seemed to increase their interest in observing the visual aspects of everyday life.

“I think observing art has developed my skills in observing and noticing things in everyday life.” (Student 3)

“I am more interested in art because, through studying it, I have learned to observe and reflect on it in different ways and more deeply than before. That is why art has become more meaningful to me, and I can draw from it to my own life more than before.” (Student 6)

Figure 3 summarizes the themes detected from the students’ reflections upon art’s functions.

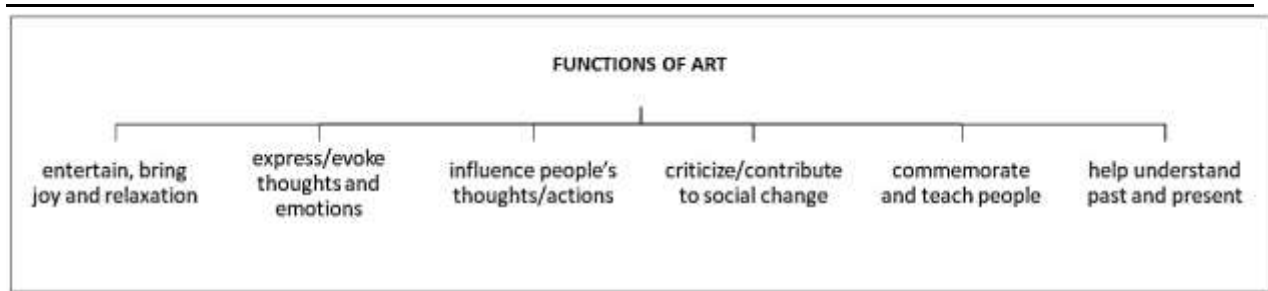


Figure 3: A summary of art's functions

4.3 How can Art Contribute to Contemporary Times?

When students were asked about the contributions art makes to contemporary times, one recurrent notion was that everyone can learn from art. Artworks were regarded as reservoirs of human knowledge and experience that contemporary people can apply as resources in making sense of and orienting their lives to the future. Art emerged as a commemoration that enables people to gather together based on the common past shared by all humankind.

"Through art, we can learn from history and different cultures. Art teaches people to look at things from different perspectives, with other people's eyes...In addition, I think it is important that art commemorates moments, emotions, everyday lives, people, and things so that we can return to them visually over and over again, cherish them, and also enjoy the experiences and thoughts generated by them." (Student 4)

Art was experienced to act as a significant bond between people from different periods of time and cultures. By depicting countless different ways of life, the students experienced art as promoting the understanding that is established between people and as increasing people's tolerance for and appreciation of other cultures and ways of life.

"Art brings us closer to the history and the culture. Through art, we can see what life was like before us. Art connects past, present, and future people, and that is why it is so important. We can learn from each other through art." (Student 12)

"Through art, people can familiarize themselves with different kinds of people...This may increase mutual understanding and tolerance." (Student 28)

Artworks were characterized as traces of people's lives that they leave behind. By following and reflecting upon these visual traces, contemporary people may acquire meaningful perspectives regarding the phenomena of their own period of time as well as the events that unfold throughout their own lives. Moreover, the students regarded the unfamiliar substance in artworks as an eye-opening factor.

"Art is important today. It never gets outdated. Maybe you cannot solve all problems through art, but I think art can help people see things from different points of view, which

might diversify the ways they think and act. Art can break rules and help people think outside the box.” (Student 27)

Finally, art was perceived as an opportunity to become aware of problematic issues in contemporary societies and promote positive change. Students also perceived art as providing important counterweights or alternatives to contemporary ideals spread through media.

“Art that is critical and deals with negative/difficult issues in life can open people’s eyes, which in turn may change their way of thinking and acting. Through influencing people’s thoughts, art can change societies.” (Student 14)

“Art can make people notice problems in societies. For example, media is full of idealized images of people. Artworks can provide alternative imagery showing that people look different and ideals of beauty change. We do not need to identify ourselves with the idealized media images.” (Student 16)

Figure 4 summarizes the themes detected from the students’ reflections upon art’s contributions in contemporary times.

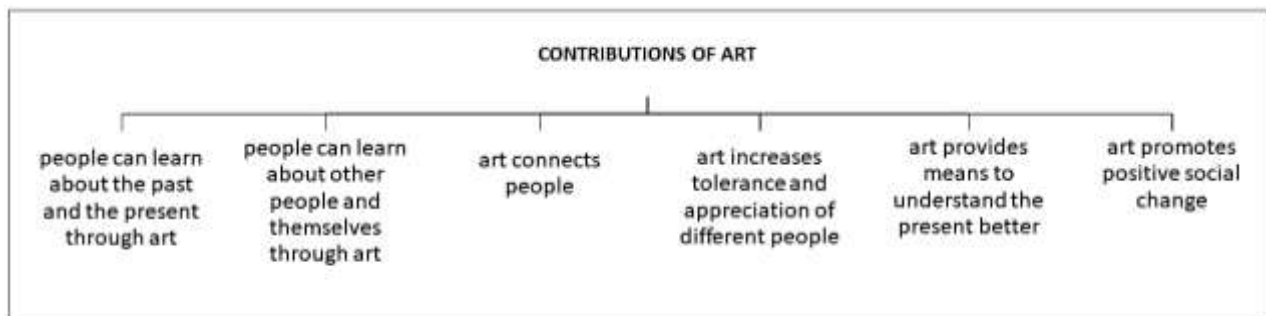


Figure 4: A summary of art’s contributions

4.4 Summary of the Results

Students defined art as objects of art and artistic activity both inside and outside art institutions. They perceived it as both a profession and a hobby by pinpointing the view that not only professional artists, but all people can create art by visually expressing their thoughts and emotions. Thus, art was considered a form of visual communication in which art makers communicate their thoughts and emotions to audiences and in which spectators explore both the world and their lives with the help of artworks. Regarding art’s functions, students regarded art on one hand as capable of entertaining, recreating, and relaxing people and on the other hand as capable of influencing their thoughts and actions. The students believe art can express and evoke thoughts and emotions as well as criticize grievances and promote social change. Nevertheless, art was understood as a reservoir of human experience and knowledge through which people can learn about the past and the present. Another aspect was understood as art’s important contribution to contemporary times. In addition, art was regarded as a forum

of individual self-exploration, collective commemoration, and sharing. Lastly, art was understood as capable of increasing people's tolerance for and appreciation of cultural and personal differences.

5. Discussion

This study's findings demonstrate that media and visual expression students define art in a number of ways. It became apparent that they perceived the definitions of art as highly practical and concrete, which is understandable in light of the practical learning-by-doing character of the studies offered in vocational upper secondary education and training (see, e.g., Chorazy & Klinedinst, 2019; Schön, 1983; Schön, 1987). The students seemed to find it more motivating—and perhaps easier—to define art from the perspective of its functions than in terms of more abstract conceptual definitions. This preference can be judged by the fact that most students' answers to question 2 were longer and more versatile than their answers to questions 1 and 3. In addition, the students' reflections upon the definitions of art (question 1) included numerous observations of art's functions, which were actually addressed in questions 2 and 3. Thus, across the data, students reflected upon art's functions the most frequently.

When the findings are observed through the lens of the approaches to defining art that are elaborated upon in the literature review, students' comments included features of both institutional and functional definitions (see Adajian, 2018; Davies, 2015; Izrow, 2017). Students' comments that relate art to art institutions, genres, and forms of art as well as the knowledge and skills of using artistic materials and techniques can be associated with institutional definitions of art based on the artworld (Davies, 2015). Similarly, the notions in which art was defined as existing outside art institutions and capable of being created without artistic education reveal one's awareness of the artworld in terms of challenging its norms and traditions of measuring art (Focosi, 2016; Neufield, 2015). In addition, the perception that art history helps one understand art can be regarded as an example of the institutional definition of art in which knowledge of the tradition is considered to provide the means for interpreting and appreciating artworks.

Regarding the functional definitions of art, both the aesthetic functions that do not relate to any particular cultural or historical context as well as the culturally and historically contextual functions can be detected (Adajian, 2018; Davies, 2015; Parsons & Charlston, 2008). The notions that art is able to inspire joy and rejuvenate people's energies as well as express and evoke thoughts and emotions can be understood as aesthetic functions irrespective of historical and cultural contexts (Adajian, 2018). Having said that, art as a means of self-expression is certainly not a function recognized across times and cultures (Honour & Fleming, 2009). In contrast, the view in which art is regarded as a means for criticizing social issues and drawbacks as well as promoting social change did—at least implicitly—entail one's awareness of cultural and social contexts (Davies, 2015). This kind of connectedness of art and culture was even more evidently expressed in the opinions that regarded art as a means for educating an

audience about the past and present alike. These comments regarded art as a kind of visual reservoir of human experience and knowledge or a form of visual collective memory (see, e.g., Hakoköngäs, 2017; Rosario, 2017) that on one hand anchors people to their cultures and on the other hand provides them with a resource of making sense of the present.

A notable number of definitions of art clustered around the idea of art's ability to connect people, promote mutual understandings, and increase one's appreciation of other people and diverse cultures. This kind of connective potential is widely recognized in the literature (Kay, 2000; Leavy, 2018; McNiff, 2018). Creating artworks and perceiving them was considered to generate empathy in terms of helping people identify themselves with others, with scenes depicted in artworks, as well as with topics and themes communicated through these works (Curtis et al., 2014; Eisner, 2008; van der Vaart, 2018). Thus, art emerged not solely as communication between the artist and the perceiver alone, but also as communication between the people and scenes depicted in the paintings on one hand and the perceivers on the other. Students' notions that art may challenge people's habitual ways of thinking and acting suggest that art is also an arena of self-reflection in which people communicate with themselves through works of art. Martikainen (2011, 2018), for instance, refers to the multidimensional reflection generated by artworks via the "cultural mirror" concept.

When students' written reflections are compared to the guidelines of the curriculum for the vocational qualification in media and visual expression (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2017), one may notice that its following central elements are included in the students' definitions of art: the knowledge and skills of materials, techniques, and means of visual expression; the expression of feelings, thoughts, and opinions on social matters; the knowledge and application of art history as the resource of making and interpreting art; and participation in social discussion. However, in light of the curriculum guidelines, which accentuate the knowledge of and skills using artistic techniques and materials, it might appear as surprising that the students did not regard these dimensions as definitive of art. Rather, they were ready to accept any visual expression of emotions and thoughts as art. Perhaps this conception drew upon their art history studies in which certain periods of time and artistic styles appreciate one's ability to communicate ideas more so than one's ability to implement one's technical skills.

6. Strengths and Limitations

This study poses both strengths and limitations. The group of participants comprised 28 final-year students who had studied the materials and techniques of visual expression for 2.5 years and had additionally participated in art history courses that approached art from various perspectives. This study afforded the participating students an opportunity to reflect upon the topic concerning what constitutes art based on their experiences. For an inductive approach to studying students' definitions and

conceptions of art, this starting point and context have provided a fertile soil for addressing their experiences.

The open questions of “How do you define/understand art?,” “What purposes/functions does art have?,” and “How can art contribute to contemporary times?” were not detailed any further in an attempt to avoid influencing students’ answers. The two latter questions were meant to elaborate upon the task by providing students with a more concrete angle for reflecting upon art, although they simultaneously addressed the topic from the functional definitions’ perspectives, thereby influencing the findings. Nevertheless, the functional approach proved more motivating for students, and the functional definitions were amply written in students’ answers to question 1, in which art’s functional properties were not mentioned.

The participating students were all Finnish individuals studying media and visual expression. Their knowledge of and experiences with art might be more versatile than those among students studying different subjects. Other definitions, functions, and contributions of art may prevail in other cultural contexts; for this reason, this study’s findings cannot be generalized to other contexts. However, replicating this study among students who study other subjects may prove insightful, as a comparison of those findings might provide valuable information for art education. It would prove additionally interesting to conduct a similar study in another cultural context and subsequently compare the findings. This kind of comparative analysis, supplemented with an analysis of the social, political, and cultural contexts involved, would increase researchers’ understanding of the culture-specific functions of art.

7. Conclusion

This study’s findings demonstrate that media and visual expression students typically do not define art as objects isolated from people, historical times, and cultures. Rather, art emerged primarily as a means for communication and interaction, and the participating students reflected more frequently upon art’s processes and functions than the objects of art themselves. What people do through art, what they experience, feel, and think when making and perceiving art, the issues art addresses and how art relates to social conditions all seemed to form the main aspects of art according to the vocational upper secondary students participating in this study. As a means of expressing, depicting, commemorating, educating, influencing, questioning, challenging, criticizing, and contributing to change, art was understood to activate people’s reflecting upon and reconstruction of their views of themselves, others, as well as past and present societies and cultures. In addition, art was considered to provide a link between people, periods of time, and cultures. In current times of crisis, polarization, and extremism (see, e.g., McCoy, Rahman & Somer, 2018; Stojarová, 2018), the students regarded art as a counterbalance that connects people and promotes inclusion.

The participating students’ definitions of art in this study can most efficiently be characterized as hybrid or cluster definitions that include characteristics of both

institutional and functional definitions (Adajian, 2018; Izrow, 2017). The studies that involve courses on visual materials and techniques on one hand and art history on the other appear to thematize and operationalize these aspects of art. The studies that involve both art history and practical training in creating art seem to develop an understanding of art's cultural connections and diversify an understanding of art beyond mere aesthetic pleasure and self-expression. This kind of disjunctive approach to art may develop an understanding of cultural norms and conventions of visual expression as well as touch on how these dimensions may fulfill diverse purposes at both the individual and social levels. Together, these approaches to art may foster students' skills of critical visual literacy that they need when navigating through our contemporary visual culture.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

About the Author

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