FINDINGS

Who, exactly, is an artist? Many claim the title, with little to back up their assertion. We've all met people who define themselves as artists, but have yet to actually produce any actual art.

A new study finds that, surprisingly, the reverse is also true. It identifies a large group of Americans who have every right to call themselves professional artists, but for some reason avoid doing so.

"Our findings suggest that there are significant numbers of individuals who are engaging in the production of artistic work, but are not embedded within the art world," Jennifer Lena of Columbia University and Danielle Lindemann of Rutgers University write in the journal Poetics. "This lack of embeddedness is fundamentally important to their self-definition."

The researchers analyzed some puzzling data from the Strategic Arts Alumni Project, a large, nationwide survey of people who attended arts schools in the U.S. (The vast majority, 81 percent, are alumni of an arts-related undergraduate program. Sixteen percent studied an arts-related discipline in graduate school, and three percent attended a high school for the arts.)

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One question asked of the 13,581 respondents was "Have you ever worked, either full- or part-time, as a professional artist?" It was preceded by a specific definition of the term: "an occupation whose primary purpose is the creation or performance of artistic works such as designs, films, illustrations, music, performances, stories, and videos."

Another question listed a series of arts-related occupations. Participants were asked to check all of those "in which you have worked, now or in the past."
Oddly, a sizable number of people—3,816—gave seemingly contradictory answers to the two questions. They “indicated that they had worked within the arts, but had never been professional artists,” Lena and Lindemann write.

Some of this difference could be written off as simple error. In addition, some of the arts-related professions listed (such as “curator” or “arts educator”) were outside the definition of “professional artist.”

Nevertheless, more than one-quarter of the self-described musicians and architects were in this “dissonance group,” along with 20 percent of dancers and choreographers and 18.5 percent of graphic designers.

So why don’t these people consider themselves professional artists? No doubt some only do their creative work as a side venture, and make little or no money from it. But it appears that some have trouble wrapping their heads around the idea that their work makes them, by definition, professional artists.

Take designers. The researchers note that most do not work “for employers whose primary output is artistic.” If you’re designing brochures or Web pages for a tech company, are you an artist? Many people in that position apparently think not.

The people most likely to self-identify as professional artists are “those who currently spend the majority of their time in arts-related jobs, those who have professional artists as parents or close relatives, and those who attended arts-focused schools (vs. arts programs within larger institutions),” the researchers write. This suggests the decision to define yourself as an artist depends in part on outside influences such as family and school ties.

While the study is an interesting look at how we define ourselves, the researchers note it has practical implications for cities hoping to attract more members of the creative class. Metropolitan areas that market themselves as perfect places for artists to relocate “may be harnessing only a particular form of artistic talent,” they write.

Perhaps they need to rewrite that copy, keeping in mind Woody Allen’s classic comedy *Bullets Over Broadway.* The film (which is the basis of a new Broadway musical) begins with the John Cusack character declaring “I’m an artist,” and ends with him conceding “I am not an artist.”

In fact, what he was confessing (after having his work rewritten, and improved, by an unlikely acquaintance) is: “I am not a genius.” Perhaps more than a few people get those two terms confused.

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