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Laurie Hanquinet, Henk Roose and Mike Savage

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The Eyes of the Beholder: Aesthetic Preferences and the Remaking of Cultural Capital

Laurie Hanquinet
University of York, UK

Henk Roose
Ghent University, Belgium

Mike Savage
London School of Economics, UK

Abstract

Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984) has been highly influential in sociological debates regarding cultural inequality, but it has rarely been considered a theory of aesthetics. In this article we explore empirically how the modernist framing of Bourdieu's aesthetics needs to be rethought in the context of contemporary aesthetic change. Drawing on a survey of museum visitors in Ghent, Belgium (n = 1195), we use Multiple Correspondence Analysis to analyse what aesthetic dimensions are important when people contemplate works of art. We find that the familiar Bourdieusian opposition between popular (based on beauty and harmony) and highbrow aesthetics is still important. However, the content of highbrow aesthetics has changed, now privileging 'postmodernist' dimensions over modernist ones. We can also detect another dimension that favours a socially reflexive art compared to a detachment of art from social preoccupations, which is not recognized in Bourdieu's account.

Keywords

aesthetics, Bourdieu, dispositions, multiple correspondence analysis, museum audience

Corresponding author:
Laurie Hanquinet, Department of Sociology, University of York, Wentworth College, Heslington, York, YO10 5DD, UK.
Email: laurie.hanquinet@york.ac.uk

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the study of art museums and their audience has flourished, greatly benefitting from the deployment of rigorous social scientific methods (Fyfe and Ross, 1996; Merriman, 1989). Surveys and interviews show recurring patterns across nations and periods: visitors to art museums are highly educated and belong to the upper and/or middle classes. This has been the case for over 30 years (Bennett et al., 2009; Donnat, 1993; Hanquinet, 2013, forthcoming). Although these findings are important, they are also somewhat sociologically reductive in not recognizing other sources of diversity among museum audiences, which may have to do with different expectations of, and motives for, a visit grounded in various aesthetic preferences and dispositions. This problem is related to the dominance of an orthodox Bourdieusian paradigm which has directed attention to the social factors involved in museum attendance, and has not adequately addressed the aesthetic dimensions of cultural participation. Our article seeks to redress this problem by developing an innovative way of studying art museum audience which extends this classical sociological perspective through exploring the aesthetic preferences of visitors in unprecedented detail.

Our concern is therefore to unpack, sociologically, the diversity of aesthetic orientations, and to recognize that the nature of visual arts and their modes of appropriation have changed during the last century – in line with Bourdieu's conception of the emergence and development of a field (1984, 1993). The classical paradigm which was established in the 18th- and 19th-century bourgeois society – with its emphasis on beauty, figurative art and artistic skills – has been challenged by the successive emergence of artistic movements promoting transgression, experimentation, and conceptual forms during the 20th century (Esquivel, 2008; Heinich, 1998a, 1998b; Michaud, 1997). Our central research question is how these different aesthetic principles translate into the aesthetic preferences of museum visitors, and how they may force us to rethink the meaning of contemporary cultural capital.

Theoretical Background

Research on Aesthetic Preferences

Sociological analyses of aesthetic dispositions have traditionally focused on how artistic preferences and aesthetic judgments are socially embedded, frequently drawing on Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984). However, there is a disproportionate focus on measuring how social position affects taste, often using relatively simple measures of aesthetic orientation. This has been at the expense of trying to disentangle dispositional dimensions within aesthetic preferences (Atkinson, 2011; Bennett et al., 2009; Prieur et al., 2008). A good example of this is the now extensive debate over the cultural omnivore which relies on crude measures of the breadth of tastes between cultural genres rather than attempting a more systematic mapping of aesthetic preferences (see the discussion in Savage and Gayo-Cal, 2011). More recently, it has been argued that activities and actual behaviour may not actually be that socially distinctive, but that it is rather how these practices are appreciated which is relevant (Atkinson, 2011; Holt, 1997; Lahire,

2003). We follow this lead by emphasizing that when looking at how people appreciate art, it is necessary to investigate people's underlying attitudes or dispositions as well as their actual practices (Holt, 1998; Roose, 2008; Rössel, 2011). This article therefore includes attitudinal measures of aesthetic preferences rather than tastes or practices, taking into account the aesthetic paradigms they are associated with.

Bourdieu: Beyond his Modernist Orientation?

The outstanding importance of *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984) is that it is simultaneously a sociological and an aesthetic theory. In his attempt to develop a social critique of the judgment of taste, he challenges the standard differentiation between the humanities and sciences, in which the former were left to define value and taste, and the latter were paramount in instrumental and technical analyses. Instead, Bourdieu sees the construction of aesthetics as itself a social process, implicated in relationships of domination and power. This is the reason for the importance of the motif of the 'Kantian aesthetic' in Bourdieu's analysis. Contrary to its claims to be universal, art, as opposed to daily life, cannot be appreciated immediately without any cultural resources (see Bourdieu and Darbel, 1969). It is through the acquisition of cultural capital, a resource which is unevenly socially distributed, that the privileged possess the competence needed to properly appropriate and value works of art. That is why he differentiates a so-called 'highbrow aesthetic' from 'popular aesthetic' (Bourdieu, 1984). Highbrow art privileges form over matter and the principle of distance or detachment in the appreciation of art. Works of art are considered as autonomous. Popular art is exactly the opposite: it has to represent something. The content is more important than the form. Art is 'realist'. It hence more easily triggers a personal reflection or affiliation from spectators. They can relate the works of art to their everyday life – immediacy or a mimesis of lived experiences becomes an important criterion in the aesthetic judgment. The distinction between popular and highbrow is therefore one between the initiated and outsiders, between the few that master the aesthetic codes and are able to decipher them and the many others who belong to the profane world. Bourdieu argues that the capacity to make abstract aesthetic judgments, detached from everyday constraints, is only possible for those whose lives are removed from daily pragmatic considerations.

Bourdieu's paradigm has been hugely, and justly, influential. It has led to numerous historical analyses of the formation of cultural institutions, many of which have demonstrated how the formation of museums, art galleries and the like involved differentiating these arenas from more popular forms of cultural display (e.g. Fyfe, 2000; Prior, 2002). It has played a key role in the development of cultural sociology, which has shown how the audiences of cultural institutions are predominantly drawn from the educated middle classes (e.g. Bennett et al., 2009). It has inspired studies of middle-class dominance more generally, influencing the analysis of social stratification (through 'cultural class analysis'), and studies of education (see Atkinson, 2011).

However, there has not been any sustained attention to the aesthetic elements of Bourdieu's thinking. We contend that his assumptions about the Kantian aesthetic rely on a modernist framing of the art world which has been challenged by new aesthetic

conceptualizations. First, Bourdieu's conception of the Kantian aesthetic as involving forms of abstraction draws strongly on modernist concerns to define 'pure' forms of art, seen to be true to the principles of the art form itself. Second, Bourdieu's conception of 'field analysis' draws on this modernist framing. Here, Bourdieu argues that the social world is comprised of a series of differentiated realms, each defined by specific 'rules of the game', whose values and stakes are not transferable between them. In this account Bourdieu echoes Weber's insistence on the separation of 'life orders', or Simmel's views about overlapping social circles, all of which seek to differentiate separate facets of social life. Bourdieu's later argument about how dominant players seek to maximize positions specific to that field, or seek to mobilize resources from outside (normally by importing economic values into it), is similarly complicit with the values of the 'autonomous' avant-garde who seek to maximize the internal, field-specific stakes.

Our point, therefore, is that Bourdieu's *Distinction* foregrounds a specifically modernist form of aesthetics which corresponds to the epoch in which he wrote. However, with a few exceptions, this has largely gone unnoticed in the subsequent sociological discussion. Instead, Bourdieu's account of cultural capital – with its assumed aesthetic structure – has been taken as read, and the focus has been on whether specific social groups are still attracted to this kind of cultural capital, which is assumed to have trans-historical properties. Even the recent debate on the 'cultural omnivore' proceeds not by questioning the nature of contemporary 'high culture' but by arguing that an increasing number of (middle- and upper-class) people now combine highbrow with more popular cultural interests (see e.g. Peterson and Kern, 1996).

Since the 1960s and early 1970s, however, when he conducted the research for *Distinction*, there is ample evidence that aesthetic stakes have been transformed. Bennett et al.'s (2009) analysis of British cultural taste has staked out these concerns in their arguments that the resonance of the historical canon is now considerably eroded. While the modernist aesthetic – just like Bourdieu's account of cultural capital – depends on the centrality of sacred and legitimate historical forms, there is now considerable evidence that these are regarded – even by those with high educational qualifications – as 'staid' and 'old fashioned'. There is more enthusiasm shown to more contemporary, cosmopolitan forms of culture – in line with the postmodernist tendency, and a greater enthusiasm for new and emergent cultural forms (Bennett et al., 2009; DiMaggio and Mukhtar, 2004).

A major aspect of postmodernism – explored further in the next section – has been to question the separation of the aesthetic from the commercial and popular, and has championed a 'playful' aesthetic which embraces both popular and traditional cultural motifs (Featherstone, 1991). Bourdieu observed such change while studying those he called 'new cultural intermediaries' (1984). Working in areas such as marketing, fashion, advertising, and media, this fraction of the new petite bourgeoisie – with the help of the new bourgeoisie – acts as 'taste makers' or as agents of a 'counter-culture' by pleading for a new ethics of experience and hence for an eclecticism in tastes. Bourdieu does not really see in this something that could alter the dynamics of the field of symbolic goods or the status of highbrow culture, as the dominant class 'concedes the better to conserve' (1984: 371). Featherstone (1987) argues on the other hand that these cultural intermediaries have helped to democratize intellectual lifestyles (and institutions) and legitimize

popular genres contributing to the postmodernist blurring (but not the collapse) of cultural hierarchies and of life and art. Self-reflective, autodidactic and in search of new experiences, they are receptive to some important principles of postmodernism, such as challenging of conventions and social critique, that can be expressed in visual art through parody, derision, or irony. If this does not directly dismiss the idea of field of cultural consumption in which people take position based on their tastes, it can affect the homology thesis that the lifestyle space is one-to-one related to social space. Tastes still socially classify but in a much more complex way given the multiplication of aesthetic principles. This multiplicity cannot be adequately addressed by identifying new social groups, such as the 'creative class' (Florida, 2002), and the 'bobos' (Brooks, 2000), because this approach does not show how far these groups embody the intersections and the tensions between different historically situated aesthetic principles. We need to unravel what all these principles are and how they relate one another before exploring their implications in terms of social distinction. In line with Bourdieu (1984), but also Lizardo (2008), we want to adopt a historical perspective of the field of artistic production, and more particularly the field of visual arts, to understand how the changes in this field may affect people's aesthetic preferences.

The Historical Mutability of Aesthetic Preferences

Having emphasized the need to place Bourdieu's own interventions historically and championing a dynamic approach to the field of artistic production, we now want to push further our understanding of contemporary aesthetic formations as context for our empirical study. Contemporary aesthetic dispositions or preferences are part of a cultural heritage which is itself the result of the institutionalization of successive aesthetic ideas and conflicts over cultural and artistic meanings that have occurred from the 18th century onwards (Heinich, 1991, 1998b; Levine, 1988). Several authors show that, traditionally, the major opposition in aesthetics has been one between a 'classical' and a 'modernist' vision of art, which is partly a response to the development of aesthetic modernism in the late 19th century (Danto, 1998; Esquivel, 2008; Michaud, 1997; Schaeffer, 1992). Modernism progressively challenged the traditional characteristics of works of art, such as representation (art should represent something clearly), harmony and beauty (art should be beautiful, balanced, etc.), and artistic skills (art should be well executed). The modernist paradigm was a reaction to the classical one, but also a logical evolution of it so it might be more correct to refer to this process in terms of transition rather than of rupture. The boundaries between 'classical' and 'modernist' visions were not that impermeable, especially if one left the art world and its cut-and-dried discourse to consider the aesthetic preferences of the general public.

Moreover, modernism also fostered the so-called sacralization of art, which was already present in the Romantic Era – in what Schaeffer (1992) calls 'the speculative theory of art'. This concept refers to the philosophical perspectives (Novalis, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, etc.) that consider art as the unique way to access transcendental Truth. Art replaces religion and forms an ecstatic knowledge. Moreover, the 'art-for-art's sake' movement strengthened the separation between the artistic/aesthetic sphere and the other societal domains and gave art a *cult* value. Art is a means to access the Absolute.

Two ideas emerged parallel with this evolution, namely the necessity of detachment in arts appreciation and a stress on the autonomy of works of art. Art must be free from any social and political implication, as well as human needs, and at a distance from the social world, in order to deliver its virtue, namely its capacity to transcend but also transform the world (as a refuge from the utilitarian and bourgeois society). As a consequence, when a spectator views a work of art, s/he has to be relieved from all everyday problems, in order to get sufficiently de-socialized or decontextualized to grasp the true essence of art in an almost religious way (see Esquivel, 2008).

With aesthetic modernism characterized by transgression of existing artistic codes, the processes of auratization of the work of art (as well as of the artist) and a radical break with tradition intensified. The mode of representation changed and through this process 'truth' could be revealed. Indeed, in many forms of abstraction (in line with the speculative tradition of art), there is an emphasis on the purely formal dimension of art – necessary to get rid of art's referential character – in order to develop the real critical potential of art and to access 'reality'. Suprematism could not be a better example of the mystical aspirations of abstract art, but others like Mondrian or Kandinsky (maybe even the critic Greenberg) belong to that speculative tradition (Schaeffer, 1992).

Nowadays, we expect both classical and modernist conceptions of art to coexist and to still compete for dominance in various artistic fields. Aesthetic modernism has led to a specific conception of artists as being original, inspired and brilliant creators and – perhaps more importantly – to a social partitioning of spectators that is emphasized by Bourdieu in his opposition between highbrow and popular aesthetics. Yet, opposing a classical or traditional and a modernist conception of art fails to do justice to the contemporary art movements that have kept challenging the boundaries of what art is and should be (Heinich, 1998b). From the 1960s onwards transgressive currents have placed contemporary art in a delicate and ambivalent position. The artistic aura and autonomy of works of art are now questioned, sometimes in a quite radical way. Postmodernist streams – often playing with pastiche or diversion – seek to merge art and daily life and blur the boundaries between the cultural and social sphere as well as between high and popular culture. In that respect, the process of 'de-differentiation' (Lash, 1990) challenges the idea that works of art have to be received through an unmediated, quiet and solitary contemplation. For an increasing number of people, art has to be engaged in society and help reflect upon central societal issues.

Contemporary art then oscillates between being too popular and kitsch on the one hand, and being too hermetic and esoteric on the other (Michaud, 1997). As an illustration, Heinich (1998a, 1998b) identifies the main arguments people use to justify their rejection of contemporary art (ethical, aesthetic, legal, economic, etc.) and their typical discourse ('A child could do it', etc.). Importantly, it has been pointed out that, even if the level of education increases the likelihood that an individual will become interested in contemporary art, it does not guarantee any more a positive attitude towards contemporary art (Heinich, 1998b).

Various aesthetic paradigms therefore might coexist, overlap and merge in museum visitors' aesthetic conceptions. This coexistence may have major implications for the composition of the audience, especially in terms of cultural capital which provides the dispositions to appreciate different aesthetic principles. Indeed, museums have evolved

and are often considered as more exciting, spectacular and commercial than before (Featherstone, 1991; McClellan, 2008). In many ways, these transformations are parallel to the evolutions that take place in the artistic world. As a consequence, insight into the aesthetic dispositions of visitors has become essential to study museum audiences and to open up the black box that constitutes the relationships between visitors and art museums. Museum audiences may not be very diverse in terms of their socio-economic background, but they may differ extensively with regard to socio-cultural characteristics including aesthetic dispositions.

Data, Variables and Method

Sample and Data Collection

The data on visitors were collected by means of a large-scale audience survey in two museums in the city of Ghent (Belgium), namely the Museum of Fine Arts and the Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art (also known as S.M.A.K.). The Museum of Fine Arts (MSK) holds a permanent collection that covers art from the Middle Ages to the mid-20th century. The Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art houses over 2000 works from all over the world, from 1945 to the present. It is considered as the most important collection of contemporary art in Flanders and has an international reputation. So, one could argue that the random sample of visitors to these museums captures the population of visitors of art museums in Ghent – and, moreover, forms a good reflection of art museum visitors in general in Belgium.

Between 7 February and 3 March 2001 a random selection of visitors was handed an eight-page self-administered questionnaire to be filled out during or after the visit. Selection bias was minimized by careful time-sampling. First, we randomly chose 24 four-hour periods – covering both weekdays and weekends. Second, within each time period we systematically selected every third visitor when s/he entered the museum (see Roose, 2007). Direct refusals were minimized by personally contacting each visitor and convincing him/her of the importance of cooperation. Direct refusals (5% of all contacted visitors refused cooperation at first contact) are different from indirect refusals, where a sampled person having accepted the questionnaire, refuses to hand it back (39.9%). This results in a realized sample of $n = 1195$ ($n_{SMAK.} = 538$, $n_{MSK} = 657$) with a highly satisfactory response rate of 59.5 per cent.

Variables

Aesthetic Preferences. Given our interests in this study, it is vital for us to have sensitive questions which allow us to measure the three aesthetic paradigms we have presented above. We constructed a scale using 21 items (see Table 1). The items can be divided into a number of dimensions that reflect the tensions between the different paradigms:

Beauty and harmony (items 1, 3, 4): this perceptual dimension refers to the importance of balance, harmony, symmetry and beauty as prime criteria for judging a work of art, or to what Heinich called the ‘aesthetic register’ (1998a, 1998b). If readily

Table 1. Relative frequencies for 21 items of aesthetic preferences in percentages (in brackets: labels used in the graphs).

Items	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1. Works of art need to be harmonious (harmonious)	21.4	24.2	54.4
2. One colour or line suffice to create art (one line/colour)	51.5	22.7	25.8
3. Art should not necessarily be beautiful (not necessarily beautiful)	59.9	15.9	24.2
4. Also an ugly work of art can be fascinating (ugly fascinate)	78.1	11.0	10.9
5. Contemporary art is rubbish: a child could do it (contemporary art child)	9.7	18.3	72.0
6. Good art requires craftsmanship (craftsmanship)	58.2	21.0	20.8
7. Art should be familiar (familiar)	22.8	28.7	48.5
8. The most important thing for art is to be affecting (affecting)	59.3	24.7	16.0
9. Art should not necessarily move you emotionally (not necessarily emotional)	45.3	17.5	37.3
10. You should approach works of art in a detached way (distance)	8.9	29.5	61.5
11. Art should produce reflection (produce reflection)	69.5	20.2	10.3
12. Good art triggers different interpretations (different interpretations)	66.0	23.7	10.3
13. To be able to appreciate art, you need a lot of prior knowledge (need prior knowledge)	16.3	22.8	61.0
14. Knowledge of the biography of the artist makes you appreciate her/his work (biography artist)	54.5	24.1	21.3
15. There is no need to know art history to love a work of art (no history to love)	42.1	25.7	32.2
16. Art should challenge conventions (challenge conventions)	52.7	34.8	12.5
17. Works of art should reflect the period of their realization (reflect period realization)	28.6	33.6	37.8
18. Art should say something about 'la condition humaine' (learn cond. humaine)	69.8	22.1	8.1
19. A work of art does not say anything about the person who made it (say nothing about artist)	14.1	23.7	62.2
20. Art should be critical of everyday social reality (critical comment)	34.9	32.0	33.2
21. Art should make you forget day-to-day worries (forget worries)	46.7	31.2	22.1

perceivable aspects of the work of art, such as colour, balance, proportion, are deemed essential to produce beauty, then a classical aesthetic is central in the appropriation. This classical approach is distinguished from a modernist aesthetic in which beauty is no longer of paramount importance in judgment. 'Ugly', unbalanced, or minimal works can also be interesting – in contemporary art heavy transgressions are further encouraged.

Figurative art: the classical paradigm stresses the importance of representation in art as a principle to assess the beauty of works of art (item 2), whereas for the modernist paradigm art does not have to be realistic.

Skills: a standard criticism addressed to contemporary art, including abstract art, is that technical skills are no longer required to create it (see Heinich, 1998a). For those supporting a classical vision of art, technical skills are essential because they help identify the real artists from the impostors. This aspect is not central to those defending more recent artistic conceptions (items 5, 6).

Distance and detachment of the spectator: this dimension denotes whether and to what extent a work of art should be approached in a detached, distant way. Indeed, according to the modernist paradigm, people's response to works of art should not be mediated by personal circumstances, interests or preoccupations or, simply, by their own life. The spectator must approach works of art in a very detached way (item 10). Art has no utilitarian function and, therefore, should not be used as a way to escape from reality (item 21). Spectators should adopt an almost ascetic posture in front of a work of art that need not be familiar (item 7). Familiarity is one of the dimensions Bourdieu referred to in order to differentiate between popular and highbrow aesthetics. In comparison, postmodernism, in arguing in favour of a blurring of life and art, sees works of art as experiences in which spectators can immerse themselves without having to abandon their mundane desires (Lash and Urry, 1988).

The importance of emotion: to what extent is aesthetic appreciation dominated by emotional motives (items 8, 9)? Modernism promotes true and disinterested emotions, as an unmediated reaction to the (form of) works of art. Emotion should not result from a personal investment in works of art, as a popular aesthetic would valorize. In the postmodernist paradigm, even if there is a tendency to re-valorize the proximity between art and the spectators, emotions do not really matter, whether they are connected to people's life or unmediated (see Marder Kamhi, 2006). Emotion has been recognized by Heinich (cf. 'le registre esthésique', 1998a, 1998b) as one of the major aspects lay people rely on to reject contemporary art (e.g. 'That doesn't move me').

Autonomy of the work of art: this is essential to the modernist conception. This idea that every form of art should be decontextualized has three important implications. First, the autonomous character of the work of art means that it can be received without any form of mediation: no prior knowledge is necessary to be able to decode art. Second, since art is purely auto-referential, knowledge about the artist does not need to be involved in the encounter with art. Third, autonomous works of art should not convey messages about their period of realization or the inner world of their creators. Therefore, the question is to know whether and to what extent spectators feel that knowledge of the cultural-historical background of the artist and period of realization is not necessary (period: items 13, 15; biography: items 14, 19) and whether a work needs to reflect the social context of its production (item 17).

Social role of art: this dimension refers to the extent art and life should get tangled up (items 11, 12, 16, 18, 20). The idea that art has an explicit social role is at the core of postmodernism and contrasts with art's autonomous position in modernism.

Our analysis is one of the first to use such detailed aesthetic questions in constructing a Multiple Correspondence Analysis. We have also included social measures here as supplementary variables.

Social Position. Indicators of social position are educational attainment and occupational category. Educational attainment consists of four categories: no to lower secondary education, high school degree, bachelor's degree and master's degree or other higher degree. For occupational categories the occupational classification from official Flemish statistics is used. It includes 10 classes of occupational categories: manual worker/farmer, office employee, small shopkeeper, managerial employee, professional, employer, student, retired, unemployed, and housekeeper. Gender and age (six categories) are included as socio-demographic background variables.

Cultural Variables. Aesthetic preferences are translated in art or painting tastes. The questionnaire probes into favouring Renaissance art, Egyptian art, non-western indigenous art, impressionism, abstract art, pop art, conceptual art, and installation art. These styles also depict the evolution from a classical perspective over modern styles to genres that stand for heavy transgressions and experimentation. Furthermore, frequency of museum attendance serves as a measure for cultural capital, for experience with works of art and, hence, for a certain field-specific competence – which has been found to be associated with different ways to engage with and judge classical music (Roose, 2008).

Method: Multiple Correspondence Analysis

To be able to get at the organization of the field of aesthetics, we follow Bourdieu's own lead. Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) is a geometric modelling technique that discloses underlying structures in categorized data by representing both modalities of questions and individuals as points in a multidimensional Euclidean space (Le Roux and Rouanet, 2010). In criticizing 'variable' based analyses such as those of Lazarsfeld, Bourdieu was an enthusiastic exponent of MCA. His use of MCA was, however, largely ignored by subsequent commentators until the recent past, when there has been a striking revival of this geometrical technique, partly because of its incorporation into user-friendly software packages such as SPAD (Bennett et al., 2009; Prieur et al., 2008; Roose and Vandenhaute, 2010).

We advocate the use of MCA for three reasons. First, it enables us to carry out an analysis with a large amount of detailed information on aesthetic preferences which is necessary to detect structuring aesthetic principles and convey cultural and social differentiation within a rather homogeneous population. Second, MCA permits us to deal with the idea that the space of aesthetic preferences may be simultaneously structured by different principles. Third, it focuses on underlying dimensions, so that it can provide an interpretation of the findings in terms of relational differentiation that does not lean too heavily on the specific items used (Abbott, 1988; Atkinson, 2011).

Results

To reveal meaningful dimensions in the measured aesthetic preferences and to be able to investigate whether indicators of social position and cultural capital are associated with these dimensions, we use Specific MCA (Le Roux and Rouanet, 2010: 203–13). The first step in MCA consists of determining the dimensionality of the Euclidean space: how many

dimensions are necessary to be able to characterize the total variance for aesthetic preferences? To do so, we need to calculate the modified rates. With 34 per cent the first axis is by far the most important, followed by 25 per cent for the second and 17 per cent for the third dimension. These axes are unusually balanced (since the first axis is often much more dominant in sociological analyses), and account for a total of 76 per cent of the variance. To retain three dimensions seems reasonable, both in terms of statistical parameters (the rates drop radically after dimension three) and for theoretical reasons, since the three retained axes can be interpreted meaningfully within the presented framework. All modalities of the variables that contribute more than average to a dimension serve as a guiding principle for interpreting and labelling the axes. The average contribution of a modality is 100/63 or 1.58 (i.e., the 21 variables multiplied by the three active categories).

Axis 1 ($\lambda_1 = 0.139$)

See Figure 1 (see also Table 1 in Appendix).

There are 21 modalities from 11 variables that contribute above average to the orientation of the first axis. They account for 81.60 per cent of the variance in that axis. Axis 1 illustrates the tension between traditional and more contemporary visions. The left side

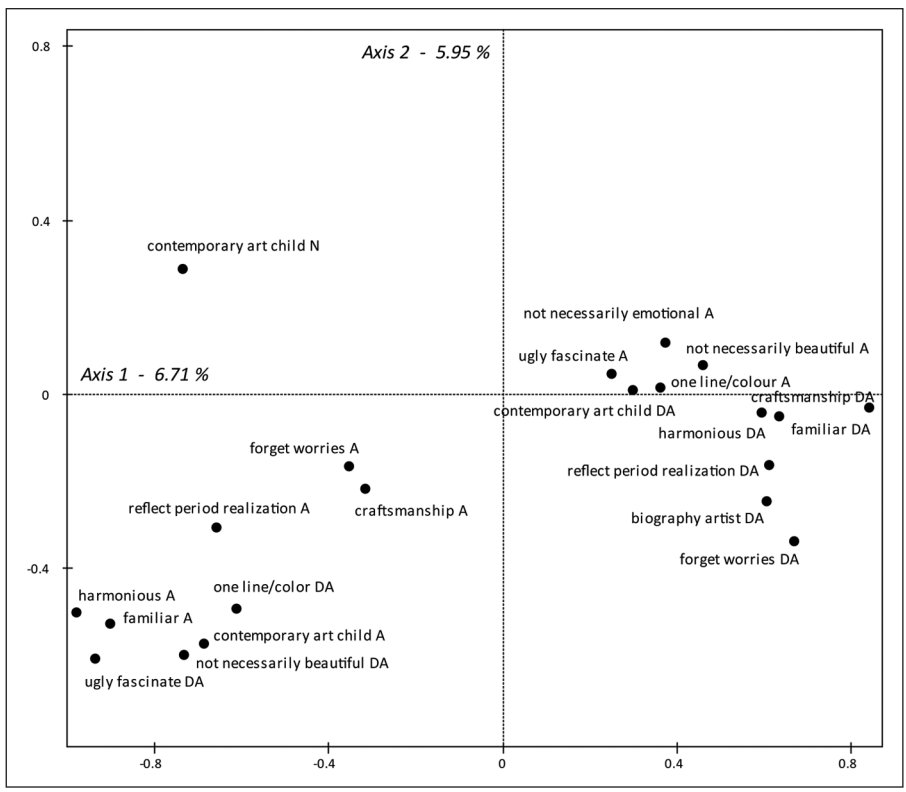


Figure 1. Plane 1–2: Modalities most contributing to axis 1.

depicts modalities that are associated with a classical, rather traditional conception of the visual arts, stressing the dimensions of beauty, figurativity, and skills as well as an emotional involvement, contrary to the spectator's detachment. According to this view that characterizes the left side of the axis, works of art should be harmonious, familiar, reflect the period of their realization and the biography of the artist and require craftsmanship. Moreover, beauty is central to appreciation – contemporary art and minimalism in terms of form and colour, as well as ugliness as something fascinating, are considered repulsive. The modalities to the right show exactly the opposite: an inclination towards transgression, towards the idea that beauty, harmony and the idea of craftsmanship are not central to arts appropriation. A certain amount of emotional commitment and escapism through the aesthetic encounter are deemed unimportant. On the right, we have a way of looking at art that does not rely on emotional involvement (which is therefore in line with postmodernism). So, the first dimension opposes an affirmation of a classical, rather 'naïve' conception of art (art as skilfully created and harmonically constructed work that offers diversion to the spectator) with a more conceptual vision that does not centre around beauty, emotional involvement, harmony, craftsmanship – a line or colour may be enough to call something art – but allows for an emotionally uninvolved and conceptual appropriation of a work of art. The first axis therefore represents an opposition between, on the one hand, the most classical reactions towards art and, on the other hand, the most modern ones in the chronological sense of the term, i.e. reflecting a knowledge of, and an adhesion to, latest developments in the artistic field of art production. As the other axes will show, other dimensions appear to be crucial to unravel the diversity of aesthetic dispositions.

Axis 2 ($\lambda_2 = 0.123$)

See Figure 2 (see also Table 2 in Appendix).

For the second axis, 14 variables contribute above average to its orientation amounting to 75 per cent of the variation in the axis. The lower side depicts a vision that embraces traditional ideas in art: art should be beautiful, familiar, harmonious, and emotional. Art is not meant to be approached in a detached way or produce reflection but it can say something about the person who created it. This vision corresponds to Bourdieu's popular aesthetics. There is a rejection of many of the modernist principles, especially in terms of content (art should be figurative). The upper side of the axis is characterized by a neutral stance towards this 'naïve' conception of art which does not agree with some of the basic principles of modernism. This neutral position possibly reflects a lack of knowledge and a less developed aesthetic disposition. Indeed, Donnat (1994) shows that being able to express a negative opinion towards cultural genres requires skills and specific dispositions in the area concerned. Axis 2 can be interpreted as two kinds of reaction towards more developed art forms, on one hand rejection, on the other indifference. These two reactions have been identified by Heinich (1998b) as a way to negatively react to more contemporary art forms.

Axis 3 ($\lambda_3 = 0.109$)

See Figure 3 (see also Table 3 in Appendix).

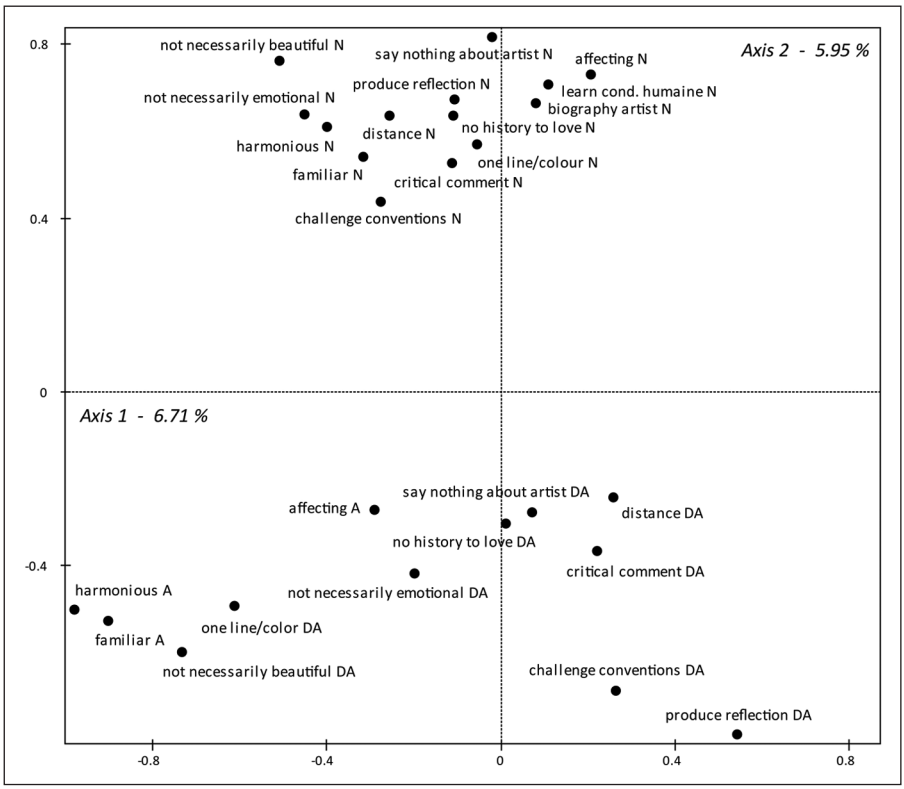


Figure 2. Plane 1–2: Modalities most contributing to axis 2.

Axis 3 is characterized by eight variables and 18 modalities that account for 81.5 per cent of the variance in that dimension. It pertains to the role that art should play in society, or more precisely, its *explicit* social role. The lower side depicts modalities that indicate that art should encourage reflection, that it should challenge conventions, that it should provide critical comment on society, that it should teach us something about the human condition. Such an aesthetic conception calls into question the boundaries between the artistic and the social and expects from art an explicit societal stance and a critical voice. As we argued earlier, this is quite symptomatic of a more postmodernist vision of art. The upper side shows a neutral or dismissive position towards that socially reflexive disposition shown by the variables 'art should not produce reflection', 'art should not challenge conventions', or 'art should not be critical of social reality'. As with axis 2, we can observe two kinds of negative reaction to more recent aesthetic principles (here those of postmodernism), either indifference or clear rejection. As a consequence, according to this view, art does not have to be socially disembedded. Such a stance opposes the principle of art autonomy that has characterized modernity and modernism (Lash, 1990; Lash and Urry, 1988). Nowadays, this modern(ist) vision is challenged by postmodernist considerations that blur former distinctions between art and daily life, or between the cultural and the social. As we have seen, the postmodernist dismissal of this

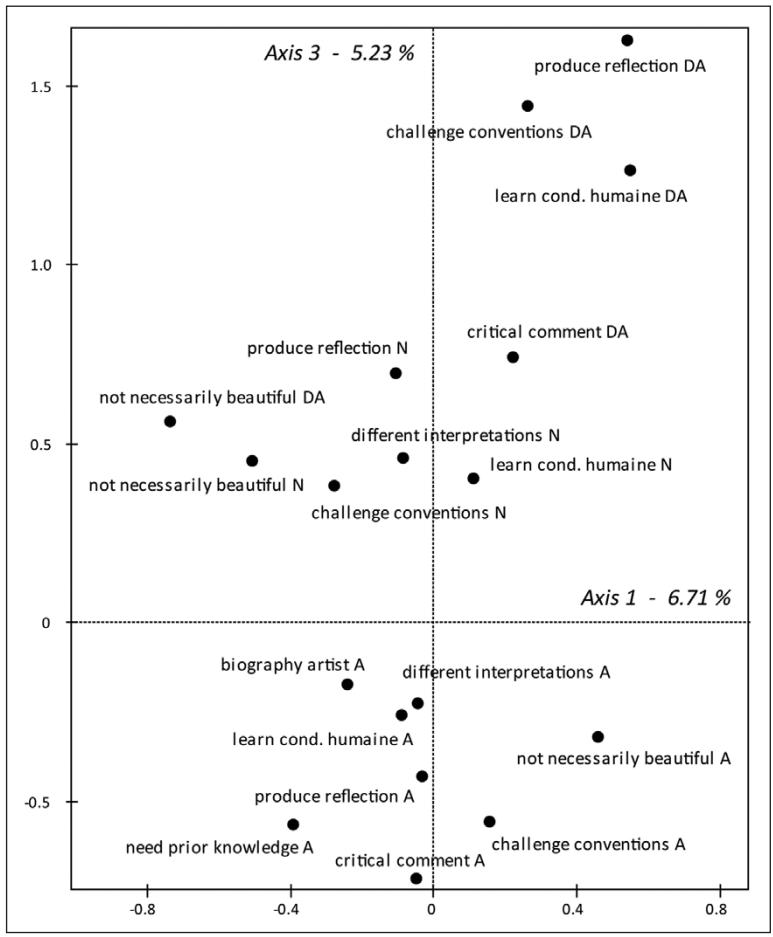
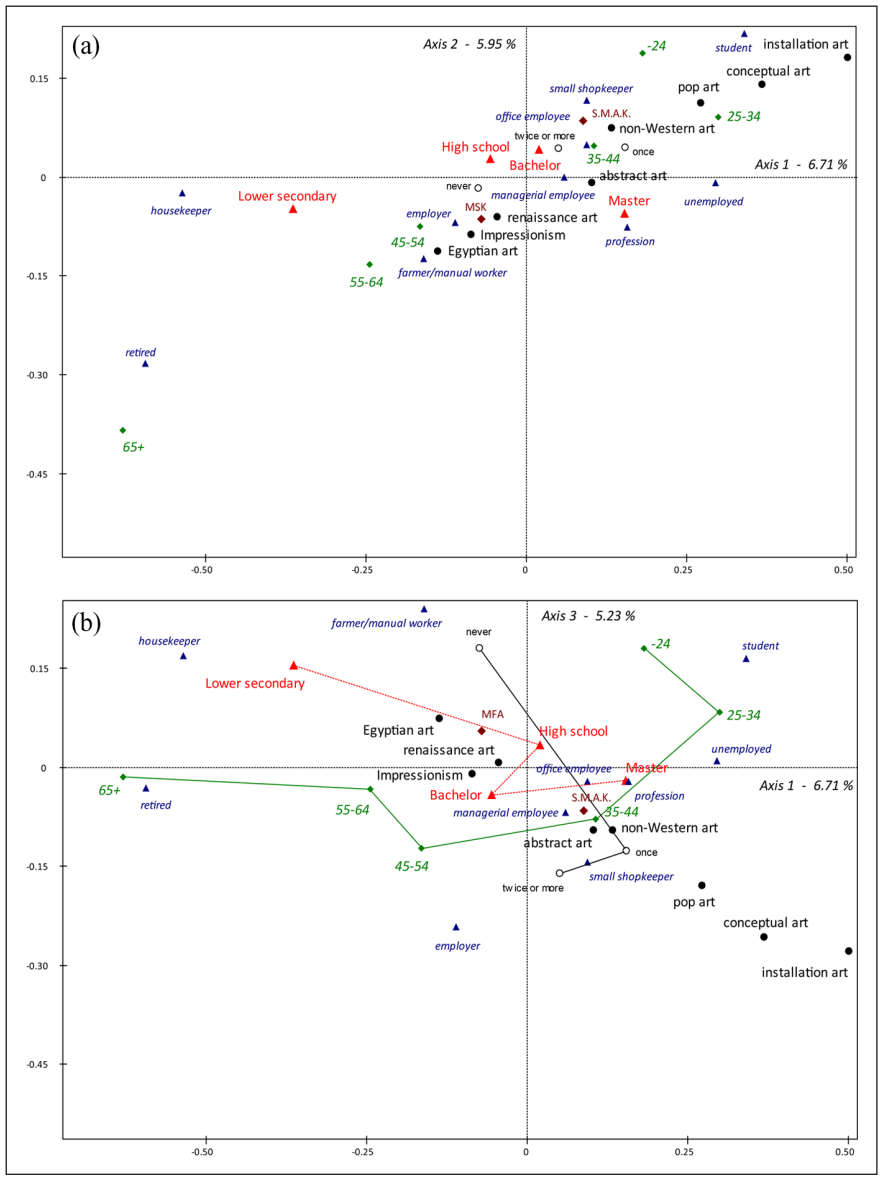


Figure 3. Plane 1–3: Modalities most contributing to axis 3.

autonomous vision of art leads to an acknowledgement that the appreciation of art requires some prior knowledge.

In Figures 4a and 4b a number of supplementary variables are plotted in the space of artistic dispositions: age, educational attainment, occupational category, and frequency of museum visits. Here, we are able to identify the relevance of sociological variables on the different aesthetic orientations we have unravelled, but in ways which are now more meaningful because they are projected onto a fuller analysis of aesthetic profiles. The first axis is associated with educational qualifications and age, where the most modern conceptions are related to more highly educated and younger museum visitors (younger than 45 years old). It is interesting to note – in line with the opposition between classical and conceptual aesthetic conceptions characterizing axis 1 – that artistic streams are distributed almost chronologically along the axis from the oldest ones (Egyptian and Renaissance art, impressionism) on the left to the most contemporary ones (pop, conceptual and installation art) to the right. The location of these last three art forms to the right



Figures 4a and 4b. Supplementary variables: age, educational attainment, occupational category, and frequency of museum visits in plane 1–2 and plane 1–3.

that tend to play with diversion and rely on a critical perspective is not surprising given that they tend to be associated with postmodernism. This chronological order is a fundamental finding which suggests that the importance of generational change is crucial to cultural dynamics. This is reinforced by the fact that axis 2 is especially linked to age: it is predominantly retired and visitors aged over 65 who have a 'naïve' appreciation of art.

Differentiation with regard to background variables along the third axis is rather small. What stands out – although the association is modest (given the sample) – is that experience with museum visits as a proxy of familiarity with art or field-specific competence is related to a socially reflective and anti-conventional attitude towards art. A lack of experience with museums is associated with a neutral stance towards the reflexive dimension in art.

Conclusion

We have argued in this article that it is inadequate to take Bourdieu's modernist account of aesthetics as a template for the analysis of contemporary cultural tastes. In taking into account insights from art history and philosophy, this article argues for the need to grasp museum visitors' aesthetic preferences and reactions towards art in the light of the changes inside the visual arts field. We thoroughly analysed underlying mechanisms which are active in the field and paid particular attention to the aesthetic principles that lie behind the organization of tastes that are essential to understand people's preferences.

Our results showed that the opposition between popular and highbrow aesthetics à la Bourdieu based on a modernist vision needs to be updated. Aesthetics have changed. Our axis 1 reveals an opposition between classical and conceptual aesthetic visions. A classical vision emphasizes traditional characteristics of art: harmony and beauty, figurativity (through the rejection of abstract art), and an importance of the artists' technical skills. In the conceptual view, more in line with postmodernism, the perception of art is built around opposite considerations: beauty, harmony, skills, and emotion do not matter, compared with ideas and concepts. Axis 1 opposes novice aesthetic preferences to more elaborated ones; in that sense, Bourdieu's opposition between highbrow and lowbrow is still active. Yet, visual arts have evolved and incorporated new aesthetic principles.

Of course, this recognition is precisely in line with Bourdieu's ideas of field as an ever-changing process. Bourdieu himself had anticipated new developments by considering the new cultural intermediaries, but his account still focuses on the highbrow–lowbrow hierarchy. For Featherstone (1991), they have contributed to making the link between social stratification and cultural hierarchies more complex and, hence, have altered the definition of highbrow culture. The idea of highbrow culture corresponds now to a much more fragmented reality.

The opposition between socially reflexive and socially detached art shown by axis 3 reveals a new dimension. We can envisage, then, at least three types of visitors: those with traditional beliefs in art, those with a socially detached vision of art based on a modernist paradigm, and those favouring art as an experience able to produce reflection. The difference between the first type and the others quite clearly relies on a difference in cultural capital, the former not having the aesthetic disposition to engage with new codes developed in visual arts. However, we can wonder whether the distinction between the two last groups could be explained by differentials in the volume of cultural capital possessed. Indeed, even if an individual's level of education increases the likelihood that she will be interested in contemporary art, this can no longer be treated as a straightforward measure that she is going to agree with new principles in contemporary art (Heinich, 1998b). That is, contemporary art alternates between being denounced as too popular

and kitsch and as too hermetic and elitist (Michaud, 1997). Linked to this ambivalence, the idea of social critique that can, for instance in pop art, playfully draw on symbols from commercial and popular culture may rely on more accessible codes as they are derived from everyday life. This does not mean that this kind of art can be celebrated as the solution it was expected to achieve, i.e. the democratization of culture. In order to be appreciated, this form of art requires a developed aesthetic disposition that reflects not only a strong historical knowledge of visual arts, but also other cultural referents from a wider repertoire of symbolic goods.

The socio-demographic variables help us differentiate the first group of visitors holding more naïve artistic conception from the two others: they are less educated and older. However, these variables are not very useful for explaining the other dimensions of aesthetic preferences, as age or education do not really account for any variance on axis 3. Nor are they of great assistance to understand axis 2. This axis seems to indicate the presence of a fourth type of visitors, those with a neutral stance towards more elaborated aesthetic visions that, in the line of Heinich (1998b), we can interpret as a negative reaction to them. These people do not have the resources to engage with the debate and choose to express a neutral attitude in order to 'stay outside the game' without having to admit that they do not know the rules.

Even though we acknowledge the specificity of our sample, our analysis shows that we cannot simply ground the interpretation of aesthetic preferences or artistic taste on socio-economic characteristics. Artistic taste (for example, liking Picasso or Louise Bourgeois) reflects aesthetic preferences that become meaningful once one has understood the dynamics and tensions inside the field of cultural consumption. Since the 1970s, at the time when Bourdieu wrote *Distinction*, this field has continued to evolve and the modernist framing has been challenged by new aesthetic visions, as a direct consequence of the interferences with other fields. As we saw for visual arts, new classificatory principles have emerged and made the structures of distinction more complex. This apparent rise of eclecticism should not be seen as the end of cultural hierarchy, but rather as the consequence of the multiplication of aesthetic principles as symbolic boundaries (see Bellavance, 2008).

Cultural sociologists, however, have rarely taken this into consideration and have kept accepting and applying Bourdieu's account of cultural capital and its assumed aesthetic structure. Many cultural indicators that are currently used to measure cultural resources can thus lead to misinterpretations of the mechanisms at stake. Our analysis leads us to agree with the view that cultural capital is now being reconfigured (DiMaggio and Mukhtar, 2004). In that sense, we concur with the need to explore the structures of the field of cultural consumption again, in order to recognize that the character of cultural capital has itself been reworked.

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Laurie Hanquinet is Lecturer in Social Sciences at the University of York with a PhD from Université Libre de Bruxelles. Her main fields of interest are sociology of culture and art, as well as social sciences methodology. She has published articles on the position of artists in society, on urban dynamics of cultural participation, on museum audience, and on social capital.

Henk Roose is Lecturer at the Department of Sociology of Ghent University, Belgium. His research focuses on the link between arts participation and social stratification, the empirical analysis of aesthetic dispositions and the development of methods for conducting audience surveys.

Mike Savage (FBA, AcSS) is Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His recent books include *Culture, Class Distinction* (with Tony Bennett, Elizabeth Silva, Alan Warde, Modesto Gayo-Cal and David Wright; Routledge, 2009) and *Identities and Social Change in Britain Since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

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Appendix

Table 1. Axis 1: Classical versus conceptual dimension. Variables and modalities most contributing to the axis.

Variables	Ctr of variables	Modalities		Ctr of modalities	
		Left	Right	Left	Right
Works of art need be harmonious	13.68	agree	disagree	6.44	6.05
Art should be familiar	12.80	agree	disagree	5.77	6.13
Art should not necessarily be beautiful	9.40	disagree	agree	5.35	4.58
Works of art should reflect period of realization	8.48	agree	disagree	3.89	4.51
Contemporary art is rubbish: a child could do it	6.68	agree neutral	disagree	1.46 3.14	2.08
Good art requires craftsmanship	6.59	agree	disagree	1.84	4.70
Also an ugly work of art can be fascinating	6.57	disagree	agree	3.03	1.57
One colour or line suffice to create art	5.22	disagree	agree	3.06	2.14
Make you forget worries	5.06	agree	disagree	1.82	3.14
Art should not necessarily move you emotionally	3.59	–	agree	–	2.02
Knowledge of biography artist makes you appreciate his/her work	3.53	–	disagree	–	2.48
$n = 1195$	81.60			35.80	39.40

Table 2. Axis 2: 'Naïve' versus neutral dimension. Variables and modalities most contributing to the axis.

Variables	Ctr of variables	Modalities		Ctr of modalities	
		Down	Up	Down	Up
Works of art say nothing about the person who created them	7.43	disagree	neutral	1.73	5.65
Art should not necessarily be beautiful	6.50	disagree	neutral	3.13	3.28
Art should be affecting	6.38	agree	neutral	1.61	4.75
Approach works of art in a detached way	5.73	disagree	neutral	1.32	4.23
Art should produce reflection	5.72	disagree	neutral	2.33	3.28
Art says something about 'la condition humaine'	5.61	–	neutral	–	4.00
Art should be familiar	5.26	agree	neutral	2.25	2.97
Art should be harmonious	5.11	agree	neutral	1.92	3.16
Art should not necessarily move you emotionally	5.09	disagree	neutral	2.34	2.52
Knowledge of biography artist makes you appreciate his/her work	4.96	–	neutral	–	3.80
One color or line suffice to create art	4.92	disagree	neutral	2.27	2.64
Art should be critical of social reality	4.87	disagree	neutral	3.14	1.59
Art should challenge conventions	4.54	disagree	neutral	2.07	2.32
It is not necessary to situate a work of art historically to be able to enjoy it	3.70	disagree	neutral	1.07	3.70
n = 1195	75.82			25.18	47.89

Table 3. Axis 3: Socially reflexive versus non-critical dimension. Variables and modalities most contributing to the axis.

Variables	Ctr of variables	Modalities		Ctr of modalities	
		Down	Up	Down	Up
Art should produce reflection	20.57	agree	disagree	5.36	11.21
			neutral		4.00
Art should challenge conventions	18.79	agree	disagree	5.36	10.33
			neutral		1.99
Art should be critical of social reality	14.70	agree	disagree	7.33	7.34
Art says something about 'la condition humaine'	8.66	agree	disagree	1.92	5.27
			neutral		1.47
Art should not necessarily be beautiful	6.93	agree	disagree	2.53	3.09
			neutral		1.31
Good art triggers different interpretations	4.53	agree	neutral	1.36	2.03
Need prior knowledge to appreciate art	3.26	agree	–	2.12	
Knowledge of biography artist makes you appreciate his/her work	2.25	agree	–	1.53	–
n = 1195	79.69			27.51	48.04