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Jozef Kovalčík

*Slovak Arts Council*, [jozef.kovalcik@fpu.sk](mailto:jozef.kovalcik@fpu.sk)

Max Ryyänen

*Aalto University*, [max.ryynanen@aalto.fi](mailto:max.ryynanen@aalto.fi)

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## The Art Scenes

Jozef Kovalčík & Max Ryyänen

### Abstract

"The art scene in Berlin is political." "The Atlanta hip hop scene is red hot!" These are remarks we have heard lately about scenes. Scenes are a commonplace in art talk. But what are scenes, and what is their role in arts? Aestheticians, art theorists, and art historians often pay attention to different scenes. Although many classics in the field are based on comments regarding only one scene, which is, for example, the case with Arthur C. Danto's "The Artworld" (1964) and Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp" (1964), which both focus on New York, there is still no discussion about scenes themselves. Starting from some contemporary classics of aesthetic theory written on art and culture, and then continuing to discuss what scenes really are, we intend to work out a sketchy understanding about not just what scenes are but how we should take them into account when we write about art and aesthetics.

### Key Words

art scenes; art theory; artworld; Arthur Danto; philosophy of art; Susan Sontag; urban culture

### 1. Introduction

She (Yayoi Kusama) came into New York's 1960s art scene as almost a woman counterpart to Andy Warhol, expressing herself in a mixture of art, fashion, and happenings.<sup>[1]</sup>

The Hollywood social scene sparkled with dinner parties where political activism was served with every course. The phrase was "Dear, are you political?" Special dinner guests included European exiles. Among famous leftists at the parties were Bertold Brecht, Thomas Mann, Igor Stravinsky, and Sergei Eisenstein.<sup>[2]</sup>

It is common to talk about the musical and intellectual scenes of early twentieth-century Vienna, the visual art scene of post-war New York and the pop scene of swinging London. We often think about artists and works of art as essentially belonging to a certain scene. This applies to, e.g., Picasso (Spanish, but worked in Paris) and the rock band Nirvana (Seattle). A connoisseur sees performance artist Marina Abramovic as an offspring of the experimental Balkan art scene and Diana Ross as an iconic example of the Motown-driven pop scene of Detroit. We associate artists with scenes and claim that the scene has been meaningful for their work, like Berlin for David Bowie in the late 1970s, the city that made his music darker and more synth-based (Berlin-style).

Scenes provide differing possibilities and boundaries for the artist. You just know that you cannot do the same thing in Berlin and Moscow. It is not always only about politics; it is about aesthetics, about the fact that you do not have an audience for your work. The expression that the artist wanted to move to Tokyo or Mexico City to be where things happen is typical for artist biographies and artist statements.<sup>[3]</sup>

Sometimes we are told that there really is no scene in a city or a town. Fifteen years ago they said that Philadelphia does not have an art scene.<sup>[4]</sup> All promising artists took the two-hour train ride to New York. Now we are told that artists are returning, following the high cost of living in New York, and that Philadelphia is starting to have a scene again. As we know, there have always been artists, audience, and art institutions in Philadelphia, so the story raises the question: what is really lacking when one says there is no scene?

The etymology of the concept is illuminating. The Greek *skene* was a building behind the stage, a hut for changing masks and costumes, during the performance a background for the acts (Latin *scena*). The original word had its root in *skia*, shadow, i.e., something that gives shade (σκιά). Scenes do give shade. They provide shelter, not just for a community, as scenes often consist of a variety of even mutually conflicting communities, but for a whole cultural realm.

Artist biographies are very articulate about describing scenes. Moving from Zurich to Paris (Tristan Tzara) or from Paris to New York (Marcel Duchamp) is in these works always accompanied with an explanation of what kind of a scene one encountered in the new city. Scenes shape our way of seeing. We believe theories of art could be read in a more site-specific way. A typical example of a text that has become an icon for all art scenes (which together make up the art world), but bases its remarks on (real and fictional) New York artists, is Arthur C. Danto's "The Artworld" (1964).<sup>[5]</sup> Danto's text offers a great view on one scene and its role in one theory of art. Following global power-relations and the

incredible cultural impact of the city, everybody knows something about the New York scene, so it is a good example to start with.

## 2. New York 1964: A world and a scene<sup>[6]</sup>

Arthur C. Danto's "The Artworld" (1964), a classic acknowledged by all major schools of aesthetics, is a study of the inherent logic of the world of (late modern or early contemporary visual) art, or that's at least how we usually interpret the text. Danto's basic claim is that the history of art and the theoretical atmosphere of the art world, the framework for what can be seen as plausible, interesting and rewarding, makes possible the change why it suddenly felt natural for both Andy Warhol to exhibit *The Brillo Box* and for his Fifth Avenue crowd to experience it in a rewarding way.

In his book *Andy Warhol* (2009), Danto recalls that by the 1960s

America had, for the first time in history, produced world class art through the paintings of the so-called New York School – the great Abstract Expressionist canvases produced during and after World War II. In American art circles, it came as a shock that the Pop artists should repudiate this immense aesthetic achievement, and paint what looked like simpleminded pictures of soup cans or Donald Duck.<sup>[7]</sup>

As Danto only concentrates on N.Y. artists like Rauschenberg and Warhol, for an internationally minded reader, his text looks dominantly New Yorker. On the other hand, it is clear that New York was the leading Western city in late modern and early contemporary art at the time when Danto published his seminal work. He worked out his theory of contemporary art by reflecting on the most influential scene of his era, which of course meant that his remarks had a more global appeal than if they had been made in a more regional scene like Stockholm.

Still, one could reflect on the fact that Danto's examples are only about one city and its scene. Danto himself does not really show that much interest on discussing other scenes or what role scenes themselves could have. He only says that Warhol's work would not have been accepted in quattrocento Florence.<sup>[8]</sup> (Could this be read as a claim that there was a scene in fifteenth-century Florence?)

Danto here stresses the potentials of historicism against essentialism, but one can take the site-specific nature of the work of one of his favorite examples, Robert Rauschenberg, to lead us more into the local nature of the New York art. Danto does not emphasize that Rauschenberg could not have erased a de Kooning painting (1953) and then exhibited a stuffed angora goat with an inflated tire (1959, a part of the series *Monogram* 1955-1959) in Moscow, Cologne, Berlin or Tokyo. And he does not note that Warhol would not have faced the same fertile ground (of the scene) with *The Brillo Box* (1964) or, more broadly speaking, with his revolutionary Fifth Avenue (Stable Gallery) exhibition *The Shop* (same year) in Bombay or Istanbul, at the same time as this was possible and plausible in New York. Although all major scenes have some kind of connection to the major paradigms in art, they also differ in their own local stories, dynamics, and socio-economic and political contexts.

New York was different, and Warhol's art was born in a fertile atmosphere for it.

Pop art was part of the cracking of the spirit of Modernism, and the beginning of the Postmodern era in which we live. In December 1961, Claes Oldenburg turned a downtown store on the East Side of Manhattan into a place in which he would sell his sculptures made of plaster, chicken wire, and cloth, painted over with household enamel to form crude representations of everyday things – dresses, tights, panties, cake, soda cans, pie, hamburgers, automobile tires. It was more like a general store than an art gallery, and Oldenburg indeed called it "The Store," as if the place of sales and the items for sale constituted an artwork.<sup>[9]</sup>

In his "Artworld," Danto speaks about the theoretical atmosphere and the history of art needed for the autonomous logic of the art world. These cultural sensitivities and frames for interpretation and experience enable the bold, obscure and (from an ordinary, everyday point of view) plainly weird work done in the art world. Different scenes support different works of art. If Danto's ideas on theoretical atmosphere and art history are to be taken to be true (on a more local level), at least strong scenes in other cities could be different, with a bit different theoretical atmospheres and histories of art, even if they shared a lot of what the other scenes have. This is what happens in the Oldenburg-Warhol case, quoted above. Danto explored an understanding of how the art world worked, but we find it interesting that he did not, as a side project, start exploring the local nature of the history of art, which looks to us like a

seductive side path in his texts. (You could even think of it as a spatial context.)

Danto's aim is, of course, quite universal, to talk about conceptual art as a phenomenon, but still, even that has been very different in places other than New York. Danto obviously knew this, but if one really thinks about art, which is the phenomenon Danto sought to understand, it easily comes to mind that the differences might also be worthy of philosophical attention. Examples of the twentieth-century conceptual art scenes, which provide a very different framework for art, include, for example, the Moscow conceptualism, which in the 1970s and the 1980s focused on appropriation using conceptual art to subvert socialist ideology, and the Cologne (visual conceptual object) art scene. This shows that we live in a world of art scenes that can at the same time be very different and very much the same.

So, even if one could say, on a meta-level, that there are really no formal rules or restrictions that would apply to contemporary art, we would still have the need for an older shop (Oldenburg's) to get to Warhol, the scene supporting a certain type of work. As one can just guess that it made it possible for Warhol to make his *Shop* easily digestible, why not make this point about the local nature of this history of art? We need to think about the history of the scenes. As logically as Oldenburg leads to Warhol (and then eventually to Jeff Koons), the impressionists led to cubism and other isms in Paris. We do not wish to say that scenes are disconnected. On the contrary, it is clear that the interconnected nature of especially the strong and impactful big scenes provide us with an idea of what art is globally. It is just that we want to underline the scene as one possible theoretical perspective of thinking about art.

Maybe we should be looking for the global impact of some scenes (Warhol's work had a global impact) and not a monolith called the art world? Danto provided a model but applied it only in a universal manner, not in the global manner that would have been appropriate.

Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp"<sup>[10]</sup> was published the same year as Danto's text. If Warhol's art juxtaposed art and popular culture, so did Sontag's camp, a highbrowed way of appropriating mass culture and kitsch. Sontag, unlike Danto, is quite explicit about targeting a certain scene in her article, and although she, too, speaks about a phenomenon that has global extensions, at the time when she wrote it, camp was an aesthetic sensibility which was not that well known outside of New York. Sontag accentuates that camp differs in different contexts, and so it is easier for us to read her very American and very much (upper class) New York-based list of typical objects of camp, like "Tiffany lamps" and "scopitone films." All in all, from an eastern European point of view (ours), the list and many of Sontag's examples look like New York's bourgeois culture, not something we'd associate with camp ("Schoedsack's *King Kong*," "the Cuban pop singer, La Lupe"). But, of course, even the concept itself has traveled not just in time but to become a global concept, and to be applied differently in different places.

In 1964, New York, the city where camp became mainstream, must anyway have been overwhelmingly into camp, as choreographer Yvonne Rainer included camp in the 1964 *No Manifesto*, which listed all the features a dance performance was *not* to include ("No to camp.")<sup>[11]</sup> Why is Danto not taking into account a possibility of thinking about Warhol as camp? This shows how reading texts as part of a certain scene at a certain time makes sense. Sontag compares camp to pop art by saying that pop art is flatter, drier and more serious than camp.<sup>[12]</sup> From today's perspective, it seems a relevant question to ask what the relationship of pop art and camp was at that time in New York.

In the end, Sontag's article is more sensitive to the local nature of the phenomenon (a "sensibility") she writes about. The text could even be read as a tribute to the avant-garde scene in New York. Sontag does not universalize her remarks like Danto. When Danto suggests that he has found the philosopher's stone for forging together the whole world's artworlds, Sontag writes about local clubs and other sites, for 'us,' which for her must have meant a community of East Coast American intellectuals and scholars in humanities reading *The Partisan Review*, where the essay was originally published, in a handful of distinguished scenes.

Among other contemporary texts where the universal for no reason partly or totally overshadows the local, one could pick Baudelaire's texts on modernism, e.g., *The Painter of Modern Life*. He discusses Parisian culture of the 1860s, as one can see from the appraisal of laziness, dandy-style, the arrogant attitudes of the cultural connoisseurs and ideas of how urban strolling could reward the flâneur.<sup>[13]</sup>

Thinking about another attempt to discuss the change of an era, Fredric Jameson's notes on changes in art in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) are remarks about American centers of art, probably West Coast US and Los Angeles, as he discusses, for example, the impact of video art as something messing up high and low

(video art was not central in most art scenes of the late 1980s but it was very strong in L.A.).[\[14\]](#)

Typically, in our example texts, as noted, the more broadly global or Western gets mixed up with local cultural traits, or something we'd like to call scenes. Scenes get used selectively to discuss broader cultural traits. But what are scenes and how could we discuss them philosophically to make sense of their nature?

### 3. What are scenes, really?

Traditionally, scenes have been studied in sociology and anthropology as a continuation of traditional community research. We have benefitted from reading them and their ideas on class, belonging, and subcultural politics (identity, space, participation), but they do not, in the end, help us very much to understand how scenes could have an aesthetic effect.[\[15\]](#) In visual arts, a scene consists of artists, curators, gallerists, critics, mediators, museum people, collectors and elevated hangarounds – and sometimes individuals have many roles. If you run an 'alternative space' and show interest in experimental political art, you might not have anything to do with newspaper critics and museum people. Artists who produce expensive high gallery objects and mainstream newspaper critics rarely know much about the grassroots. Still all parts of a scene of a city are somewhat conscious of each other, and if the factions are big enough, even they are sometimes called scenes (the grass-root scene, the museum scene, and so on). Works, processes, and thoughts are exchanged inside the system. A scene could be called a network, in some sense, based on geography.

It is fascinating to think about the variety of scenes. In the 1980s London, now Berlin in visual arts, Barcelona in electronic arts, and St. Petersburg in theater, are cities where there is and has been a certain form of atmosphere, a shared form of experience, which makes the scene unique.

The late 1960s and both the 1970s and 1980s design scene of Milan made playful, colorful and semi-futuristic everyday objects a commonplace. Think about edgy Olivetti typewriters by Ettore Sottsass (e.g., Valentine, 1968) and the 'happy' kitchen equipment of Matteo Thun. This bold scene would have not been possible without an artistic movement creating the objects, companies and factories that were willing and able to mass-produce them, shops which were selling the works, collectors who were into it (customers) and exhibition spaces that made them the focus of aesthetic attention. Aesthetic properties might be shared in one scene, like this Milan design scene, where objects of the same era look quite the same. There was also a shared aesthetic ideology behind it, as the designers and their producers wanted to make good design a part of the everyday culture of all classes.[\[16\]](#)

The scene is not necessarily about shared form. It can be, for example, about a collective breaking and exploring of boundaries. One example could be the radical Tokyo art scene of the 1960s, and its 'spirit,' where conservative radical writer Yukio Mishima (who committed hara-kiri), butoh dance, blood performances, and ritualistic noise music developed side by side, supporting each other.[\[17\]](#)

Film scenes are more rare (mainstream ones need big studios and experimental ones are mostly margins in the visual art scene), and strong geographical literary scenes are not that usual either, as many writers are lonely wolves and not in a need of shared studios or exhibition spaces nor forced to go to biennials to see what their colleagues do. In some towns, there are poetry slam scenes. Some arts, like visual art and performing arts, are still just more dependent on having a scene, as they need sites and an audience. Films and poems are not as dependent on urban culture as for example dance and theater.

In scenes you share a certain art history. It is not as actively studied as the art history of countries, but it unites people, sometimes even more. In scenes you know all the main artists of the scene. Being a composer in Helsinki you have to have a relationship to Sibelius, and in many cases the works composed have comments on him, or they maybe even mock certain ways of fetishizing the local 'master.' The composer knows of course also the work of the main film makers. One could claim that this is just about understanding that works have an intertextual role, but what we are pointing out is that locally (not necessarily nationally) different names and works define thinking about and experiencing art.

Every scene history includes scandals and intellectual debates, which have an impact in some other way on the scene. In Helsinki, virtually nobody's is free from the theme of appropriation, as the scandals surrounding the use of (the indigenous) Sami clothes in some artworks ended up in a strong cultural debate, but in some cities where this boundary has not been crossed and no discussion has prevailed, people work in a different manner. In Tallinn, Estonia, nearly everyone is more into semiotics than philosophy, following the fact that semiotician Juri Lotman worked in Estonia and created a strong tradition there, and in

many artworks one can see the impact of semiotic thinking. Similarly, bringing artworks on tour to these cities makes them meet interpretational and experiential patterns based upon the intellectual history of the city.

Theoreticians and critics have a practical, aesthetic impact on the art scenes, as their writings have an effect on discussions and interpretations of art works. Arthur C. Danto's art critiques in the New York Times were constantly in dialogue with the scene he wrote about. These are not just reference points for artistic work, but they also shape imagination, boundaries (what has and what has not yet been done) and aspirations ("I am against X's legacy"). Theorists can also be strong or weak in different art scenes. In one city half of the people quote Antonio Negri, in another the mantra is Gilles Deleuze, and this might affect the way you work out a political installation.

Curators and art educators consciously aspire to understand scenes by asking how to interpret works in the local scene, and then they use this knowledge when they present the works in other scenes. They have to think a lot how to transcribe the work done in one scene into the framework of another. It is not obvious that a star of one scene will become even accepted in another one.

When cities are smaller and less dominant, a part of the experience is marginality and periphery. In the more marginal scenes you see more clearly what the differences of different major scenes are. In the big ones the presumption is nearly always that big scenes 'lead' (institutionally, this is often the case) or that there is really nothing to see in the small ones. Sometimes small scenes become trendy. Mostly small scenes follow big scenes, though, and so the scandals and biggest intellectual debates are imported from New York to every small scene. This way the hierarchy of scenes affect how things are perceived everywhere.

Making the peculiar features of small scenes global needs back-up from a bigger one. In Helsinki, it is a commonplace to combine a public sauna with a bar or an art exhibition. This practice will hardly ever be adapted even by neighboring countries if it does not first become trendy in, say Brooklyn. It is about the dynamics of global power relations and institutional colonialism. It is clear that the 'West' is not a very complete word for understanding power relations. In our Eastern European margins, in Helsinki and Bratislava, which are no grand capitals of historical colonial powers, we would like to say to the post-colonialists we read and admire: if you want to criticize Paris, London, and New York, why use the word 'West' or 'Europe'?<sup>[18]</sup> We are in the shadow of the major scenes, too, and the major scenes are not interested in what we do more than they are in the way fancier cultural scenes of Mumbai and Dakar. Focusing on scenes could show post-colonialist theory the way to a fruitful narrowing down of the object of their critique.

Living, working and staying in bigger cities never changed our (we, the authors) identity and attitude. But we have noticed that some people return from big scenes colonized by them. This often creates tension between the ones who have 'elevated themselves' to represent the big world, and the local key 'masters,' gatekeepers and traditions of the scene where they return. It is our destiny in small scenes to witness this form of self-colonialization, with all due respect to the richness and grandeur of the big scenes.

Sometimes the word scene is used to refer to bigger geographical units. We recall an American art historian saying that the scene in Europe is different from the States. From a European point of view, it does not look like one scene. We are not saying that the use of the concept would be wrong here, but it must mean something different from what we are talking about, something looser, which refers to such big units that not much is gluing them together.

If a small country has its own language and a well-working network of funding and media that bring people together, the country can look like a scene, but this structure nearly always relies on the biggest city of the area. Artists living in the countryside or in small towns have to have exhibitions in the closest big city or in a city where they have the needed network to be able to show that they are legitimate for support and acceptance in the arts community. Isolation, romantic as it may sound, does not work. The way to exist in the arts is to have a connection to a scene.

Scenes can be misleading for interpretation. If you know someone is from a certain city, you might see his/her work in a different fashion. Sometimes artists are not really 'products' of the scene where they are believed to be working. Serbian film maker Emir Kusturica studied in Prague and Ai Weiwei studied contemporary art in New York, which does not mean that they wouldn't have ties to their local scenes: we just need to remember how complicated their background is.

Connections to other places are also a feature of every scene. Madrid is the city in Europe where you can see Southern American art. Cities of the former Yugoslavia still have strong mutual connections in culture.

Filmmakers in Tehran grew up seeing both Hollywood and Bollywood movies. Old colonial ties and business anchor scenes to other scenes. It is about exchange programs of art schools, important people who know each other, and where cheap airlines fly.

Scenes also die. "There *used to be* a great art scene in pre-war Bucharest," a friend of ours observed. When scenes flourish, people move in. Scenes are never just products of the locals. And when things go wrong, people move out, which seems to be the case in New York right now, because of the high prices. Young artists in the US seem to live in Austin, Miami, Detroit, and Seattle these days. In the right scene, you do not have to explain what you do and there is a ready-made audience for your work. This is why our friends who are political artists move to Berlin.

What is meant by a scene is not just the 'official' working hours but sometimes even more the lifestyle around the professional work, and this is what scene scholars have been studying so far from a sociological point of view. Bars, clubs, local festivals and biennales, seminars and discussions, exhibition openings, cafes and other venues and forms of networking form a base of what becomes and is a scene. There is an official and unofficial side of the scene, the one end being the institutions (museums, art schools, theaters, publishers), the other the social life (alternative spaces, bars, clubs). Berlin sites and people look and feel different from London. This differing everyday aesthetics of the scenes is one reason why people are attracted to them.

A scene is not necessarily a subculture. Looking at Dick Hebdige's classic work on subcultures where different forms of non-mainstream culture get organized in an organic manner, one could say that there are cities that have stronger subcultures than others. And a subculture scene, like a noise music scene or a burlesque scene, is a scene like any other.<sup>[19]</sup> But Hebdige is right in suggesting that belonging to a subculture is more of a life-style project but in art scenes there is not so much identity building going on. It is subtler, and the impact of art scenes cannot be put under such a strong tag. The punk movement was a strong subculture and it defined the production of not just music but also fashion and graphic styles, but you cannot say that the entire London art scene would have been punk. Not everyone in Berlin or Brooklyn is a hipster. Subcultures are just a part of the bigger unit. People can live without a scene. They can be shared by people in very broad areas who do not know each other.

Similarly, one can say that classics on the institutional nature of art, Pierre Bourdieu and George Dickie, are not very helpful for our purpose. Bourdieu is witty in his analyses of what the Western Central European bourgeois appreciates in culture, but he does not give any clues to how the 'appropriated' culture, that is, the art scene, works.<sup>[20]</sup> Dickie's analyses of the art institution focus on public art services, which, of course, can have a role in the scene too, but which actually aim to help people who are not in the scene to get into the world of art (this is why we need art education). Dickie writes only about big institutions with gatekeepers and power to legitimate art.<sup>[21]</sup>

Many small towns have some kind of community and a bit of infrastructure, but the use of the concept 'scene' emphasizes something else. Scenes are about a broader network and realm of culture, shared experience and recognition by people in other scenes. This shared paradigm, horizon for interpretation or experience, is to some extent formative for the people working and living in it.

A scene is an intensive unit where the professionals come together not just in work but also in sharing their everyday and consumption activities, and which is therefore something that is possible nearly only in cities. This intensity makes it possible to form autonomic structures for art practice.

#### **4. On the aesthetics of the art scene**

We will now explore what kind of aesthetic difference the art scene makes. Let's start by recalling that most artists do not actually have much understanding of art history. They may know some classics but they are not scholars. Most of their knowledge comes from the local scene where they work. As they are often poor, they cannot travel much. The scene is all they have, although their work is then discussed by critics and scholars who look at it through a historical and global framework. If the artist is successful, s/he is the one who travels from scene to scene, and at home a local critic who does not have the resources, judges his/her work too much as just a part of the scene.

One analogy for scenes could be found in wine regions. The main minerals, grapes, methods of cultivating and harvesting are present everywhere, but in different areas the factors come together in different ways. There is local food that supports the dominance of some tastes more than others. There are geological contexts that support wines differently and so produce different flavors. In some regions certain grapes become an issue. Take for example Malbec, which is just added

into a mix and not considered to be able to sustain its own wine in Bordeaux, but which has become a successful grape on its own in Argentina. Or think about the way pinot noir has become cultivated and formed differently following geographical and cultural factors in Germany, Italy and California. We have globally minded wine tasters who know regions and their differences. But locally, in the areas where wine is cultivated, you can actually mostly buy just the local production. Living in Tuscany you get an understanding of wine, but the basis for your understanding is really Chianti and only some local specialties (e.g., Colline di Lucca). In the world of wines, Tuscany can be a gate into understanding the whole, but learning wines there gains its formation from the local realm.

We sometimes have a need to understand an art scene when we encounter artworks, and knowing a scene makes the encounter with the artwork richer. Sometimes it makes us feel that we get it 'right' that way. A good example of that can be found in the Vienna actionists. Their *Orgies-Mysteries Theater* (1970-) at Schloss Prinzdorf have included a large number of performers and spectators who have performed Dionysiac orgies of blood and gore. The activities of this group performance included ritual disembowelment of different animals (bulls, sheep), the act of stuffing entrails back into hacked-open carcasses, pouring blood on actors representing Christ and Oedipus, and night time processions around Prinzdorf with goats, pigs, horses, sheep dogs and cattle, not to mention actors bearing flaming torches. One member of the group, Günter Brus, drank his own urine, and sang the Austrian National Anthem while masturbating in another performance, and Hans Cibulka posed with a sliced open fish covering his groin. Looking at this ritualistic flirting with cultural boundaries, one does not have to understand the nature of Central European Catholicism and morals, Freud's impact on the city, and the way too many dark sides of Viennese history have been swept under the carpet. To talk about scenes, these artists were reacting aggressively towards the bourgeois culture of their own city, Vienna, and they are also just one particle in the polemical art scene of Vienna, where edgy talk and action against right wing politics and bourgeois culture is common. At the same time, some of the more aestheticized installations of Hermann Nitsch reflect so much upon Catholic liturgy and the way it is used in Central Eastern Europe that even stylistically it is hard to grab it without local cultural understanding.<sup>[22]</sup>

The deeds of the Vienna Actionists would only have been pathetic performative excess (or heroic anarchism for some) in a city like Helsinki, and considered to be mere sensationalism, maybe even just childish. One can study and get knowledge about the scene so much that in the end all this makes sense, but one can also get it intuitively by hanging out in the scene. The scene with its micro-geographical and cultural connections is somewhat like a small culture. We often speak of going to foreign cultures and learning from them. Something similar could happen more self-consciously with scenes.

Based on Ludwig Wittgenstein's ideas, Kjell S. Johannesen presents the term 'aesthetic sensitivity.' He reminds readers about the fact that through training we learn to see balance in an image or to recognize harmonies in music.<sup>[23]</sup> We claim that certain sensitivities, not necessarily central but still noteworthy, can be provided by the training in particular scenes. It is not just aesthetic sensitivity towards art works. It is about audience behavior, understanding local modes of production, use of theoretical concepts and stereotypes. You can learn to know how to dance, behave, and to respond to music. These practices are at the place where the music is made.

While anyone can enjoy British pop music, it gives an extra layer of understanding and depth to the experience if one has the possibility to see how it works out in the original context, whether we speak about the laid-back atmosphere of Manchester or the uptight, fancy pop lifestyle of London. The network of clubs, record shops, the presence of labels, DJs and radio programs with their connoisseur hosts form a cultural system. There is an atmosphere, that gives a certain undertone to listening to British pop music after one has visited the country. The intertextual network, the way one knows the music is performed and listened to live, the birth context where the music was born, and understatement which are hard to get if one does not have the aesthetic literacy for the whole, give the music a richer web of meanings, not to mention sensual traces from the scene. Some industrial sounds in British music echo the country's industrial past that is present in the cities where the music is made.

While one can become an expert in its history and sound without visiting the place, there is an atmosphere that locally works, not like Danto's idea of theoretical atmosphere and history, but in a more sensory way. While repeated many times in scenes, certain sounds get new meanings and make musical sense. When one has not just listened to records, but attended the original clubs where the music is played live, one learns to listen to it differently, to put emphasis on sounds that accompany certain audience behaviors and to note underlying meanings in vocals.



In contrast to understanding music in a certain country or region (e.g., country music in Texas), being in a scene shows us the importance of the intense communication in the urban realm. Even if later on everybody would understand the way rap music is based on a certain party tradition where the DJ would extend songs with the help of the breakbeats, and where she or he would be rapping on the breakbeats to cheer people up, originally this was happening just in one scene, the Bronx. It took years before it was imported even to Manhattan.

Thinking in Foucault fashion, we are here talking about a variety of discursive formations with articulate properties and character: geographical conditions, traditional artistic production, forms of art, behavior, habits and expectations of the audience, theoretical approaches and specificity of reflections affect arts. For the understanding of a particular art scene and work of art it is necessary to consider and be sensitive to each conceptual formation.

It is still hard to say if there would be any work or style of art where one would absolutely need to know the scene to get into terms with the art. Even in our example where the Vienna scene really gives a meaning and sensitivity to understand the work, the artworks can be interpreted and experienced from other perspectives. Only if one really wants to get it right in relation to a scene, one sometimes needs a thorough understanding of the scene. Aesthetic cultures always have some aesthetic order or form that is meant to please the senses, and the textures of the works are so rich that a variety of interpretations and uses of the works is possible.

Even the ontology of art can be thought of through scenes, as shown by Danto. New articulations of art are, in the end, tested, not just with time, but through an acceptance of the broader community (national, global). Scenes, at least strong ones, have differing ontological possibilities. We already pointed out that Warhol had to do what he did in New York. His work could not have taken the direction it did in Berlin. Even if the differences between the scenes in this respect would not always be big, the differing possibilities are worth noting.

Lifestyle(s) are central here. The life of scenes in the broader context of art, people moving from one scene to another, or becoming interested in different scenes in different times of their life and historical situations, is certainly a feature in contemporary culture that we cannot ignore. The twentieth-century portrayals of artist life still mention scenes, but when we go to portrayals about the nineteenth century, the scene is no longer an issue. Although one might want to think already about Renaissance Florence as a scene, we mostly still associate scenes with modern lifestyle, (increased social and geographical) mobility, and so the use of the term feels somewhat incomplete when applied to historical periods.

The role of scenes reflects a change. One hundred-fifty years ago it was fashionable to establish and think about nations, and hence old texts on art focus on the art of the nation. Now our talk on art is much more often about cities and their venues, atmospheres and residencies.<sup>[24]</sup> In general, the increased interest in cities and urban culture is central for today's life, the way we travel to cities more than ever, not to mention how many tourist guides and sites there are, and how much they focus on design districts, semi-artistic hipster areas, and townships that have been taken over by artists. Cities even support and develop these areas.<sup>[25]</sup>

There is much we could expand on, e.g., the relationship of local scenes and the internationally more or less shared conceptions, practices and canons of art, but here our main aspiration has been to take up the topic, and to open a discussion on it. We have become interested here in rethinking history, or at least asking if there would be a need for new readings. Was the Zurich dada actually coined to represent a scene, or should we really think of it as a movement? Were some of our favorite 'schools' more scenes than schools or movements? Were the Prague School and the Vienna Circle actually scenes? The same could be asked about the structuralist movement and the cubists in Paris. Has it been customary to use terms like 'school' and 'movement' because we have not had a clear understanding of what scenes are?

We, of course, owe a great deal to Danto's work. It is just that his theory, together with most aesthetic theories, forgets the role scenes have, and this lack of site-specificity fueled the writing of this text. Besides a more global framework – let us call this broadly shared horizon of interpretation 'the art world' – art often needs or has use of the support of its own scene. And at least scenes have a practical impact on the artists' work, as shown in Part 2.

All these ideas became clear for us through experiencing the Andy Warhol museum in Medzilaborce, Eastern Slovakia. The museum, which the Warhol family established in the early 1990s, includes approximately 140 Andy Warhol originals and other works by famous pop artists. It lies close to the Polish border. It was clear how lonely these works were out there without a supporting scene. It is not that anything would have changed in our interpretation of them, but most museums have some

sense of belonging to the world of art. Here one felt the lack of context. There are many museums where one is far from the urban centers. Most of these sites are still extensions of them in spirit. In Medzilaborce's case, the museum somehow does not accentuate its connection to other worlds. Outside you meet goats, village people and forest. It is like having art in space. This experience made our idea about scenes stronger. It fueled us to write this article.

Jozef Kovalčík  
[jozef.kovalcik@fpu.sk](mailto:jozef.kovalcik@fpu.sk)

Max Rynänen  
[max.rynanen@aalto.fi](mailto:max.rynanen@aalto.fi)

Jozef Kovalčík, Ph.D., is the executive director of Slovak Arts Council since July 2015. Max Rynänen, Ph.D., is the head of the international MA programme Visual Culture, Curating, and Contemporary Art at Aalto University Finland. Together they have co-written articles on art, popular culture and the state of aesthetics, and co-edited the book *Aesthetics of Popular Culture* (Slovart, 2014). They are the editors in chief of the journal *Popular Inquiry: The Journal of the Aesthetics of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture* ([www.popularinquiry.com](http://www.popularinquiry.com)).

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### Endnotes

[1] Paperback text for *Yayoi Kusama: In infinity*. Eds. Lærke Rydal Jørgensen, Marie Laurberg and Michael Juul Holm (Copenhagen. Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2015).

[2] Tom Sito, *The Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006), p. 177.

[3] Rainer Metzinger's *Berlin in the Twenties: Art and Culture 1918-1933* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), shows how expressionism took over all arts in Berlin and fostered an audience for itself (pp. 86-101), how Berlin dada remained anchored to the city in a regional manner (p. 99), and how cafeterias and entertainment formed a cluster in the city's cultural life (253-289).

[4] There is a thread in *Quora* about the topic "Does Philadelphia have an Art Scene?" See <https://www.quora.com/Does-Philadelphia-have-an-art-scene> (visited May 31, 2018; the thread started May 2017).

[5] Arthur C. Danto, "The Artworld," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol 61, Issue 19, American Philosophy Association Eastern Division Sixty-First Annual Meeting (Oct 15, 1964), pp. 571-584. One of Danto's example artists in the text, the conceptual artist Testadura is fictional, not a real agent of the New York art scene. That is the reason for our remark on real and fictional artists.

[6] Although it would be great to shift attention from the dominant centers of the West to other scenes, one can hardly think about a better way to bring people together than by discussing the most famous and central scene of them all. As there are even famous texts in aesthetics that comment on the New York scene, we hope that the readers can forgive us for this choice. We hope to make up with this by introducing many thoughts on scenes through less known cultural centers later in the article.

[7] Arthur C. Danto, *Andy Warhol* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. xi. Danto focused on Warhol's connection to popular culture and consumerism, but one can also accentuate his interest in American working-class culture, as Anthony E. Grudin stresses in his "A Sign of Good Taste': Andy Warhol and the Rise of Brand Image Advertising," *Oxford Art Journal*, 33.2, 2010, 211-232.

[8] Chapter 1 ("Works of Art and Mere Real Things," pp. 1-32) of Arthur C. Danto's *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), is built on this idea, which stems from Heinrich Wölfflin's thought that not everything is possible at every time.

[9] Danto, *Andy Warhol*, p. 31.

[10] Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Vintage, 1966), pp. 275-292. The list is found on pp. 277-278.

[11] Republished on 1000manifestos ([www.1000manifestos.com](http://www.1000manifestos.com)). (The following) link visited January 16, 2018.  
<http://www.1000manifestos.com/yvonne-rainer-no-manifesto/>

[12] Sontag, "Notes on Camp," p. 292.

[13] Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life* (London: Penguin, 2010).

[14] Although Jameson lived at the time in California, where, e.g., video art (mentioned in the book something messing up high and low in galleries) was strong in the art scene of Los Angeles, we might want to assume that he probably noted also changes in the East Coast art scenes. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

[15] Michaela Pfadenhauer's "Ethnography of Scenes. Towards a Sociological Life-World Analysis of (Post-Traditional) Community-building," *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, Vol 6, No 3, Art 43, (September 2005). <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/23/49>. For a good study of one particular scene (also lacking an interest to debate its aesthetics, though), see Dana Nell Maher's *The Sociology of Scenes, the Sacramento Poetry Scene* (Las Vegas: UNLV Theses, 2009). <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2125&context=thesedissertations>.

[16] Catharine Rossi's *Crafting Modern Design in Italy: From Post-War to Postmodernism* (London: The Royal College of Art, 2011) gives a good overview of the 1960s trend of using plastic and reactions for and against American kitsch, both focusing on Milan and the broader Italian design landscape (see, e.g., chapter 4, "From Mari to Memphis: Processes and Production from Radical Design to Postmodernism," pp. 349-462).

[17] Kurihara Nanako describes the Tokyo scene as a shock for Hirakata Tatsumi, the founder of butoh, who arrived from the Tohoku countryside to the capital of Japan in the Post-War Era. In his study Nanako stresses post-war confusion but also discusses its liberating effects on the city's cultural life, where artists "were free and full of chaotic energy" (p. 17). His first piece *Kinjiki* (Forbidden Fruit, 1959) even commented on Yukio Mishima, the *enfant terrible* of the city's literary scene. Kurihara Nanako, "Hirakata Tatsumi: The Words of Butoh," *The Drama Review*, 44, 1 (T165), (Spring 2000), 17-18.

[18] Hamid Dabashi's hit book (whose basic spirit we of course support even if he forgets us!) *Can (Non-) Europeans Think?* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015), is an example of a book where the West is the conceptual target, but only French and Anglo-American philosophers (or the ones who work there) are under attack. From our perspective we just get marginalized one more time this way, now by post-colonialists, who do not often remember that the West and/or Europe includes also marginalized and poor countries, and countries with a history of colonialization (like Finland and Slovakia).

[19] Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London and New York: Routledge, 1979).

[20] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (London: Routledge, 1984).

[21] Dickie's influential thoughts on how the upper level institutional world of art works with its games of legitimation and approval works are best expressed in his work *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Cornell University Press, 1974). In *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art* (New York: Haven Publications, 1984) Dickie comes sometimes quite close to crossing the line to discussing art scenes, as he takes up the public of the artist, stresses how it should be educated to understand art, and that sometimes artists do not really try to reach a broader audience with their work. Here one could have been thinking about the possibility to communicate it to a small community, or a scene, but Dickie chooses to think of a "romantic solitude" vis-à-vis museums (pp. 65-66).

[22] Marcin Borchart's study on Nitsch and his contemporaries analyses the deeds of the Vienna scene as social negation (and offers a sketch on the context, i.e. the scene). Marcin Borchart, "Viennese Actionism – Transgression as an Art of Social Negation," *Er(r)go. Teoria – Literatura – Kultura*, Vol 35, (2017), 2, 101-121.

[23] See e.g. Kjell S. Johannesen, *Kunst, språk og estetisk praksis* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 1994).

[24] This is one of the topics in Angela McRobbie's new book *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016).

[25] Here one has to add, that actually some Central European cities have evoked studies on their own art, and Vienna, one of our examples in the text, is one of them. See e.g. Mario Valeri Manera (ed), *Le arti a Vienna: Dalla secessione alla caduta dell'impero asburgico* (Venice: Edizioni la Biennale, 1984) and Peter Vergo, *Art in Vienna 1898-1918* (New York: Phaidon Press, 1975). Although the books clearly show a shared artistic realm, they do not in any way theorize or sketch out ideas on what kind of a phenomenon a scene is.