

The Road to Parnassus

Artist Strategies in Contemporary Art
and the rise of Douglas Gordon

by **Diego Mantoan**



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TO DOUGLAS, HE KNOWS WHY
TO GIULIA, SHE SHOULD KNOW WHY
TO MARILENA, SHE MUST KNOW WHY
TO ANNA AND ANTONIO, THEY MIGHT KNOW WHY
TO ANTONELLA, SHE HAD ABSOLUTELY NO CLUE

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Chapter 2

A cultural producer in the art system

2.1. Who is an artist: the artist and the art system

Dealing with the kick start of an artist's career, especially a contemporary artist's, requires defining the actual research subject in the first place, which is in turn obviously a problem related to the more general concept of art that one proposes to draw on. Philosophers, art historians and sociologists – recently even economists – spilled gallons of ink on paper to find an exhaustive answer. It would appear, that two centuries ago a swift reply might have been easier, given the control over art validation implemented by Academia. Especially since the various strains of avant-garde around 1900, art's boundaries have been constantly challenged and broadened, not to mention the last five or six decades that apparently opened up the field to all sorts of artistic production. The days in which aesthetics ruled over whatever was called art seem now long gone, although the presumption of art's constitutional timelessness and universality is still a deep rooted commonplace. So far, it appears rather useless to study an artist's first steps purely concentrating on ideological aspects of his or her artworks, as it would indeed be impossible to determine how his or her production came about to be considered as true art objects. Surely art can be seen to hold a transcendent value, nevertheless an artist is rooted in the society he or she lives in and acts as a supplier of the art system. One may even observe, that artists play an active part in establishing their own position in the art system and their role model in society, as well as their ideological self-projection as artists. Clearly these remarks arise from a sociological approach that has widely interested the field of art studies in the second half of the 20th Century, for the most part setting aside the critical revision of art's categories of analysis, while insisting instead on the relevance of institutional processes and structures in the development of the arts (Wolff, 1999). Minimizing the importance of atemporality and value-freedom which insists in art critics and art history, art sociology helps to understand the social and cultural construction of art, of artists, products, institutions and of its public (Wolff, 1981, p.201). Hence, the artwork is intended as a cultural product, for it loses any transcendent value, which emerges in turn from ideological, institutional and social contingencies set in a specific time and place (Hauser, 1983, p.622). Likewise art practice and institutions, this happens also with both critics

and art historians, whose conclusions are necessarily constrained by those very conditions, which would thus invite to demystify creativity and analyse aesthetic paradigms in their specific social, historical and geographic period (Wolff, 1981, p.199). In fact, even considering art from an ontological perspective leads to the awareness that the peculiarity of every artificial object consists in the intentionality of its production, conversely to natural objects (Margolis, 2000, p. 125). Intentional properties can thus be interpreted, since they are determined due to a consensual process within society, such as for any kind of linguistic, semiotic and symbolic property (Carroll, 2000, p.18). This intentional essence, proper of cultural and artistic products, claims for the necessity of a history-aware interpretation, since they emerge from mutual agreement in a specific society. Both producing and describing a cultural entity are interpretation procedures in themselves, hence every propriety that is objectively conferred to an artwork could be altered in time due a constant revision process, which counts as a distinctive feature of human societies (Margolis, 2000, pp.120-127). For the above reasons it would be unthinkable to separate the meaning of a given artwork from the historic moment and place that cherished it. Far from maintaining absolute relativity in cultural discourse, these arguments place art in the field of social and institutional theory. The art world would thus be a group of assorted spheres, which members of a given society have collectively bestowed with artistic value (Dickie, 2000, p.100). In this perspective, art emerges as a cultural product consequently holding arbitrary features derived from the development of social consensus over centuries.

If art is intended as the cultural product of a determined society, then this may become much clearer at times of artistic change, which often depend on shifting paradigms due to social, political or economic turnings (Hauser, 1983, p.100). Nevertheless, transformation in the economic and social field takes a long run, thus revealing the importance of structural continuity in habits and institutions¹. Such a notion of art requires understanding the artist as a cultural producer; hence the development of this profession demands to be observed over several centuries. At large, the artist needs to be someone who is aware of the general idea of art in his or her own society and who has acquired the necessary knowledge of the means for artistic production (Dickie, 2000, p.98). However, both his role model and status within society have experienced different stages in time, along with changing art practice and institutions. Considering Western tradition, visual artists have progressively gained social importance since late Medieval Times, while their conventional education and professional

profiles have changed as well. Shifting standards for artist training (from workshops to academies), for artistic labour (different types and profiles of artist) and for artist's intercourse with art demand (starting with the artist-client-relationship) had indeed a substantial influence on art production over history (Previtali, 1979). Thus, being an artist holds various meanings and features depending on the specific geographic and chronologic field under observation. Already for the period that ranges from late Middle Ages to the early 19th Century, five different types of artist may be counted at least, as suggested by Peter Burke: artisan, courtier, entrepreneur, bureaucrat and rebel (Burke, 1979). These archetypes are of course theoretical models and hardly existed as pure forms, but they adequately describe the variety of an artist's professional attitude, role model, social status and pace of mind. Furthermore, they are consistent with examples drawn from art history and seem to move along a timeline, as if they were subsequent stages of a linear forward push. For each type there are specific political, social and economic premises that made its appearance possible and favoured it over others. Nevertheless, all five types coexisted at some point in Modern Times, thus they must be regarded as typical for European Art in the considered period. Besides these major archetypes, two more should be counted, although less frequent: the purely religious artist and the woman artist. Speaking of the main categories, each one had a different way of producing and marketing works, as well as a peculiar role he or she was credited with in society. The artist as a craftsman dates back to medieval tradition, when labour was organized in small workshops and constrained by guild's ruling. Artisans usually worked on a local basis for small commissions, possibly moving from place to place in order to engage in bigger commissions. Quite every late-Medieval artist would make a good example, even some who were well recognized in their own lifetimes like Duccio di Buoninsegna, Cenni di Pepo or his pupil Giotto da Bondone, all of whom had occasionally touring workshops. In the Renaissance period a growing number of visual artists were allowed into the homes and palaces of rich noblemen and became part of their private courts. Even though courtesan-artists were usually paid higher wages than artisans, not many reached a stable position and had to move around from court to court, eventually yielding to the pressure of their patrons – sometimes even aesthetically. Courtesans would count for instance Leonardo Da Vinci, who stayed in Milan at Ludovico Sforza's side for over twenty years, or Cosmè Tura, hired as official painter by the Este family in Ferrara and lodged in the lord's mansion, the likes of Hans Holbein for the Tudors decades later. At the beginning of the 16th Century the art market became more and more international with painters travelling all over Europe and some celebrity

artists earning big money. The art boom allowed a few famous artists to open huge workshops, some becoming true enterprises that fed the richest courts on the Continent with pieces of art. Venetian painter Titian and German Lucas Cranach the Elder used their talent and broad appreciation to establish very successful businesses based on big workshops that almost worked around the hour. Due to the predominance on the European continent of large nation-states such as Spain and France, which came about gradually in the 17th century, several artists gained a stable position inside newly founded institutions – such as academies – or even hold influential posts in government. This is often true for architects, but also in the case of visual artists such as the sculptor Antonio Canova who was appointed as the superintendent of cultural heritage in Rome. Hence, artists became part of a nation's bureaucracy and were drawn into a high ranked lifestyle. Finally, there have always been some artists who didn't want to play by the rules and were already considered rebels in their epoch. Notably Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio or the Neapolitan painter Salvator Rosa lead a wild life, often on the run due to disrespectful behaviour towards some powerful notables of their times. However, for the centuries before the French Revolution the term rebel holds a different meaning from the *bohémien* attitude of anti-bourgeois, typical of many late 19th century artists. In fact, rebel-artists didn't cut all ties to society, since they also needed the appraisal and protection of at least one influential client or patron to thrive on, the likes of courtesans and bureaucrats (Haskell, 1989, p.3-23).

Considering the five categories exposed above, one can see there has never been a time when artists were not influenced by social relations and duties. The quest for success has always implied some sort of acceptance of society's pressure, either willingly or reluctantly (Burke, 1979, p.112). An artist may try to force these constraints, sometimes even succeeding in subverting the normal order, but he or she will always remain an expression of their own personality strictly within the frame of allowances society is ready to make to artists (Marcone, 1998). However, playing by the rules doesn't mean an artist becomes conventional – in a pejorative way – or less creative. One may think of Andrea del Verrocchio's very traditional Florentine workshop, where some great masters apprenticed, amongst others Domenico Ghirlandaio, Pietro Vennucci also known as the Perugino, Lorenzo di Credi, Filippino Lippi and even an absolute genius as Leonardo da Vinci. Despite the five different archetypes, the true issue for artists in Early Modern Time was rather the rise in status they wanted to establish for themselves in society, seen as the only key to gain more creative freedom.

Besides personal success, an increased social status was a major concern, since visual art was neglected in the Middle Ages due to its exclusion from the *septem artes liberales*. Autographing works had been an important step for visual artists out of Medieval Times, in order to emerge from obscurity and assert their own personality. The next stage was the claim to benefit from a greater social standing, alongside growing commercial and cultural success. Self-portraits make a good example for a decisive gain in artists' confidence over their own social role. One may recall Albrecht Dürer depicting himself wearing expensive fur coats or Tiziano Vecellio who didn't miss a chance to tell the world he was the Emperor's official painter, portraying himself grabbing for the Golden Fleece on his neck received from Charles V of Habsburg.

So far, the historical development of art appears to rely extensively on the social and economic circumstances, as well as on the ideological strain implied in every cultural product. The latter depends in turn on the economic situation, the social position, the political predominance and the spiritual attitude of a determinate class, group or community of interests that influence the artist. However, the complexity of an artwork goes beyond materialistic constraints, as it is also related to the specific field of aesthetics, as well as on the individual characteristics and biographic aspects of a given artist. Although aesthetics may again be explained resorting to social and ideological paradigms, its theoretical dimension dwells autonomously and should be drawn into art discourse as an additional means of interpretation (Wolff, 1981, pp.199-200). Hence, an artwork lays at the overlap of three separate conditions, which are psychology, sociology and history of styles (Hauser, 1958, p.13). Hardly one may find a psychological or sociological equivalent to aesthetic value that would make considerations about styles, forms or ideas completely useless. In fact, artistic quality appears to be dependent on the certification of a minimal aesthetic amount. Hence, art would be what counts as such or consequently what those people reckoned as artists produce (Hauser, 1983, pp.57, 341, 746). Relying on an implicit agreement, art must be the result of a negotiation amongst those players that hold some sort of determination right over artistic judgement. The creation of an artwork would thus be comprised in a broader field, based on a collective foundation rather than being an individual activity (Boime, 1990). Recognizing two separate, though mutual necessary kind of productions for an artwork reveals itself as a crucial aspect: on the one side lays art's material production, which is up to the artist, while on the other side there is the production of its symbolic meaning, that is the creation of its value based on institutional

and social recognition. The idea of an art system emerges, in which several political and social forces interact, going far beyond the existence of a singular patron or institution, on the contrary focussing on the merge of individuals into a community characterized by the predominance of political and cultural elites (Bourdieu, 1993, pp.12, 36). The ruling class as a whole would then appear to hold the post of art system certifier or gatekeeper, rightly declaring artistic value. However, this system hardly is a unified set and should be defined appropriately as a space of positions where cultural meaning and predominance are at stake. In fact, the art world involves numerous players, each with different means and intentions, and depends on the particular power relations between them. Lending the words of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, it can be described as “a force-field as well as a field of struggles which aim at transforming or maintaining the established relation of forces” (Bourdieu, 2013, p.15). The particular conformation of this arena depends on the distribution of specific capital amongst all participants, which consists of those properties that determine success in the considered field. The agents who hold stronger power are in a dominant position due to the accumulated cultural capital – which may be prestige, influence over other key players, opinion leadership, network assets – and usually try to thrive on their revenue of position, opposing competitors that challenge it. The true struggle, however, is over authority inside the field, which means conquering the role of legitimate and acknowledged decision maker of the arena. The position everyone is fighting for holds the typical advantages of oligopoly, awarding the rare ability to sanction symbolic meaning in the artistic field. Typically the struggle is over the definition of the field limits. The main concerns are, what should be legitimately considered as art and who should be counted as a field player. Studying the career of a particular artist, hence, should be comprised inside the broader artistic field, therefore considering all agents that contribute to the meaning and value of his or her works: dealers, museum directors, collectors, critics, publishers and all other players who mutually determine artistic value (Bourdieu, 1993, pp.30-36). Hence, it wouldn't be sufficient to take the social, psychological and biographical conditions of the direct producers into account – speak, of the artist – but it is necessary to consider also the conditions of production defined by the different agents involved in the field. Widening the scope even more, cultural production in turn is inscribed in the more general economic and political field, thus being affected by its laws and forces (Stallabrass, 2006a). It may be understood as a dominated position and its players as a dominated fraction of the dominant class. However, the art field and its agents may decide to

fluctuate between two opposite attitudes towards the broader arena: a more market oriented position prone to the dominators, on the one side, and a rather detached or even opposing position on the other side, which relays on the claim of creative freedom and autonomous principles for aesthetic development (Bourdieu, 1993, pp.40-42).

In any case, the most difficult position appears to be that of new entrants, because they start with a very low capital level and must find strategies to break entry barriers. From their starting point they can only try to get the pulse on the situation – which may happen instinctively or more deliberately – in order to understand how to gain access to the arena. Membership of the field will rather be granted to those aspiring agents who possess a vast amount of information on the trends and force relations of the field itself: one should better know the field's past, understand its present state and be capable of imagining its future developments. Furthermore, it is advised to identify influential institutions and people, to comprehend the nature of their relationships to one another – harmonic or at odds – and to gather information about ideas and issues which are “in the air” (Bourdieu, 1993, pp.31-32). This is also what should be done to retrace the first steps of a successful artist, as it would be insufficient to concentrate on his or her sole biographic, psychological and social background. A thorough research on the artistic field of his or her time is inescapable, in order to recognize the various players, their peculiar position in the arena and the network of relationships between them. Furthermore, it is necessary to go beyond the mere description of the field and try to understand the intrinsic aims and motivations that may explain the different player's behaviour, in order to understand the specific decisions taken in terms of art trends (Heinich, 1999, p.26). Although dominant agents tend to maintain the acquired position setting up entry barriers, in fact this doesn't mean that their artistic choices are inherently conservative and that only artists who follow major trends stand a chance. Powerful players would usually try to thrive on the revenue of their position, but this could also involve progressive change in taste that leads to new artistic developments, in order to be ahead of times and lead the line. Thus, entry barriers are not insurmountable, but one needs to understand the ideology and preferences of the gatekeepers. Consequently, listing the most important people and institutions of the art system must be understood as the first step to investigate the historical development of art trends. Beyond the mere identification of crucial agents, it is necessary to consider the criteria adopted by these players for their peculiar definition of art, as well as for their actual choices. The issue of individual preferences of influential

players – such as ideologies, theories, motivations and taste – may be linked to an understanding of art considered as a cluster concept, an idea derived from Wittgenstein's language philosophy (Carrol, 2000, p.16). A cluster concept is formed by a set of mutually sufficient properties – e.g. several characteristics that an artwork should possess – none of which is actually necessary, neither jointly nor individually. This would mean, that an artwork could lack any of the supposed properties that are usually conferred to its status². As a matter of facts, the list of criteria adopted might not be exhaustive to explain why an object is considered a piece of art, but this would only mean that new items should be added to the list. New criteria might even contrast previous criteria: an artefact may for instance distance itself from natural beauty (such as for Cubism), disregard emotions (as in the case of Minimalism) or lack any technical skill (such as *ready-mades*). The cluster concept should simply pinpoint a variety of factors, which define what art is, but the real focus should be put on the subset of criteria adopted by a determined agent. Every player in the art field chooses his or her own subset, which is a possible combination of criteria. Hence, an object or an action may or may not be considered art, depending on the subset considered by the assessor. This approach allows one to understand the existence of a variety of opinions about art, which can all be legitimate at one and the same time although showing harsh discrepancies. A mere institutional, social or historic interpretation of art may be deficient in understanding certain developments in trends and tastes, if not combined with an investigation of individual preferences and opinions among agents who hold a strong position in the art field – such as influential critics, museum directors, dealers, collectors (Gaut, 2000, pp.27-37). Once established that gatekeepers are no coherent group, stressing individual preferences shouldn't lead to the idea that they all are independent individuals. As a matter of facts, dominant agents may feel mutually sympathetic or even form some sort of alliance, thus creating interdependent sub-groups or factions that take the same side against other groupings (Vettese, 2007, p. 21). Consequently, an artist who is seeking affirmation must not only be aware of the general art trends, but also create a production pertinent to the reference system or specific subset of gatekeepers he addresses, in order to hope for their endorsement (Vettese, 1998, pp.116-117).

Cultural capital and historic feel, field of forces and struggles, dominant position and individual preferences, alliances and connections: entering the art system doesn't seem at all an easy game for a young man or woman, who intends to be reckoned as an artist. However, more than a few find a

way to gain access to the field and some are even able to master the situation to their own advantage. Being amongst the most successful artists of his generation, Douglas Gordon makes a good case study to identify strategies and moves – both deliberate and unaware ones – which helped in the specific historic context and should supply general directions for the artistic field at large. In order to unveil his early career stages, it could be useful first to recognize the current position the Scottish artist has reached in the art system.

2.2. What an artist: Douglas Gordon in the art system

Glasgow born Douglas Gordon has been active now for more than two decades in the art system at international level and is regarded as one of the most successful living artists, usually set in the upper positions of various annual artists rankings³. Succeeding in establishing himself as a markedly international artist, today he is regarded among several art scene celebrities, though his personal attitude and media exposure make him a quite tempered artist, who usually aims at escaping the public glare of stardom. Over the past two decades his impact on recent art developments has been highly significant, especially as far as installation art and the use of new media are concerned, becoming one of the most influential authors of his generation. The peculiar works, techniques and genres which ensured his position in the art system are videos, projections, installations and films – the following two standing among his best known works: the most celebrated *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), a slow motion screening of Alfred Hitchcock's famous Hollywood thriller which was recently purchased in a revised edition by Kunstmuseum Basel at a record price for video art⁴, and the documentary film *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* (2006) shot with Philippe Parreno on the great French football champion, which premiered at Cannes Film Festival that same year. His career has been distinguished by several international awards granted by notable institutions such as Tate Britain (Turner Prize 1996), Venice Biennale (1997) and New York Guggenheim (Hugo Boss Prize 1998), as well as other significant prizes such as Berlin DAAD Stipendium (1997), Hannover Central Kunstpreis (1998) and Zurich Roswitha Haftmann Prize (2008). As regards to the media applied, Gordon's distinction is essentially due to his choice to abandon traditional techniques, primarily painting and sculpture, favouring instead the use of language and performance, of video images and environmental installations. The four categories mentioned are useful to classify the various types of works he makes, though two in particular stand out among

them: on the one hand the production of texts, words or phrases circulated by different means – either attached on walls, ceilings, floors, and similar surfaces or broadcasting them via print, phone or mail – and on the other hand the creation of video works, both by means of using existing material, such as movies and footage drawn from various sources, and of original shots. Both kinds of works are usually displayed as installations that conceptually involve the exhibition space in which they are positioned. His most significant production will be briefly reviewed in order to outline the Scottish artist's distinguishing features on the international art scene. For now, those works which date back to the exact scope of this analysis – being the decade 1986-1996 – are described very concisely, since they will be analysed in detail further on.

Concerning his textual works, the very early ones include *Meaning and Location* (1990), which was conceived and first installed at the graduate exhibition of London's Slade School of Art. It consists of a biblical quote, repeated twice with distorted punctuation, applied on the edge of the circular opening on the ceiling of the Octagon Room at London University College, the phrase being: 'Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise. Truly I say to you today, you will be with me in paradise'. Another work, *Above all else...* (1991), was shown at the Serpentine Gallery in London on occasion of the group show for the Barclays Young Artist's Award that same year. It is a Bembo font capital letter text declaring 'WE ARE EVIL', which again had been fixed on the central room ceiling, emblazoned with a fake blue stain. Since 1991 his textual works also include a long series of autograph letters, containing either quotations or the artist's original words, which were sent to friends and acquaintances, but above all to art world professionals and often even celebrities. The first letter dates back to an exhibition held in Nevers, France, featuring the sentence 'I am aware of who you are and what you do'. Text works also include *List of Names* (1990), which records thousands of names on the wall, looking like a sort of war memorial and quoting – at random – the names of all the people Gordon could remember having met so far. The first installation listed 1440 names and was created in 1991 for the exhibition *Self Conscious State* at Third Eye Centre in Glasgow. His telephone pieces, defined as *Instructions* by the author himself, are midway between text works and performances. For these projects Gordon asks the organizers of the exhibitions to make several phone calls to strangers, who are unaware to be involved in an artistic situation. The caller has to utter a short sentence, written by the artist, that may be interpreted by the receivers as a disturbance into their private lives, aimed at getting their secret feelings exposed. The first telephone piece,

Instructions (Number 1) (1992), was devised for a small group show at the Cafè Picasso in Rome and the sentence was 'You can't hide your love forever'.

In 1992 and then permanently from 1993 on, Gordon started to adopt video for his works, at first he employed existing materials: on the one hand his production made use of more or less well known cinematic movies, on the other hand he created video installations exploiting medical or amateur footage. His first and most celebrated video installation is *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), shown at the Tramway Gallery in Glasgow in 1993. As already mentioned, it is a dramatically slowed down projection of Hitchcock's famous thriller, in order to last one full day. It is displayed as a double side projection on a screen hanging mid-air from the ceiling in the centre of a darkened room. As a result the orthodox cinematic experience is wiped out, since the viewer will never see the film in full. However, the audience share the same physical space as the movie, while the stop-motion frames bring about a state of hypnosis and can trigger mental associations induced by both personal and collective memory (Verzotti, 2006, p.18). Similarly, still by means of the appropriation of Hollywood film footage, Gordon created various other works, as for *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1996), a double video projection he displayed at the 1996 exhibition of the Turner Prize finalists. A clip is shown of Dr Jekyll's transformation into Mr Hyde drawn from an 1930ies movie, though the scene is slowed down and projected onto two separate screens, one projected in negative photography – on the left side – and one in normal positive – on the right side. As another example counts *Between Darkness and Light* (1997), exhibited in an underpass in the German city of Münster for *Skulptur Projekte '97*. The work stages a simultaneous confrontation of two films on the same screen, which belong to two contrasting genres: the famous horror movie *The Exorcist* and the religious biopic *The Song of Bernadette*. Finally for the video installation *Through a looking glass* (1999), installed the first time at the Gagosian Gallery in New York, Gordon resorted to a famous scene from *Taxi Driver*. The title is borrowed from Lewis Carroll's novel, that sequels *Alice in Wonderland*. The work features the projection onto two perpendicular screens of the clip in which actor Robert De Niro, playing the title role, is rehearsing his new personality in front of a mirror, revealing first signs of a developing schizophrenia. However, the displayed frames differ on the two projections, as they are mirroring images run at a slightly different pace, hence losing soon coordination and tending to confuse and disorient the viewers.

Employing found footage, instead, from 1994 on the Scottish artist has created various video installations, three in particular being *Trigger Finger*, *Hysterical* and *10ms⁻¹*, which all exploit clinical shootings that focus on physical disorders caused by psychological traumas. *Trigger Finger* (1994) and *10ms⁻¹* (1994) were shown in his first solo exhibition at Lisson Gallery in London in 1994. They were both produced using materials from World War I military archives and play upon sequence loops. *Trigger Finger* shows on a single screen the take of a male hand repeating the gesture of a shooting gun, while *10ms⁻¹* features a young man laying on the floor unable to get up on his feet, being constantly pulled to the ground by his own weight. *Hysterical* (1995), the first video installation projected onto a double screen, was made for the group exhibition *General Release*, featuring the selection of younger British artists for the 1995 Venice Biennale. On two screens, black and white frames are shown of a schizophrenic woman given a medical sedative treatment by two doctors. For the series called *Bootleg* (1995-96) the Scottish artists drew from illegal shootings taken at rock concerts in the Seventies. *Bootleg (cramped)* (1995), *Bootleg (stoned)* (1996) and *Bootleg (bigmouth)* (1996) were displayed as video installations for a comprehensive solo exhibition at Zurich's Museum für Gegenwartskunst in 1996. Each of them features a clip from three different rock concerts showing a brief sequence in which the lead vocalist pretends a hysterical attack on stage, as if possessed by the music. Finally, the last work to be mentioned for the use of bootleg material is *Black and White (Babylon)* (1996), created on the occasion of the touring exhibition *The British Art Show 4* in 1996. This installation manipulates an amateur clip of a striptease performance secretly taken in a nightclub of the Fifties and projects it on two screens hanging side by side: the first screen shows the actual image, while on the second one the clip is projected upside down.

Gordon later moved on to shoot also original videos, beginning with a series of clips featuring his own limbs, hands and arms, legs and feet. The most significant achievement of this type are two videos entitled *A divided self I* and *II* (1996), which were shown at the Turner Prize nominees' exhibition in 1996. The two monitors, on which the two clips run, show the sequence of two incessant fighting arms, one hairless and the other hairy, as if they were staging a struggle between opposite principles, between good and evil. They are actually the artist's own arms, having shaved one of them, in order to enact the struggle of two different personalities within the same individual. In 1999 he shot his first full-length movie, entitled *Feature Film*, which was produced by London's Artangel foundation and supported by the Költnischer Kunstverein. The movie is about conductor James

Conlon's performance of Bernard Herrmann's score to *Vertigo* with the Paris Opera orchestra. For the entire shoot the camera insists on Conlon with takes of hands and head, movements and expressions while conducting the thrilling soundtrack of this other Hitchcock movie. Another movie already mentioned is *Zidane: A Twenty-first Century Portrait* (2006), that hold much in common with *Feature Film*. It is a sort of documentary which insists on the moves of the French soccer player, assembled from footage shot in real time over the course of a single football match by seventeen synchronized cameras placed around the playground. Other original videos, though intended as more complex video installations, include *Play Dead, Real Time* (2003), shot inside the Gagosian Gallery in New York, where it was later premiered. Two slightly leaning screens and a small monitor, all positioned in the middle of the room, play the video of an elephant in the gallery striding and tumbling around to mimic his own death. The footage causes a little dizziness to the viewer, as the camera lens constantly rings around the big animal in a swift and circular motion.

Over the years Gordon has also created several series of photographs or of physically manipulated photos and posters, each as an individual piece. They were produced mainly on occasion of solo shows for commercial galleries that acted as his dealers, such as Lisson Gallery in London, Yvon Lambert in Paris or Gagosian Gallery in New York. The photographs include for instance the series *Three Inches (Black)* (1997), which comprises eleven colour C-Print photos, showing a hand whose index has been totally blackened by a tattoo⁵. The series was realized for Yvon Lambert in Paris on occasion of a solo exhibition in 1996 and was displayed inside a room with pitch-black walls. *Croque-Mort* (2000) is another series of about ten photographs installed in a room that had been painted red, instead, for a solo exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery in New York in 2000. The photos feature close-up details of a baby grabbing its little foot and nearing its mouth, as if to bite it⁶. For Gagosian Gallery Gordon produced several other series, but in this case he manipulated existing photographs and posters of Hollywood celebrities and pop stars. In 2002 he made the *Blind Star* series, which are pictures portraying several cinema stars of the past, whose eyes he had cut out and replaced by mirrors on the background. In 2006 he started the series of so-called *Self-Portrait of You + Me*, which are again celebrities' photos and posters, but partially burnt by the artist, then installed on a mirror and finally framed altogether.

The Scottish artist has further developed a peculiar strain of environmental installations, making use of a varied range media, which include among the best known *Something between my mouth and your ear*

(1994), *30 Seconds Text* (1997) and *From God to Nothing* (1997). *Something between my mouth and your ear* can be considered one of his first installation pieces, other than the environmental performances belonging to his school years in Glasgow in the mid Eighties. Created in 1994 for the exhibition *The Reading Room* at Dolphin Gallery in Oxford, the work consists in a room painted dark blue with dimming blue light, where a HiFi station on the floor plays incessantly 30 pop songs. The music pieces belong to the British top list of the period January-September 1966, which were the months of Gordon's mother's pregnancy, so the room should recreate the visual, acoustic and aural sensations that the foetus had likely felt before birth. *30 Seconds Text* is another mixed media installation, a fragment of a bigger piece formerly made in Uppsala castle in 1996 for a solo exhibition within an broader group show of Scottish artists in Sweden entitled *Swan-off*. The original work is called *...head* (1996) and was displayed only once, consisting of two separate installations: a text about medical experiments projected onto the wall and a double screen video projection in an adjacent room. The text was shown underneath a ruined stuccoed decoration, which is an angel's body whose head had been severed due to the lowering of the ceiling. The two videos, instead, were shown in a suitably darkened room and featured black and white frames of a severed head and its headless body. For the Venice Biennale in 1997 Gordon rearranged the piece extracting the text and reworking it as a mere environmental installation without videos, changing also the title. This new version consists of the same text applied onto the wall of a pitch-black room, lit by a small lamp that is switched on and off every thirty seconds. The story tells about the experiments carried out by a French physician on prisoners sentenced to death and executed in the early 20th Century. The scientist tried to interact with the severed heads and wrote they remained conscious for about thirty seconds on average. The time to read the whole text is exactly thirty seconds, which is also the time the light bulb stays on before leaving the viewer in the dark. A black room and light bulbs hanging from the ceiling are again used in *From God to Nothing*, which he conceived during his stay in Germany subsidized by the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) and was later installed at the Galerie Micheline Szwajcer in Antwerp that same year. On the four walls Gordon applied continuous a line of text at eye height that recorded all of the artist's one hundred and forty-seven fears. In ascending order, the words start with the fear of God and finish with anxiety over nothingness, hence elucidating the title of the work. The room is set in a dim atmosphere thanks to three light bulbs hanging at different heights, coinciding with three human pivotal points being the mind, the heart and the genitals.

In view of the means predominant in his production, it would appear reasonable to regard Gordon as a media and performance artist. However, circumscribing his action to a specific category of art could possibly lead to underestimate the impact of his work on the general development of contemporary art. What emerges from this quick survey over his production, demonstrates instead that Gordon has not switched to new media to conduct a mere media-centric discourse, which is to thematise formal or stylistic problems pertaining solely to new media. Considering the wide influence of Gordon's video works beyond video art itself, for instance, he doesn't appear to be a mere video artist, because that medium does not necessarily define all results of his creativity. Furthermore, art categories and genres – as for every kind of heuristic classification – are devices conceived for the organization of learning and knowledge; hence they don't represent adamantine truths. Rather Gordon makes use of any possible media such as video, language, performance and installations as they are adequate means of expression to focus on topics and issues he is concerned about (Stemmrich, 1995). Hence, the neglect of traditional techniques derives from their unsuitability to express the subjects Gordon intends to treat and should not lead one to think that the author fully identifies himself with the new media⁷. As a matter of facts, the true common denominator of his production appears to lay in the contents and in the underlying creative process that leads to the works subsequent realization. In order to outline the traits that characterize Gordon's role on the international scene, his art should better be approached from the viewpoint of the issues dealt with and of the peculiar working method, rather than starting from the media he applies. Even if sentiments often differ, critics' opinions will also be expounded to learn about Gordon's stance in the art system and identify the main features of his contribution to the development of visual arts in recent years.

At a first look over Gordon's production the overall poetics of his efforts appear to be epitomized by the word *unsettlement*⁸. As a matter of facts, the Scottish artist consistently seems to employ an approach leading to the alienation of apparently consolidated meanings, a result that is achieved by handling the context and perceptive conditions of their very presentation (Brown, 2004, p.107). By altering conventional patterns of visual and psychological perception, Gordon's strategy aims at undermining the foundations of any certainty, which usually rests on broader social acceptance (Verzotti, 2006, p.20). To achieve this goal, the author tries to involve viewers in an active process of visual and mental reception of the work, often enthusing them to make use of collective memories or of their

personal recollections. Rather than referring to viewers, it would be more appropriate to define the public as 'recipients', since experiencing Gordon's work – as for many other contemporary artists – is never a merely visual occurrence. All of his works should be regarded as incomplete from a linguistic or heuristic perspective, although completed in their formal appearance. The artist voluntarily aims at a sort of indeterminacy, which in his view leads to a process of reflection and possible discovery triggered by the work itself, instead of reaching a final climax in the work (Stemmrich, 1995, p.26). For this very reason it may be eventually apparent why Gordon's production cannot be constrained within the tight limits of a specific medium, which is in fact rather used as a means to convey ideas and carry possible consequences (*Scream and scream again*, Cat.1996, p.14). This circumstance is consistent with the utter importance of the titles of Gordon's works, which often serve as an extension of the piece itself and prove crucial to grasp the associations of ideas the artist is implying (Bush, 2004, p.66). Still it should be underlined that Gordon does not intend to interfere with the viewer's ultimate interpretation of his works, which function as a potential for evocation. Being convinced that human experience is essentially subjective, he intends to let the viewer alone come full circle about the meaning, even if moving away from the artist's original intent (Sinclair, 1992, p.43).

Reflecting on the uncertainty and fallibility of human nature and, thus, of social order led Douglas Gordon to rotate around several themes, being specifically: language ambiguity, good vs. evil correlation, double-self, the blurred difference between reality and fiction, the difficulty in distinguishing right from wrong (Sega and Tolomeo, 2002, p.72). Two key concepts distinguish the author's peculiar path through the issues mentioned, which are context and dialogue (Van Assche, 1995). Context should be understood as the field of potential connections to draw from in order to attain evocative power and trigger mental associations. Dialogue should be conceived as a necessary relationship between different standing points – be it conflicting principles or else – that can breed a third way, where opposing perspectives overlap causing the original premises to collapse or to be rethought. Gordon finds the material for his works in familiar contexts, in order to verge on the labile borderline that separates good from evil, right from wrong, truth from fiction. He exploits the evocative power of images, words, sounds and situations that should be familiar to the viewer, but then relocates them in a completely different context, hence enabling a range of possible mental and physical associations which are rooted in the receptors' memory – be it subjective or

collective (Verzotti, 2006, pp.15-16; Sega and Tolomeo, 2002, p.73). Drawing on mass culture is a suitable strategy to Gordon's set goals: on the one hand, products such as pop songs or Hollywood movies are phenomenal conductors of psychological affection and mental associations, so the artist may use them to evoke a specific state of mind; on the other hand, such products constitute a pre-existing topical storyline the viewer is already accustomed to, hence to which correspond precise expectations and behavioural models (Brown, 2004, p.32). Furthermore, the artist for the sake of a dramatically altered experience of reality mixes up the chosen products of popular culture. To this purpose the author makes frequent use of para-scientific instances or psychological aspects that modify even the perception of the space where the material he has tempered with is set (Verzotti, 2006, p.17). These are all planned strategies that are aimed to question our ability to perceive time and space, as well as moral issues, hence leading the viewer to doubt the stability of the human psyche and even of his personal identity. Gordon provokes a constant clash between appearance and reality, good and evil, right and wrong. Far from acknowledging a winner for these conflicts, the opposing concepts seem instead to fade into one another becoming interchangeable (*Scream and scream again*, 1996, p.13). The works of the Scottish artist set the viewer in a twilight zone where every familiar notion and its very opposite appear to be equivalent.

There are several artistic strategies Gordon employs to achieve the described results, which are strategies that stem from his education, as well as from his personal inclination and from a thorough research carried out during his early career. The main procedures he adopts are quite recognizable and now define his peculiar style in the art system, the first and foremost being a sort of estrangement effect obtained by transferring materials from a specific context to a completely different one. The work titled *Above All Else*, which has been mentioned earlier, proves a paradigmatic case in point. In fact, it consists of the words 'WE ARE EVIL' applied onto the ceiling, which is really a phrase taken from a hooligan banner seen at a football match. These very words installed at the Serpentine Gallery in London on the occasion of the Barclays Young Artist Award appeared to have two different meanings, at least: on the one hand they could refer to the awareness of the original sin – to which the blue stain on the ceiling might allude too – while on the other hand it sounded as a generational claim of a new group of fierce artists that had to make their way breaking out with forerunners (Verzotti, 2006, p.16). Another process which Gordon frequently resorts to is manipulating the narrative pace, that

allows him to muddle reality and fiction, as well as to change the conventional perception of space and time. The most obvious example in this regard is *24 Hour Psycho*, where the extreme act of slowing down the film causes the cinematic fiction to collapse on itself, since the moving image should instead be obtained by a projected sequence of twenty-four frames per second. Many works by the Scottish artist make use of another technique which could be described as 'splitting and mirroring', such as in the case of simultaneous visions Gordon provides, but each seen from different points of view due to rotation or reflection. The result is small, but very efficient: although being different, the images look identical and it is impossible to distinguish the right ones from the wrong ones (Brown, 2004, p.32, 47). This concept may be clarified with the identity relationship between an individual's right and left hands: the two human limbs are equal but different at the same time (Lebovici, 2000, p.166). Several of the artist's works exploit this process, such as *Through a Looking Glass*. Mimicking Lewis Carroll's novel, the title clearly refers to a mirror vision, in fact the same sequence extracted from *Taxi Driver* is shown on two screens, but as a reflected projections run at slightly different speed. Unsettlement is to be understood as the last major strategy Gordon employs and that is particularly recurrent in his textual works, in order to distance his production from that of previous conceptual artists' such as Lawrence Weiner and On Kawara. At odds with the dry and factual sentences typical of several artists in the Seventies, the Scottish artist instils dramatic and sinister meanings in these pieces (Stemmrich, 1995, p.18). Always including words that could be read as a direct intrusion in the addressees' lives, he intentionally aims at upsetting the viewer, in order to have a reaction triggered by the artwork itself. Gordon used to send such text pieces to people he was somehow in relationship to, e.g. dealers, museum directors, collectors, curators, fellow artists, friends and relatives. This method allows him to be conceptual and visceral at one and the same time, as if he played a game involving body and mind (Brown, 2004, p.86).

Having rapidly reviewed the major production and the working method of Douglas Gordon, critics' opinions may help to focus on how the Scottish artist has been received over time by crucial agents of artistic legitimation and what position he has carved out for himself in the field for contemporary art. Opinions diverge alright, since the art system is divided into factions, each of which adopts peculiar criteria for determining what real art looks like and which artists are the most influential (Vettese, 2007, pp.21-22). Hence, it is necessary to discover the different theories and narratives used to describe art by its contemporaries, in order to

understand the actual choices and evolution of visual art in a particular period (Danto, 2008). As to Gordon's work, several critics have taken the Scottish artist into consideration mainly for his relevance in video art. Michael Fried values his videos and movies for the ability to dramatize reality, succeeding in portraying his subjects' psychological state of mind and, at the same time, catching the viewers' mind (Fried, 2008, pp.226-233). While praising the production of original films and videos by Glasgow born artist, Michael Rush rather focuses Gordon's personal relevance for video art on the procedure of appropriation and praises his pioneering role in the practice of exploiting existing video material from different sources (Rush, 2007, pp.214-222). Other authors highlight the iconoclastic features in the Scottish artist's production grounding their judgment on Gordon's creative methods, first of all the alteration of borrowed material. Stuart Comer believes that Gordon's manipulation aims to dissect the chosen material until it loses its familiar aspect, thus leading viewers to look beyond external appearance and to implement the work with their subjective experience (Comer, 2009, pp.91-92). Francis McKee points out that exploiting and altering iconic images – Hollywood celebrities, rock stars or famous movies – ends up investigating the relationship that society and the media hold to celebrities: sometimes icons are worshipped, some other times they are rejected and tormented (*Douglas Gordon: self-portrait*, Cat.2007, pp.7-10). Gordon's appropriation of idols may, however, be construed as a reflection of the mass culture permeating our society. According to Gregor Stemmrich, this practice proves to be very useful to render Gordon's procedures both visceral and attractive, while still grounded in the conceptual front of the Seventies consciously resumed by the Scottish artist (Stemmrich, 1995, pp.12-26). Hans Ulrich Obrist also includes Gordon's work among the new conceptual trends of the early Nineties, as he specifically stresses the relevance centred on communicating ideas – hence highlighting the creative act, rather than the physical and material outcome (Obrist, 2003, pp.317-326). Drawing attention to the wide range of media used and the rejection of traditional techniques, Klaus Biesenbach includes Glasgow artist in the branch of media and performance art as one of its most prominent authors. Gordon's enrolment in this classification would be justified by the bulk of his production, which focuses on articulate video installations and other kinds of installation art (*Douglas Gordon: Timeline*, Cat.2006). Richard Dorment fully agrees with this stance, crediting Gordon even with setting media art free from the constraints of the past. Comparing his production with those of video artists' of the Sixties and Seventies, Dorment maintains that earlier artists were obsessed to reproduce eyesight, while Gordon would rather try to investigate the psychological

experience of vision (Dorment, 1996c, p.5). Finally, some critics relate Gordon's career more generally to the success of the young British artists that rose to prominence during the Nineties. Julian Stallabrass, for instance, asserts the affiliation of the Scottish artist to so-called YBAs, especially since his works share many characteristics that proved quintessential for that generation. In the critic's opinion, such common features would be the drift towards shock art, represented by cheap provocations and bulky installations, as well as the focus on trivial content, often leaving absolute freedom of interpretation (Stallabrass, 2006b, pp.141-142). As far as these various opinions go, three different trends appear to be recurrent in Douglas Gordon's production and to define his position in the art system. Perhaps the most obvious one, in view of the techniques adopted, is media and performance art. Another tendency is related to conceptual art, whose benchmarks for Gordon seem to be Lawrence Weiner, On Kawara and Joseph Kosuth, as well as the collective *Art & Language* (Verzotti, 2006, p.15). All in all, the Scottish artist belongs also to a specific British art season, which was dominated by the YBA trend, to which he is often affiliated as one of the most eminent representatives (Muir, 2011, p.130). Setting aside any question of accuracy of these assumptions or to the possible predominance of one of the trends mentioned above, the critic's opinions on Douglas Gordon have aided to set his production in the broader context of the artistic field. They outline the position he is likely to have reached after his successful career, so they may help to follow up the strategies and moves he has consciously or inadvertently adopted in order to achieve the goal of establishing himself as an internationally recognized artist.

2.3. What does an artist do: players, key resources, strategies in the art system

Having looked at Douglas Gordon's main production over the years, as well as at different strains of interpretation by critics and art historians, several features have emerged which define him today in the art world. The peculiar arrangement of these features, in turn, describe the career stage he is in – as they would for any prominent artist – and are derived from resources gradually acquired, which are crucial in the art system. These may be called a proper artistic capital, as they are relevant for determining the force and position of a player within the art field. Thus, these key resources can be improved through specific strategies that necessarily involve the other agents of the art system, since they affect the overall balance of forces

and positions. Depending on the starting point of the artist – or of any other player of the system – a set of different behavioural models can be activated to gain more artistic capital. The provided description of the operations in the art system could appear rather mechanical, however it epitomizes three variables that must be analysed in order to understand artistic success, which are players, key resources and strategies. Players – as economists would call them – are the agents, which constitute the art field (Bourdieu, 1993, pp.30-35), thus being necessary in their specific role for the system to work. Key resources are those stock elements, which determine artistic capital in the field, hence establishing the relative force and position of a player. Strategies are behavioural models turned into actions that aim at an individual capital gain. The outcome of strategies based on key resources in connection with the other players are finally represented by the peculiar features that describe an artist's position in the system. Albeit seeming very mechanical, even in practice any aspiring artist needs to find an answer to the following questions: Who are the relevant agents in the field? What capital or resources must be possessed to enter the field? Which strategies could gain me more key resources? What features should better define my peculiar production and myself as an artist?

So far, only Gordon's present features have been described, so one needs to study how he got there, thus detecting the players, key resources and behavioural models that took him there, as well as his specific choices over artistic production. In order to do so, the above exposed variables may offer a useful description model to analyse the specific case. First of all, then, it is necessary to identify the players on the field, the crucial features and the possible strategies on a general level. At the same time, it is essential to establish a correct terminology for the adopted description model, thus validating the exact choice of words used for its different elements. Starting with the context in which the artist is operating, one should better opt in favour of the term 'art system', that was coined by art critic Lawrence Alloway on the pages of *Artforum* and is now generally preferred over 'art world' (Vettese, 2007, p.19). The notion of system, in fact, conveys the idea of a set of interrelated people, as well as that of an articulated process that can confer the status of art to candidates for aesthetic appreciation⁹. Furthermore, the notion of 'art world' implies an idea of unity, while it is now generally accepted that within the art system strives a large variety of reference groups, some even at odds with one another¹⁰. Following this interpretation, aesthetic appreciation is formed through common understanding between individuals of a specific reference group, thus representing the outcome of a process of social legitimacy which attributes

art status by means of the coordination of various relevant players, the artist being only one link in the chain (Danto, 2008). Furthermore, 'art system' is an all comprehensive notion compared to 'art field', since the latter would describe solely the arena of agents and positions, taking individualism and personal advantage as the true driving forces of art evolution, rather than acknowledging the existence of other motivations, such as ideological attitudes and collective stances (Heinich, pp.27-28). Hence, the art system is rooted in a community of factions and individuals who interact according to their specific role, which must be identified in order to outline the process of art certification. The players of the system comprise a wide range of professions or functions, the artist and the public appearing as the most obvious and necessary¹¹. It is important to stand by the definition of 'player', since the term 'agent' might be misleading: for economists the latter refers only to the possible intermediaries between demand and supply, while 'players' are all subjects involved in a determined production or marketplace. Between the artist and the public a large number of players – both individuals and institutions – are hoarded, among them curators, dealers, museum directors, critics, historians, theorists, philosophers, scholars, collectors, investors and other buyers, as well as art schools, academies, galleries, museums, auction houses, fairs, temporary exhibitions such as biennales, magazines, newspapers etc. All of these players take part in the process of art validation, that is claiming and finally establishing the legitimate value of an artist or a work of art by means of a number of steps: provided that it is an author's intention to make a work of art – hence to be an artist – his or her proposition or product will undergo the examination of players trusted with the capability of legitimate artistic discourse, which will decide whether accepting or rejecting the author's proposal (Vettese, 2007, p.21). As a matter of facts critics, curators, dealers, collectors, museum directors and anyone else who is entitled to acknowledge artistic value will judge the work of an aspiring artist – but even of an established one. Each player will react according to his or her own ideological, theoretical and art historical opinion – though provided they appear subjective – as well as along individual taste or even personal mood. Considering the art system as a heterogeneous aggregate, which includes several groups and factions with different visions and interests, an artist candidate could even be cast off by some players, but embraced by others. The system outlined so far appears to be ruled by specialists and it is a little unclear what criteria may be used for artists selection, while the general public seems consigned to utter exclusion from artistic choices – both in influence and understanding. The claim of contemporary art being inaccessible to the masses almost counts as a constant criticism nowadays,

especially if compared to cinema, pop music or literature. In this regard, however, one may suggest a distinction between the entertainment industry and high culture¹², although some artists frequently cross the line: in the former, audience is a relevant variable – though popular taste is often steered by corporations or opinion makers – while the latter is definitely controlled by a smaller elite, as was the case in past centuries, thus setting up one more field of specialized human knowledge.

Unless the above strain of explanation is to be judged the mere outcome of social and institutional superstructures¹³, one more reason is needed to clarify the existence of players between artists and the public, which may be found in the economic model underlying the art system. Economics of the arts is now an established discipline committed to systematic analysis of the interaction and behaviour of players in the art market (Frey, 2000, pp.1-6). Although psychological aspects are relevant, neoclassical methodology is useful to clarify the mechanics of the art system intended as an aggregate of players (institutions and individuals), where the supply side (artists) matches art demand (museums, collectors, public etc.) by means of intermediaries (dealers, curators, critics etc.). The neoclassical approach to economics consists of a comparative view on individuals and institutions, whose behaviour is supposed to be rational; hence all choices made by players of the market can be influenced by incentives or constraints (Foglio, 2005, pp.51-52). This doesn't appear to be the case of art, since it has been argued previously that the selection of artists depends on a variety of preferences, which are even at odds with one another sometimes. In fact, economists have adopted an 'irrationality axiom' for goods that are qualified by aesthetics and meaning, such as art: hence, the structure of relationships in the art system is non-consequential, as there is a possible qualitative or informative asymmetry among agents due to differing evaluations – based on the value of their different aesthetic information and bias, such as taste (Mossetto, 1993, pp.79-80). Visual arts are thus afflicted by information asymmetry due to the true essence of the goods in question, which are qualified by symbolic qualities: these need to be recognized inside a specific reference group that can understand and appreciate the peculiar value of its meaning and aesthetics (Santagata, 1998, p.22). Information asymmetry in the art system drives in particular to a situation that economists call adverse selection¹⁴, since the differing level of information in the market makes it difficult for prospective buyers to ponder the criteria for choosing one particular artwork or artist (Trimarchi, 1993, pp.86-87). The knowledge gap between seller and buyer would normally lead to the circumstance that a specific artwork is valued

differently by the supply side and the demand side, thus compromising the possible transaction. As a matter of facts, if the buyer's estimation of the artwork differs from the seller's one, the former would be ready to pay only a smaller sum than the latter expects, hence failing market equilibrium. Usually, the marketplace sets prices on goods which function as symbols of shared evaluation, hence conveying the information that is necessary to assure quality and make transactions effective. However, information asymmetry caused by aesthetic or symbolic qualification cannot be solved by taking price as a substitute for lacking information, because the buyer would risk a wrong choice being completely in the dark about the true quality of the good at stake: the only possible solution are specific institutional certifiers which are entitled with the authority and legitimation for quality assurance in the art system (Mossetto, 1993, pp.111-112). As regards the art system then, certification is a proper alternative to traditional market information – which would normally be the price – to go beyond information asymmetry among players originally caused by symbolic and aesthetic qualification of cultural goods. In other words, a buyer or audience will be ready to acquire or enjoy an artwork, if he acknowledges its value or trusts its evaluation, hence being assured as to the cultural value of the good before the purchase or fruition. For this reason the art system needs agents who connect the demand and supply sides, which means legitimate intermediaries such as dealers, galleries, curators, critics etc. On a practical level, they function as players that preliminarily select the artists to be introduced to the art system, hence acting as gatekeepers that constitute an entry barrier for any candidate artist (Caves, 2000, p.25). Considering the self-validating nature of legitimacy inside the art field, even the certifiers' reputation is largely founded on self-selection by the cultural establishment, as well as on the individual stock capital a specific player has been able to acquire. Hence, the art system is to be intended as a self-certifying monopoly that supplies a service of 'quality-validation' to consumers, who on their part turn to the cultural establishment in search of someone to trust in, given uncertainty over true artistic products (Mossetto, 1993, p.163). As the art system is made up of several groups and factions, actually every reference group operates as a small monopoly in its own range constituting a sub-field, thus transforming the art system in a kind of monopolistic competition where several producers or groups of producers are struggling for presenting a peculiar production and having a loyal audience¹⁵. In fact, the specific characteristics that micro-economics ascribes to monopolistically competitive markets seem to fit perfectly the art system: (i) there is a variety of producers and consumers, but none of them is completely tenure of the

market; (ii) products are differentiated and consumers are capable to perceive these distinctions, especially thanks to interpretation offered by certifiers; (iii) there are entry barriers for new producers, since they must show their product is different or new; (iv) producers have some control over price definition, as they can claim their product to hold unique peculiarities (Mankiw, 2009, pp.329-348).

The above economic approach has helped to sort out the different players of the system, dividing them into three main categories according to their peculiar function: producers (supply side, e.g. artists), certifiers or gatekeepers (intermediaries, e.g. dealers, curators etc.) and consumers (demand side, e.g. buyers, audience etc.). On a practical level the distinction is not so clear-cut, as some players could intermingle their role, such as a curator substantially leading an artists movement, or an artist becoming curator of a peer group to help all of them to access the market, or again a collector acting as a dealer for the artists he buys. However, the division into three separate categories constitutes a feasible model to analyse the art system and identify the necessary features a specific player must possess, as well as the actions to improve one's own position. To detect those key resources an artist had better work on, aiming at their gradual increase to enhance his or her status in the field, it appears useful to start from the criteria generally adopted to measure artistic success. In fact, ranking methods in visual arts are useful to focus on the outcome an artist is expected to produce, not just as regards to artworks but also for his or her wider appreciation. Several convenient criteria can be found in *Kunstkompass*, probably one of the best-known contemporary art barometers, developed by the German art and economics editor Willi Bongard and first published in 1970 on the magazine *Capital* to be published every year on occasion of the Art Cologne fair. Although some specific aspects of the ranking have been criticized over the years for being arbitrary or excessively centred on German institutions, the general parameters represent a valid choice to feel the pulse of the art system. In fact, the philosophy of *Kunstkompass* is to look at the repercussions of artistic success, since artistic quality would be impossible to measure otherwise. The true guiding light appears to be the degree of visibility acquired by an artist, that is his or her exposure and standing inside the art system, which can be assessed by the number of solo exhibitions in important museums, the participation into relevant group shows, the extent of monograph articles or reviews in leading art magazines and newspapers, the purchase of artworks by influent collections. *Kunstkompass* doesn't take artist quotations into account, a feature that

corresponds to economic theory that considers price irrelevant to understand market mechanics in the case of trust goods such as artworks, as argued before. Other artists rankings define artistic success by means of similar quantitative criteria including a few more – such as the number of academic papers or monograph catalogues – or combining them in a slightly different way. However, several of these methods regard price as important, because it signposts the buyers social status – if artworks are taken as consumer goods for aesthetic and symbolic appreciation – as well as the artist's asset value – if an artwork is meant as an investment (Foglio, 2005, pp.210-211). The real complication with price in the art system is to learn about it, since most transactions are kept private being direct purchases from dealers or artists themselves, while only the most prominent acquisitions are laid bare in auction houses. A minor parameter to classify artists may also be their origin, meaning the training they received: having studied in a renowned institution or worked as an assistant to a famous artist can make a big difference in terms of access to the art system, but such circumstances are not necessarily taken into account in official rankings (Caves, 2000, p.26). Though again rarely considered, one last criterion to define an artist's career stage is his or her dealer or gallery representation, which can disclose the approximate market positioning of an artist. As a matter of facts, galleries and dealers have themselves a reputation in the art system, which depends largely on the success of artists they represent – or have represented in the past – and on the standing of loyal collectors (Thompson, 2008, pp.46-47). Given these circumstances, it is possible to work out a vertical and geographical differentiation, hence a dealer's position can be determined in respect to the average career stage of the represented artists and to the range of his or her commercial influence in the art field (Jyrämä, 2008a, p. 89). These two ways of differentiation outline several kinds of businesses that go on one side from starting galleries for newcomers to big promoters of superstar artists, on the other side from small local or regional galleries to huge international enterprises. Traditionally there would be another kind of differentiation, which is bound to the end market of the gallery, being primary (only new production) or secondary (only second time purchases). However, this distinction has been blown up in the last few decades by means of several influent players such as dealer Larry Gagosian who started to merge the two business branches in one and the same gallery, selling historical Warhol pieces together with fresh artworks by cutting-edge authors. Even auction houses, which were generally dedicated to the secondary market, have recently contributed to blow up this separation starting to pick up sales of latest production by living artists (Thompson, 2008, pp.173-184). In any

case, the vertical differentiation still gives an insight on the varied career stages an artist might be at, according to the market position he or she has acquired. Though the borders may not be clear-cut, one can make the following distinctions as regards to the status of an artist: (i) art student, which would be during art education or training; (ii) artist candidate, usually an aspiring artist at the end or shortly after art education; (iii) new entry, one that has drawn the attention of a talent scout or is already represented by one of the newcomers' dealers; (iv) rising artist, one who has sold several pieces, had at least one important solo show and some reviews in important magazines; (v) established artist, one who steadily manages to live from his or her art production, being represented by a main gallery, and has a stable presence in relevant group shows and specialist magazines; (vi) celebrity, one who has definitively reached the Parnassus of the art system with record prices, several award victories, wide media exposure and frequent features in art history books. The above classification can be questioned as to the parameters used for sorting an artist into one of the specified categories or even criticized in a bulk for being too deterministic, given the various paths that an artist career may take. As a matter of facts, adopting the product's life cycle perspective would generally demonstrate that the advancement of an artist or a movement follows four steps: introduction, growth, maturity and decline (Vettese, 1998, pp.186-189). However, practical examples show a variety of possible career developments, usually with one or two major creative climaxes, while the remaining time is rather characterized by routine. Furthermore, there can be harsh ups and downs, since success is very ephemeral and oblivion always lingers for those who didn't reach an untouchable reputation. One last observation is concerned with the trade off between commercial success and artistic approval, since they don't necessarily go hand in hand: the former may be acquired moving from the fringe through the media lacking a good consideration by the institutional establishment, while the latter could earn an artist many prizes and honourable mentions but scarce financial resources (Jyrämä, 2008b, pp.108-109). All in all, the proposed classification of artists holds anyway the advantage of sketching the various stages of a career development: whether one takes slow steps or rushes through every stage, any aspiring artist must find a way to get some sort of training, enter the system, rise into prominence and finally establish an enduring career at regional, national or even international level. It may happen for an artist to live comfortably with local sales, but a totally different strategy is necessary to become a truly established author with an international reputation, participation in important group shows,

exhibitions in relevant museums and representation by a professional dealer.

All aspects mentioned so far represent the measurable traits that describe an artist's career stage altogether, intended as outcome of the crucial resources he or she has been able to accumulate and activate. These features may eventually be summarized in the following categories of quantitative and empirical parameters: (i) origin, hence one's art education and training; (ii) exposure, which is the artist's public standing due to the relevance of featured venues, group and solo shows, catalogues, reviews, awards etc.; (iii) type of clients, being buyers and collectors – both private and public, individual and institutional; (iv) scope, which signals the possible range of an artist's reputation being local, regional, national or international; (v) market positioning, referring in particular to the sales stage of an artist, which comprises the type of dealer representation, as well as the presence on the primary and secondary market (auction house purchases); (vi) price, being only regarded as the last feature given the mentioned problems of its formation in the art market. If these parameters measure the results of an artist's action in the system, which are then the key resources he or she should better possess or gather? What is the capital an artist can draw on inside the art field? The terms capital and art field obviously refer to the sociological theory of Pierre Bourdieu (1993), but could even be interpreted as capital stock with its economic implications: capital refers to the fixed input of production, which is constituted by the fundamental assets that allow the production itself to take place. Hence, it seems a feasible term to describe the key resources, which have been proposed as the second relevant variable to influence artistic success. Ranging from art historians to sociologists and economist, scholars have taken various assets into consideration, though everyone stressing some in particular. However, a few of these are now widely accepted and comprise above all the following: artistic project (art capital), connections (network capital), reputation (social capital) and wage (financial capital). An artist's specific proposition is probably the most obvious resource to foster one's own career, because it constitutes the principal product supplied to the art system. Particular attention should be paid to the basic components of an artist's project, which are represented on one side by talent, of course, but on the other side also by his or her peculiar aesthetic, ideological and systemic choices (Towse, 1998, p.98). In fact, an artist needs to be pertinent to the reference system he or she addresses and must furthermore define – or at least be aware of – how to spread his or her artistic production. This would mean understanding the art system, identifying a demand to satisfy

(e.g. a cultural niche), building an offer proposal (aesthetically and ideologically specified), determining the segments to attract, positioning in the art market (Foglio, 2005, pp.128-131). Considering the role of gatekeepers, the second key resource for the artist is represented by network capital, hence the connections he or she is capable of building, in order to obtain support by influential players, gain access to the system and become a legitimate member of the art world (Sacco, 1998, p.47). The crucial contribution of network and relationships cannot be underestimated in visual arts, since they preside over entrance in the field, as well as over reputation. However, the latter should be treated separately, because it properly refers to the personal image and social status of an artist (Jyrämä, 2008b, p.108). This kind of social capital becomes a crucial aspect in the art system, given that artworks are trust goods and that trust is enhanced by reputation. In turn, personal image may even become part of the art capital, especially when the marketing mechanism of branding is exploited. The last key resource that matters for every artist – both aspiring and established ones – is wage, which is the financial capital that can support his or her activity. As a matter of fact, pursuing an artistic career is a particularly risk-taking choice, even though it is frequently done with little awareness (Towse, 1996a, p.321). Candidates to enter the art system come truly in hoards, hence increasing the level of competition among emerging artists and sensibly lowering the wages of new entrants. In addition, at the beginning an artistic career is hardly remunerative and one's own efforts must therefore be intended as a mere individual investment for starting a successful path (Caves, 2000, pp.36-37). Usually an artist candidate takes the risk, because he or she considers chiefly the prospective earnings of celebrities instead of short term evaluations, which is also the reason why most aspiring artists need a non-artistic work to support their production (Benhamou, 2000, pp.38-40). Financial capital is a major concern for every beginner and the most likely solution is to maximize the time spent making art by means of a non-artistic job, which generally doesn't fit one's own education level, but is useful to earn a living and keep on producing art.

All four mentioned forms of capital – art, network, social and financial – can be singularly or mutually increased for leveraging the position of an author inside the art system. Actions on the capital stock may be performed inadvertently, however artists are usually aware of the fact, which they need to take some choices to hope for a career improvement. Furthermore, as soon as one is set to try a profession in the visual arts he or she is immediately faced with necessary decisions, such as what to produce, which reference group to point at, where to live and work, how to earn

enough to keep on trying. The answers given to these and other questions design a proper plan of actions, though the final outcome of its application may differ from its expected results. In this regards, one may maintain that even artists do apply specific strategies, for instance used to emerge, to thrive on or to increase their position in the art system. A strategy is not a mere plan or program, but rather an articulate process that combines intentions, decisions and actions (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). Its beginning is set at the revealed intentions of a player, which are represented by the artist's purposes and ambitions for his personal career. The initial intentions must then be conveyed into an effective plan of actions, which would be called the deliberate strategy, being the decisions taken to foster one's own capital. Finally, the plan has to be carried out and gets confronted with factual circumstances, thus letting diversions and changes arise along the way, which would be called altogether the emergent strategy. This pattern of explanation establishes the concept of strategy as the behavioural model that is used to translate one's own intentions into voluntary actions, hence it may differ according to an individual's characteristics and preferences, which is true even for business managers¹⁶. In fact, the drive to a particular strategy lays in the aspirations, attitude and personality of the given player, while the final outcome is influenced by circumstantial factors and by the response to their emergence. The general question concerning artists strategies should then be about the possible options they have to leverage their capital stock, rather than if they are at all conscious of acting strategically, since a strategy may also be originally mistaken or fail in the end. So far, only general suggestions can be made, which must later be analysed against factual evidence of the chosen study case. Concerning artistic capital, for instance, an author needs to determine his or her art project making choices on the following issues: (i) select the research themes, as well as a certain media or technique, while working to forge a particular style; (ii) chose a stance in the trade off between cutting edge and tradition, hence trying innovative paths (risky, but with a possible long term gain) or mimicking an already successful trend (safe, but likely to ephemeral success); (iii) think of the possible target or reference group to produce art for, thus defining the product features and one's own market position by means of a coherent distribution channel; (iv) decide on the production model to follow, e.g. whether serial and repetitive or innovative and sporadic, being committed to few iconic pieces or abundant artworks for the broad collectors market. For improving network capital and arouse the attention of gatekeepers again artists have to pick on several strategies, such as: (i) creating alliances, which may be peer groups, ideological movements, style collectives, artist

unions etc.; (ii) seeking mentors or godfathers who would offer support and legitimacy; (iii) get in touch with the art market, presenting oneself to dealers and collectors; (iv) communicate with opinion leaders such as curators, critics, art historians or magazines. Social capital depends on reputation and personal image that an artist builds for him- or herself and corroborates by different means, for instance through individual mythology, self-entrepreneurship, branding, celebrity status, opportunities for media exposure (Kerring, Fraser, Özbilgin, 2004, p.136). Financial capital can eventually be drawn too along different strategic moves – apart from artistic production – among which count family support, non-artistic jobs, other art-related jobs such as teaching in art schools or writing reviews, gaining scholarships for residencies, monetary awards and prizes, a patron's backing. All these sort of strategies increase an artist's wage and offer the opportunity to pursue a proper artistic career, provided that one can also minimize the time spent earning a living and dedicate as much as possible to art (Throsby, 1996, p.345). So far the strategies have been divided in respect to the four identified key resources they have influence on, though an integrated perspective would be preferable. In fact, the mentioned strategies often overlap and intertwine, while the total capital stock should be balanced between the four different strains mentioned. Networks, for instance, are most important for success, but would be nothing without a consistent artistic project – however, also the opposite is true. Likewise, choosing a particular art trend that meets one of the influent gatekeeper's taste and ideology is both an artistic and relational strategy. An aspiring artist – more than anyone in the art system – must work on all four key resources together, because they are all mutually necessary and of real advantage on the difficult path to the final breakthrough.

Art system, players, gatekeepers, legitimacy and entry barriers, capital and key resources, strategies and actions: the scene is set to start retracing the first steps of Douglas Gordon's very successful career.

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