From Tenth Street to Studio 54: On the Social Life of Creatives

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In her recent book *The Warhol Economy*, Elizabeth Currid proposes that "cultural economies operate differently from other industries" such as "finance, law and manufacturing" which tend towards a "formal, rigid" set of institutional arrangements.[1] While an agglomeration of firms and labour pools can be an asset in any industry, in the case of artistic and other types of cultural production, spatial proximity and face-to-face social interaction become the "decisive mechanism[s] by which cultural products and cultural producers are generated, evaluated and sent to the market."[2] We see this, argues Currid, from the very different kinds of geographies occupied by creative—as against traditional—industries:

> The cultural economy operates far from the boardrooms and sky-scrapers that pack Manhattan's geography. The evaluation of culture occurs in the tents in Bryant Park during Fashion Week, the galleries in Chelsea, the nightlife of the Lower East Side, or the clandestine nooks in Soho, Chelsea, or the Meat packing District that house nightclubs, lounges, and restaurants, with bouncers who could be mistaken for Secret Service agents. In these haunts—often exclu-sive—the cultural economy works most efficiently.[3]

Since the creative scenes that Currid depicts sound more like an episode of *Sex in the City* than a description of the historic avant-gardes, including those, like the Abstract Expressionists, who called New York City home, it

begs the question: is the emphasis on "sociability" and "connectivity" a distinguishing feature of contemporary creatives? Or is there a longer historical pattern of social networking associated with artistic production?

The decisive transformation in the social life of artists arguably took place with the weakening of the medieval guilds and the passage of creative personnel from being a craftsman or an artisan to being "an artist."[4] With this transformation in the role of the artist came an accompanying set of new institutions, the most notable having been the Paris based *Académie de Peinture et de Sculpture* founded in 1648. As Victoria Alexander puts it, the *Academy* was established "as an alternative to the medieval guild system" and led to one institution controlling most of the rewards associated with artistic production, such as "artists' apprenticeships and training, exhibition space … prizes for the best pieces and eventually election to an academic chair."[5] The exhibitions were particularly important. They created the opportunity to buy and sell artworks on the market independent of patronage. The exhibitions also established a space in which sociability and commerce worked in combination:

> [The] exhibition called the *Salon* was held once a year … Huge crowds of people came to the *Salons*, which were important socially, as well as aesthetically. Collectors and purchasers came to socialize and to buy.[6]

In this first instance, then, formal and informal social relations existed side by side. However, as the *Academy* was eclipsed by the more impersonal social system of dealers, critics and buyers, informal social relations became much more prominent than formal, institutional ones. Thus in their study of the rise of Impressionism in France during the second half of the nineteenth century Harrison and Cynthia White note that strong associations existed between the leading painters of the movement during the period of most intense technical innovation.[7] Impressionists met each other and developed close friendships. Van Gogh and Gauguin even briefly shared a house during a tumultuous but very productive period of their working lives. Most of the Impressionists also developed their techniques at a distance from the *Academy* and other formal institutions of art. As such, it could be said that the Impressionist revolution in painting was, at least partly, the "result of the social structure of their group and the circumstances of their work in partial isolation from the official system and its styles."[8]

Diana Crane suggests that the Impressionists resembled many other modern artistic avant-gardes in having been made up of a "small solidarity group surrounded by a looser association of critics, dealers, and buyers

who provided recognition, sympathy, and encouragement."[9] In this respect, the great avant-gardes of the modern period could be said to have involved social circles where intimate, face-to-face interactions were the norm. Given that many avant-garde styles initially met with hostile rejection, if not "colossal ridicule from the existing artistic establishment," these tightly knit groups were an important source of "solidarity" for artists and their closest supporters.[10]

This then is one of the major ironies of artistic modernism: namely, that groups that cultivated "abstract" artistic languages in cosmopolitan, metropolitan settings should have been based on intense, communal and friendship-based patterns of social life. Raymond Williams offers one very plausible explanation for why artistic modernists may have assumed this sociological pattern. He suggests that having migrated to the major global metropolises—such as Paris, Vienna, Berlin, London and New York—artists and other creative personnel were liberated from their "national and provincial cultures" and the attendant "native languages or native visual traditions."[11] Instead of the familiar, modernists were confronted by the "strangeness" of "crowded streets" and other phenomena "unknown to the observer."[12] Williams quips that, during early or "classical" modernism, "artists, writers and thinkers of this phase found the only community available to them: the community of the medium, of their own practices."[13]

These authors seem to share the view then that artistic modernism led to social circles of great importance. However, the shift from formal institutions—like the *Academy* and its *Salon*—to informal social circles of "like-minded" artists is an important transformation in the manner in which social circles were organised. Thus, in her study of post-war New York art worlds, Crane suggests that they evolved from "intimate face-to-face networks" to something that functioned as "acquaintance network[s] … whose members were linked to one another through indirect as well as direct ties, which permitted information and ideas to spread through the entire group."[14] She claims that while the latter may have fuzzy boundaries, since it is impossible to "visualize the entire network," such social circles are, often, much more effective than "formal organisational structures."[15]

This is why, in the case of Abstract Expressionism, galleries, rather than museums, played such an important role—and the role of the gallery was social as much as aesthetic or commercial. Crane suggests that, during the emergence of key post-war styles, "galleries played a role as foci for social interaction amongst artists" and that the significance of galleries "appeared to increase over time."[16] For example, many of the Abstract Expressionists ran cooperative galleries on East Tenth Street, an area where many of them also lived. In an essay written in 1954, entitled "Tenth Street:

A Geography of Modern Art," the art critic Harold Rosenberg compared the urban spaces occupied by the post-war avant-garde to their earlier Greenwich Village bohemian counterparts. He suggested that if Greenwich Village was an "imitation of Paris," East Tenth Street was decidedly "anti-picturesque."[17] Rosenberg added that "[e]verything on Tenth Street [wa]s one of a kind" and described the urban milieu in these terms:

> [A] liquor store with a large 'wino' clientele; up a flight of iron steps, a foreign-language-club restaurant; up another flight, a hotel-workers' employment agency; in a basement, a pool room; in another, something stored; in the middle of the block, a metal-stamping factory with a 'modernistic' pea green cement and glass brick front; on the Fourth Avenue Corner, to be sure, an excavation.[18]

In *The Painted Word* Tom Wolfe labelled the very same art scene "Cultureburg," after the art critic Clement Greenberg. He claimed that the social world of Tenth Street operated in the following manner:

> Two of the main meeting places, the Subjects of the Artist School and The Club, were on East Eighth Street, and the other, the Cedar Tavern, was on University Place. But the galleries that showed their work, such as the Area and the Hilda Carmel, were on Tenth Street, and that was the name that caught on. Within *le monde*, "going down to Tenth Street" was … [a] pilgrimage … In any event, this *cénacle* was soon so big and so influential that regular Friday night meetings at The Club became like town meetings for the entire New York art scene.[19]

Wolfe describes the participants in this social world as a combination of "dealers, collectors, uptown curators … critics, and just about any other *culturati* who could wrangle their way in"[20] (emphasis added). What is interesting is that, as this social world grew in size and attracted increased attention, what had been an intimate circle of artists and close supporters grew to include members who had direct as well as indirect social relations with each other.

As Crane puts it, the various art scenes that were dominant in post-war New York tended to involve small groups "in the early stages of the development of a style… [and] tended to be short-lived."[21] The type of group she has in mind revolved around individuals such as de Kooning, Pollock, Reinhart and Newman (in the case of Abstract Expressionism) and Johns, Rauschenberg, Oldenburg and Lichenstein (in the case of Pop Art). These small circles also provided a "platform" for art theorists, such as Greenberg and Rosenberg, to exercise "absolute authority" within the artistic subcul-

ture in question.[22] But if Crane is correct, these small cliques usually evolved into something resembling a larger "acquaintance network." The trajectory was therefore for the "artistic milieu" to shift "from a tightly-knit counterculture to a set of relatively transient, interlocking subcultures."[23]

Enter Andy Warhol. He eschewed the tight-knit counterculture model of the Abstract Expressionists and early Pop Artists. As Elizabeth Wilson puts it in her study *Bohemians: Glamorous Outcasts*, "by 1963 Warhol's Factory studio was becoming the focus of a new kind of scene."[24] The Factory was "open to anyone and everyone" and became a social "stage on which hustlers and drag queens encountered the New York art world and street life met up with society debutantes and Harvard hipsters."[25] It was a world where "decadence became a lifestyle and voyeurism an art form" and glamour cast a "spell" over all of the activities taking place.[26] Another commentator describes it as "a subterranean world of beautiful people and geniuses and poseurs, the obsessed and the bored, who had at last come into their glamorous own."[27]

Warhol's attitude to art and his own philosophy of life tended to support the identity of art world with social world and vice versa.[28] He celebrated mass culture, the cult of celebrity and surfaces or the superficial. With his signature silver-blonde hair and "minimal persona," he also linked his artistic output very closely with his own personality. Wilson also comments that "art and life" merged at The Factory "as one continual performance, reaching new heights when the Velvet Underground created multimedia events at which all boundaries were abandoned."[29] She further suggests that some of the weirder occurrences, such as when "Valerie Solanas shot Warhol," fitted perfectly within the logic of the Factory and could be construed as "the ultimate Happening."[30]

For Richard Florida, Warhol's Factory epitomised that creativity was an "inescapably social process … frequently exercised in collective terms."[31] He suggests that for all the personal posturing and the felt need to "cultivate a public image of bemused indifference, [Warhol] was a prolific organiser and worker—mobilizing friends and colleagues to publish a magazine and produce films and music, all while pursuing his own art."[32] This taps into one of the sociological constants in Western culture since the advent of Romanticism: namely, that leisure has been seen as important as work, consumption as valid as creativity, within various artistic subcultures. Indeed, Romanticism allowed for the modern "myth of the artist" (and later for an ideology of "mass consumerism") to emerge by providing a "philosophy of 'recreation'" and by "legitimat[ing] the search for pleasure as good in itself."[33] Thus, creatives—from the Romantics through to Warhol—have perceived the act of styling oneself and the act of creating original products

as possibly having much more in common than critics of mass consumerism have acknowledged.

For Currid the career and aesthetic outlook of Warhol exemplified the "dynamics" of creative production in a city like New York "more than anyone."[34] She especially credits the artist with perceiving that "fashion, art, film, music, and design did not reside in separate spheres" and that "sharing ideas and resources across creative sectors" was a huge asset for artists and other creative personnel.[35] Through his idea of "business art," Warhol also foresaw what the economist Richard Caves has termed the new "contracts between art and commerce";[36] alliances that would become routine in the age of post-industrialism or a form of capitalism in which culture is a central engine of the economy. Currid adds:

> Warhol also saw the significance of the social spaces in which these industries and creative people interacted — his Factory merged cultural production with a social scene. And he demonstrated that this scene was instrumental in generating real economic value through its social cachet. And thus, the social and economic dynamics exhibited within [this] artistic and cultural world are very much the Warhol economy.[37]

Currid suggests there is no better example of the effects of this social logic upon artistic careers than the meteoric rise of Jean-Michel Basquiat. The latter went from being an anonymous graffiti artist to a leading figure in the Neo-Expressionist movement of the 1980s by virtue of installing himself within the East Village art and social scene of that period, and through his chance encounters in social situations with Warhol and gallery owner, Mary Boone, "who catapulted his career."[38]

In this respect, the social logic of creativity is both patterned and based on "serendipity." Going to the right parties, hanging out in the right nightclubs, can increase the chances of success, but even in a city like New York there is no guarantee that "tastemakers" or fellow creatives will take an interest in one's work. The role of serendipity simply highlights the significance of acquaintance and informal networks. Currid expresses her hypothesis regarding the operations of the "Warhol economy" in the following terms:

> [I]n the cultural economy, the informal social realm is the center of action ... Social interactions are essential to the overall production system, and the very concept of what an "institution" is (it's not a university, the government, or a trade association) must be rethought with respect to the creative economy. Art and culture operate in a different capacity… How is it possible that many of those I

spoke with keep running into people who happen to have jobs or projects for them? ... How come a party or nightclub in New York City becomes a career or business opportunity?[39]

Currid's assessment of how these networks function owes a great deal to the writings of the American sociologist, Mark Granovetter. In a much cited essay entitled "The Strength of Weak Ties," Granovetter makes the interesting claim that often the most effective social connections are weaker or more distant ties.[40] He reached this observation by conducting empirical research into how people find employment. His interviewees told him that they often secured jobs through acquaintances rather than friends. This led Granovetter to conclude: "The contention here is that removal of the average weak tie would do more damage to transmission probabilities than would that of the average strong one."[41] "Transmission probabilities" refers here to the capacity to diffuse information and innovation, including the ability to bridge small-scale interactions with large-scale contexts. Currid takes Granovetter's "strength of weak ties" argument to have special validity for the case of creatives: "No market relies more heavily on social networks than the exchange of cultural goods."[42] She proposes that this is in part explained by the complexity of interactions involved in the supply and dissemination of cultural goods, as well as by the fact that creative industries are driven by the logic of taste and novelty over criteria such as proficiency or trust.

But, to the extent that Currid wants to emphasise the urban character of the social networks that drive creative production in a city like New York, she feels the need to supplement the views of Granovetter with those of urbanist Jane Jacobs. From the latter Currid takes the argument that the most successful cities are those in which the city's structure facilitates "new combinations" of social and economic life. Urban life is most "amenable to serendipity … unexpected meetings and social exchanges when streets lend themselves to a variety of functions, what Jacobs called 'mixed uses,' housing, restaurants, stores, and so forth."[43] Such urban interactions are particularly noticeable in the night-time economy of New York where the "tight-knit nightlife scene," argues Currid, "directs the fashion, music and art industries towards the hippest, trendiest place to hang out" giving urban creative social circles a "capricious, at times ephemeral" quality.[44]

However, the significance of nightlife to urban creative enclaves means that cultural production has a temporal as well as spatial pattern. From the nineteenth century onwards, bohemian life has always been associated with night-time and nocturnal pleasures. Here the contrast to the bourgeoisie and its work ethic—which requires a disciplined approach to time and a preference for daytime work activities—is most stark.[45] As

Hempker and Koopman note in their study of creatives in the Netherlands, blurring the boundaries between work and leisure, day and night, is a fundamental aspect of the lives of creative personnel:

> Meeting like-minded people, a characteristic of the night, is perhaps more important in the world of creativity than among other entrepreneurs. The creative industry often contains people who are opposed to a nine-to-five mentality. They do not separate their private life from their work. Appointments overlap. Work-related meetings take place in the entertainment circuit … [with] friends dropping in during working hours. The lifestyle is polychromic … rather than monochromic.[46]

Florida concurs that nightlife "is an important part of the mix."[47] However, he also points to the "polychromic" rather than "monochromic" quality of the temporal experiences of creatives by suggesting that they place a high value on "third places"—neither home nor work but "venues like coffee shops, bookstores, cafes in which we find less formal acquaintances."[48] These places are "polychromic" to the extent that they encourage a more-than-one-activity-at-a-time attitude. Florida says that "third spaces" are seen as important by creatives for the "vibe" and "company" they provide, as well as for the opportunity to "connect" and "observe." Connecting to the outside world is arguably very important for creative people as they keep unusual work schedules and often spend large chunks of time in isolation.[49]

But since social spaces seem to be important to postmodern creatives, are they all equally effective in promoting creativity? Currid's *The Warhol Economy* includes a chapter, entitled "The Economics of the Dance Floor," and one often gets the feeling when reading her book that she thinks the true site of creativity in postmodern New York was never Warhol's Factory but rather Steve Rubells', famous but short-lived nightclub, Studio 54. Indeed, on the famous opening night, such glamorous creatives as Andy Warhol, Calvin Klein, Mick and Bianca Jagger, Liza Minelli, Margaux Hemingway, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Salvador Dali, Brooke Shields, Michael Jackson, Deborah Harry, and the legendary Martha Graham, attended the nightclub in question. Again, it was a question of social world trumping art world, and glamour replacing genius as the focal point for veneration.

However, Florida's own empirical research tends to dispel the myth that high-level creativity might have taken place at Studio 54. He concludes on the basis of interviews with thousands of creatives that while night-time options are highly prized, all-night partying was seen as conflicting with the value that creatives attach to work-time and the routines associated with

creative work. Creatives often described not being able to afford the "recovery time" associated with drugs or alcohol. Florida also reports that, on the whole, the "highest-rated night life options were cultural attractions … and late-night dining… Bars, large dance clubs and after-hours clubs ranked much further down the list."[50] Interestingly, much of *The Rise of the Creative Class* taps into the emergence of a new kind of creative mythical figure—the "geek"—rather than the promethean-cum-bohemian artist.

Florida's empirical insights into just what kinds of nocturnal leisure activities postmodern creatives prefer tend to suggest—somewhat contrarily to Currid—that the sociological factors that foster creativity cannot be reduced to stereotypical images of artistic bohemians as 24/7 party animals. The felt need for stimulation and contact with other people or a certain vibe is plausible enough, but the creative process itself often resembles work more than leisure (or, at least, it does not resemble undisciplined leisure). Creativity demands routines, continuity and the application of skilled technique. Indeed, as Peter Murphy has recently argued, being constantly engaged with the rest of the world can be counterproductive, in that "when work becomes fragmented and concentration is spread in multiple directions, the casualty is imaginative thinking and creativity that require long gestation and periods of intense, uninterrupted focus."[51] He suggests that the equation between art and leisure can often be misleading and is one of the unfortunate remnants of German Idealism and its Romantic offshoots. The shortcomings of seeing creativity as "free play" becomes even more acute in a society where electronic and digital communications are predominant, as such technologies "habitually speed things up" and tend to make interruptions to the creative process an ever present danger.[52]

Florida seems cognisant of what Murphy is criticising within the discourse of boundless creativity in post-industrial, knowledge societies, when he states that "creativity flourishes best" in an environment that is "stable enough to allow for continuity of effort, yet diverse and broadminded enough to nourish creativity."[53] In a sense, creativity is a very particular kind of playful activity—what the social psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi terms a process centred on being able to attain a state of "flow."[54] Implicit in the notion of "flow" is the idea that creativity, and for that matter life in general, require some degree of focused attention:

> Unfortunately, the nervous system has definite limits on how much information it can process at any given time. There are just so many 'events' that can appear in consciousness and be recognized and handled before they begin to crowd each other out … Thoughts have to follow each other, or they get jumbled. We cannot run, sing, and balance the checkbook simultaneously, because each one of

these activities exhausts most of our capacity for attention.[55]

This model of creativity and human consciousness flies in the face of Romantic notions of "genius" and "bohemian excess" in that it sees boundaries and the setting of cognitive limits as fundamental. Indeed, what Romantics tend to see as a Promethean capacity for countless hours of work might also be explained by the necessary bounded nature of "flow"—it is only when or after one is in the "zone" that such a feat becomes possible. The likelihood of such a process beginning or continuing while at a night-club is open to question.

Csikszentmihalyi's theory of creativity accords with the insights of that tradition of social science thinking that might be labelled "frame theory." From anthropologists such as Gregory Bateson and psychologists such as Howard Gardner through to microsociologists such as Erving Goffman and Eviatar Zerubavel a constant refrain has been that the organisation of experience revolves around a "focus that includes a wide swath or a narrow one … a focus that is close-up or distant."[56] Before these authors, the phenomenologist Alfred Schutz had already referred to social life as consisting of "multiple realities."[57] In order for reality to be experienced in a particular way, something must happen, what Schutz terms a "transformation" and Goffman calls "being keyed in." Thus in the theatre the curtain rises to "signify the transition into the world of the stageplay"; similarly, the "passage into the pictorial world" requires the social actor permitting their gaze to be "limited by what is within the frame."[58]

Creativity, more than most cognitive activities, requires a high degree of framing, even if, paradoxically, closing oneself off to some things is what opens up the possibility of meaningful contacts with others. Thus a visit to one's favourite café can provide the creative person with either a necessary break or a stimulus for prolonging creative activity. But working, while at the café, is a very different kettle of fish. It will require the ability to tune out or to separate out creating from non-creating and vice versa.

Some creative people have reported that the café can offer the kind of privacy or what Goffman terms "protective shields" that allow for focused attention to take place. In his autobiographical reflections, the English author, Christopher Isherwood, recounts that he favoured writing in cafes during his time in Berlin in the 1920s, because these spaces "gave him a soothing sense of privacy … it was actually easier to concentrate than when he was by himself. He was alone, yet not alone."[59] But the ability to focus his attention in such a concerted manner was dependent on being able to "move in and out" of the "world" of the café "at will."[60] Without this capacity to "move in and out" of such an urban public context, it is likely that Isherwood would not have found the setting of the café so conducive to

writing.

Another way of saying what Isherwood observed regarding the ability to work in a café is that the lifestyle of the creative class is not the same thing as the kind of life that allows creatives to do creative work. At times, these two processes may actually work in opposition to each other. Thus, what Richard Lloyd and Terry Nichols Clark have termed "The City as Entertainment Machine" is more about the "extent to which Yuppies" turned to the "aesthetic practices of artists for their cultural cues."[61] But these same processes could be said to have fuelled the gentrification of urban areas such as SoHo and East Village in Manhattan that have now, paradoxically, priced many artists out of the New York real estate market. The same thing has happened in many cities throughout the world. Currid   acknowledges this when she writes that one of the greatest challenges associated with maintaining New York City's status as a creative metropolis is the "city's prohibitive cost of living" and what she sees as the "city's punitive approach toward night life."[62] The second of these matters, according to Florida, not necessarily because creatives prefer nightclubs to late-night dining (he argues they do not), but rather because the presence of a healthy and tolerant nightlife is taken by creatives as a sign that a particular city "gets it."[63] He labels this feature the creative or artistic city as *gestalt*.

But what of Currid's sociability thesis? The claim that success in artistic and other cultural worlds is dependent on the ability of economic agents to tap into the "skill sets of weak ties" seems plausible enough. However, Currid's observation that in the Warhol economy "art and culture operate in a constant state of 'hypersocialization'"[64] requires, as I have indicated, some fine-tuning. Indeed, sociological theory may provide the necessary tools with which to theorise the kind of sociability in question through the writings of turn-of-the-last-century author, Georg Simmel.[65]

Simmel argues that sociability is the most *autonomous* or pure *play-form* of social interaction precisely because it involves "the regulatory function" of *tact* and the individual is expected to "draw limits" upon the "claims" he imposes on others, by virtue of his or her "impulses, ego-stresses, and intellectual and material desires."[66] In short, for Simmel, sociable interaction is governed by the "form" of the interaction rather than its "contents." Indeed, the more free sociability is of those desires and factors that originally spawned it, the more it is "bound to exhibit the nature of play, or more deeply, of art."[67] But its playful or art-like quality should not deceive us into thinking that sociability is entirely frivolous. Simmel proposes it is "precisely the more serious person who derives from sociability a feeling of liberation and relief."[68] We might hypothesise that for such a serious person, for example a person whose life is entirely governed by a vocation, sociability is

a "relief"—in Simmel's terms—precisely because it complements the organised and ritualised aspects of everyday or workaday existence.

Thus, to Currid's proposal that sociability is functional or instrumental to one's career as a creative person, we might add the Simmelean insight that it is perhaps the exceptional character of sociable interactions that makes them more appealing to creatives. Furthermore, there is a relationship between the "private" and "public" negotiations of a creative life that complicate our stereotypical images of creative "social worlds," events as baroque gatherings full of air-kisses and meaningless gossip. As I have argued in another essay and has also been documented in various ethnographies of art schools, the art world—a specific but very illustrative example of a social world inhabited by creatives—has proven to be very effective in socialising its members into thinking that its social networks are "Society" and vice versa (that is, that society is no more than the social networks that make up the art world).[69] As Simon Frith and Howard Horne noted in their sociological study of British art schools and why they had also succeeded in producing so many successful creatives in the worlds of popular music and fashion (for example, recent British creatives such as Brian Eno, Malcolm Maclaren, Keith Richards and Vivienne Westwood): "The art school experience is about commitment to a working practice, to a mode of learning which assumes the status of lifestyle … Art is everything. Art is Life."[70] Again, the conclusion one could reach is that the social connections associated with creativity become synonymous with "Society" for those involved.

No doubt, creatives take to what Simmel termed the "art of sociability" as proverbial "ducks to water." As experts in symbols they no doubt relish the opportunity to engage in social performances that carry a high degree of artifice. But if Simmel is correct that sociability becomes more artful the more autonomous its forms, then there is no necessary correlation or homology between sociability and creative work *per se.* Missing from the accounts offered by Currid and Florida is the sense that creatives may actually find sociability burdensome or unnecessarily distracting from their vocational pursuits. However, if we see sociability in terms of Simmel's sociology, then it is not necessary to imagine that creatives are inherently sociable people or more sociable than other occupational groups. Indeed, Simmel argues that it was in the court society of the *Ancien Régime* rather than in the clubs or associations of modern occupational groups that we find the logic of sociability expressed in its purest form:

> The fact that the autonomy of such forms is bound to exhibit the nature of play or, more deeply, of art, becomes even more striking in the courtly society of the *Ancien Régime*. Here, the disappearance of any concrete content of life … resulted in the emergence of cer-

tain freely suspended forms… The etiquette of courtly society had
become a value in itself. It no longer referred to any content; it had
developed its own intrinsic laws, which were comparable to the laws
of art. The laws of art are valid only in terms of art: by no means
have they the purpose of imitating the reality of the models, of things
outside of art itself.[71]

The kind of logic of sociability that Simmel describes for court society
is perhaps resembled most closely within the contemporary social worlds of
creatives by art world events such as the Venice Biennale. In her wonderful
new ethnography of the contemporary art world, entitled *Seven Days in the
Art World*, sociologist-turned-advertising executive-and-now-freelance art
journalist, Sarah Thornton, writes of the event:

> The Biennale, set in one of the most beautiful cities in the world, of-
> ten feels strange and stagy. Just arriving in Venice and bumping into
> people one knows can inaugurate the event … Many say that the
> business of the Biennale really only gets rolling with a Bellini, the
> Prosecco-and-peach-puree cocktail … I met an acquaintance for this
> ritual drink at a hotel bar with a large terrace on the Grand Canal.
> Scattered amongst the outdoor tables were many familiar faces from
> the New York, LA, London, and Berlin art worlds.[72]

Thornton points out that not all participants in these art world events
are equal. She suggests that with "34,000 VIP and press passes issued for
the four-day event, the Biennale is the world's largest assembly of art world
insiders and their observers … [and] the gatherings oscillate between the
idiosyncratically inclusive and the callously exclusive."[73] One curator de-
scribes the event as "to be in the middle of things; but to be at the center of
nothing."[74] Another suggests the Venice Biennale is a case of the "avant-
garde in a fishbowl."[75]

But in keeping with the themes of this paper, no one goes to such
events to do any actual creative work. Indeed, most of the artworks on dis-
play are also not for sale. One of Thornton's interviewees puts the logic of
the event this way: "It's not just that people hope that they'll have a moving
experience with an artwork or a chance meeting with their favorite artist in a
hotel bar … Everyone is secretly hoping that something beautiful will hap-
pen to them."[76] It is tempting to describe events such as the Venice Bien-
nale as artworks in and of themselves; a situation where the aesthetic ex-
perience extends to one's role in sociability and its various cultural expres-
sions.

Simmel understood that sociability involved play-acting and the treat-
ing of all others as equals within the confines of a world that is otherwise

exclusive. He hit upon the fact that, in order for the social world of sociability to function properly, each participant had to leave rank behind, as well as the concerns and pressures of everyday existence. Interestingly, he cautioned that whenever sociability attains "its most sovereign expression" it simultaneously comes "close[st] to being its own caricature."[77] Images of elite-level gatherings, such as the Venice Biennale, tend to reinforce the glamour associated with contemporary creatives and no doubt serve to reinforce the high prices paid by the art market for the works produced by art world superstars. But these kinds of social gatherings also feed the suspicion that creativity is increasingly about gaining entry into rarefied social worlds rather than any innate talent or the inherent value of one's creative outputs. This is perhaps unfair. However, as long as creatives and the social scientists researching them—such as Currid and Florida—cultivate images of art and cultural production as driven almost entirely by social networking, the public can be forgiven for thinking that "who you know" is much more important than "what you know" or "what you are good at."

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NOTES

[1] Elizabeth Currid, *The Warhol Economy: How Fashion, Art and Music Drive New York City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 4.

[2] Currid, *The Warhol Economy*, 4.

[3] Currid, *The Warhol Economy*, 4.

[4] Bernice Martin, *A Sociology of Contemporary Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), 85.

[5] Victoria Alexander, *Sociology of the Arts: Exploring Fine and Popular Forms* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 84.

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