
Article

The Society for the Arts of Corporation: An invitation

Henry S. Turner

English Department, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ.

Abstract This essay explains the thinking behind 'The Society for the Arts of Corporation,' a non-profit organization for scholars and members of the general public that encourages research into public art pertaining to the nature of corporations as group persons and models of political life. The essay takes up the problem of 'art' and of 'generalization' as procedures for thinking and working with ideas, arguments and materials of all kinds, comparing these to classical discussions of *ars* and *techne* and to the work of Sidney, Bacon and Shakespeare.

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Recently, after several years of research on the history and theory of corporations – on what could be described quite aptly, in fact, as the 'postmedieval corporation' – I decided that the time had come for a practical experiment: a test of arguments that had come to organize my thinking. This test, I hoped, like any experiment worth undertaking, might suddenly throw open consequences unforeseen and new problems for further reflection. But my work on the 'postmedieval' corporation immediately implied an additional premise. For the point was not simply to argue, to reflect and to consider. It was to act and to do; or, it was to evaluate to what extent arguing, reflecting and considering could become modes of acting and doing, and especially public forms of acting and doing. 'Public': the term is indispensable to our political thought. And yet despite sustained collaborative work on 'public knowledge' with colleagues from several fields,

and despite having just written an entire book on corporations that was, in a roundabout way, also about the nature of a public idea (Turner, 2016), I felt that I did not yet fully grasp what the limits and varieties of public institutions, public speech or public actions might be.

To this list, I should add a fourth idea: public ‘art.’ The term ‘art’ is a complicated one, as any medievalist understands; the very topic of *Critical/Liberal/Arts* addresses itself directly to this difficulty. Like many medievalists and early modernists, I refer to ‘art’ in its classical sense, where *ars* or *techne* is both a mode of thinking and a mode of doing. It is a practical skill, a knack, a facility with materials and forms of all kinds: with speech and with ideas; with speech and ideas formed into arguments; with matter; even with circumstances and situations. ‘Talent,’ Jean Genet once wrote, is ‘courtesy toward matter’ (Genet, 1949, 123). It is a perfect definition of art, too. Art always demands an occasion. And it is, as a consequence, always an *open* procedure; it emerges from the contingency of circumstances and the dispositions that it finds. Art is thus also an infinite procedure, indeed, about which it is impossible to ‘theorize,’ as the ancient rhetoricians and the Renaissance poets understood. It describes the habits of thinking and operating we develop when we have proceeded beyond a collection of ‘mere’ particulars, only to find that we are not yet in a position to think in terms of universal propositions. We are no longer merely doing, acting or making without reason or purpose, and yet we are not able to create a geometry; this is not because we are incapable of doing so, but because the nature of the material or the occasion makes this theoretical work impossible. Rhetoric or medicine are ‘arts’ because they are modes of *circumstantiated* knowledge, and circumstances are by definition infinite, as Quintilian (or George Gascoigne or George Puttenham) are quick to remind us. About ‘art’ we cannot prescribe definitively: we can only begin to *generalize*.

This predicament may also be phrased more optimistically, however, to say that in these situations we are *always* able to generalize, once we have learned to do so. When the object of our creative generalizations is ‘nature,’ and we use natural forms and substances to invent those generalizations, then our art is called ‘science’ – and we find that the art itself is nature, as Polixenes declares in *The Winter’s Tale* (Shakespeare, 1963, 4.4.97). When the object of our artful generalizations is people – their actions and speech – and the medium we use to generalize about people, actions and speech is, in turn, more people, actions, and speech, then we call our art ‘drama.’ If our medium is words, then we are the ‘peerless poet,’ as Sir Philip Sidney calls him, who ‘coupleth the general notion with the particular example’ (Sidney, 1973, 107.12–13). The astonishing thing is that Sidney’s famous description of poesy can also stand as a caption for Baconian method, which *also* issues in new names for new notions – Sidney’s *Apology* and Bacon’s *Novum Organon* stand as bookends for an entire sensibility toward ‘art’ that extends across literature and science throughout the entire postmedieval period. And so I offer the idea of generalization, in passing, as something essential to the idea of the ‘Critical Liberal Arts.’



As for myself, I had a particular group of problems pertaining to the nature of corporations that I wanted explore, and I wanted to explore them in this ‘artful’ way – I had come to suspect, indeed, that there is no other way to know anything, and that all knowledge is a form of ‘art’ in this sense. I wanted to begin generalizing about these problems in a deliberate and deliberative way; I wanted to do so collectively; and I wanted the process to remain an open one. The problems before me included:

1. the definition of a corporation: what characteristic features it might have; how widely the definition of a ‘corporate’ entity might extend; what types of groups or composite entities were not ‘corporate’ but merely aggregate and accidental;
2. the formal features that enable us to speak in a non-trivial way about corporate ‘personhood’ and its attributes: ideas about will and moral responsibility, goals and purpose, and even about affective features and styles of being that we associate with the idea of a ‘personality,’ when this is extended, however awkwardly, to a group or to an institution;
3. the relationship between a corporate ‘person’ and the long-standing idea of a corporate ‘body’; hence (more broadly), the relationship between various material circumstances or instantiations of corporate entities and their ideal, intellectual, fictional or nominal characteristics, as in the case of the name or the icon.

And so I decided to ‘institute,’ to use one of my favorite sixteenth-century words, a form within which one might begin to generalize about the nature of collective life and collective purpose, in such a way that this act of generalization might be pursued as a public practice. My *ultimate* goal in doing so was to explore a definition of the ‘political’ that had emerged out of my historical work on corporations. In this definition, the ‘political’ had come to mean, for me:

that which translates among the competing systems of value that underwrite all action, whether of an individual or a collective nature, and in this way establishes the ‘common’ as an open totality: a persistence in and through and even beyond the problem of difference.

I realize that this definition is a mouthful, but since I have so little space, I will have to let it stand here and refer readers to *The Corporate Commonwealth*. As abstract as it may be, I think it captures what all corporations do. For our ‘political’ life has never simply been a drama of states and citizens, and the representatives who putatively unite them: it unfolds across many scales of group life, enabled by many forms of collective association and common action, all of which undertake this process of translating among competing systems of value in a more or less open way.

So what is this ‘institution,’ the Society for the Arts of Corporation? The Society is a non-profit organization for academics, artists, and members of the general public who take an active interest in the problems related to corporation, incorporation, and corporateness. It is open to any person or organization who

wishes to participate in the life of the Society by encouraging the invention of ideas, the conduct of public acts, conversations, discussion, lectures, general debate and the making of works of art of all kinds pertaining to the nature of corporate association and corporate being, including specialized historical, philosophical and artistic research into:

- the composition and behavior of group formations, of all kinds, at all scales, and of whatever kinds of members, whether natural or artificial;
- the definition, characteristics, and potential of corporate persons;
- the nature of corporate speech, corporate action and corporate governance;
- the political implications and political potential of corporate groups, corporation persons and their attributes;
- the intellectual, scholarly, historical and artistic forms best suited to the investigation of problems pertaining to corporation and incorporation and their communication to the public.

The Society for the Arts of Corporation is an experiment in the nature of the group person and it will be, I hope, something genuinely collective. Membership is open to anyone, of whatever profession, expertise or education, with the only proviso that it may not be anonymous. Membership is entirely voluntary and by participation only: there are no dues, and no purchase or payment may be made to secure membership. Donations and contributions to the corporation must be in the form of a public act, or a qualitative work of scholarship or art, taking 'art' not only in the sense of 'fine art' or 'creative art' (although they, too, are included) but in the broader way that I have sketched above.

To become a member, two things only are required:

1. a Declaration and Oath of Membership, written by the person or representative of the group or entity who wishes to join the Society and which must be submitted to the Society's archives; and
2. the performance of at least one act per year, documented and submitted to the Society, which addresses the purposes of the Society in a public way.

The Declaration and Oath has no set form, voice or content: it may be brief or long, personal or impersonal, simple or complex. The point is to provoke a reflection on your purposes for joining the Society, to encourage you to think creatively about what form this declaration might best take, and to explore a voice or style that you think is most appropriate for its expression. Like the Declaration and Oath of Membership, a Member's annual act, work or event has no set form, type, scale, duration, content or material. It is to be undertaken according to the judgment of each individual member (and a Member may of course perform more than one). However, each act, work or event should be destined for the Society, that is, it should be undertaken in such a way that it affirms membership in the Society and the intent to further its purposes. Members should understand that deliberation about what might constitute an 'appropriate



purpose,’ that is, about activities that are somehow characteristic of corporate-ness, itself constitutes one of the Society’s main activities and interest. Documentation for acts or events may be as simple as a written description of the occasion, form and content; they may also be otherwise recorded. Further information on how to become a member of the Society may be found at the Society’s website: www.artsofcorporation.org.

The Society is a living organization in which members may examine and experiment with the nature of corporate entities of all kinds in a creative way, without presumption of consensus, agreement or uniformity of approach. It may be understood as a *mimesis* of the corporation, an imitative act that recreates the corporation in a new form: a theater of collective life, a sprawling poem written in the many voices of its members, a sculpture built of manufactured circumstances, a strike that pits one corporate form against another. As the Society proceeds, it will be incorporating itself legally, but it will also be exploring the hypothesis that legal forms of incorporation are a sufficient but not a necessary condition for corporateness, which may result from a range of activities or phenomena that cannot be adequately described by referring to legal concepts and technical legal instruments. Some members may choose to join the process of planning, describing, discussing, writing and filing the charter, bylaws, tax-reporting and other documentation necessary to the formation of the Society as a legal corporation and to the annual disclosure of its activities, in as much detail and with as much considered deliberation as is necessary in order to conduct its activities in a manner appropriate to the Society’s continued existence and with the integrity necessary to the Society’s purpose. Others may choose to engage in activities that press the premises of the Society to their limits.

The IRS distinguishes between entities that are true corporations, or collective associations of persons engaged in a common activity, and individuals who simply surround themselves with associates. The distinction is an interesting one: are we talking about something that deserves to be called an ‘institution,’ or are we talking about something more dubious, self-serving, and even disreputable: a gang, or a kind of organized crime? The Society for the Art of Corporation awaits this determination. I invite you to join it: www.artsofcorporation.org.

About the Author

Henry S. Turner teaches in the English Department at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. He is the author of *The Corporate Commonwealth: Pluralism and Political Fictions in England, 1516–1651* (Chicago, 2016), *Shakespeare’s Double Helix* (Continuum, 2008) and *The English Renaissance Stage: Geometry, Poetics, and the Practical Spatial Arts* (Oxford, 2006) (E-mail: henry.turner@rutgers.edu).

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