Nathalie Heinich

Let us try to understand each other

Reply to Crane, Laermans, Marontate and Schinkel

Nathalie Heinich, currently holder of the Boekman Chair in the Sociology of Art at the University of Amsterdam, presented her methodological concept in a public lecture entitled, 'What is an artistic event? A new approach to the sociological discourse', which was published in *Boekmancahier* 44. This was the start of a series of articles on her views about art sociology. Contributions by Rudi Laermans and Willem Schinkel were published in *Boekmancahier* 46, followed by Jan Marontate and Diana Crane in *Boekmancahier* 48. We now hand over to Nathalie Heinich. Below is her reply.

First of all, I want to thank the *Boekmancahier* for this rare opportunity to open a genuine discussion among sociologists: it is rare enough to deserve a special mention. Indeed, I guess my reply will convince the reader that such exchanges are really necessary, given the depth of some misunderstandings between us... I also want to thank those who took the time and trouble to react to my paper 'What is an Artistic Event?': Rudi Laermans, Willem Schinkel, Diana Crane and Jan Marontate.[1] The latter particularly deserves my gratitude for having tried to explicate the French intellectual context of my research: a context that she knows very well (perhaps better than us French, who are too closely involved in it to get a clear view of this landscape!), and that, owing to her description, appears to be more than relevant in understanding what is at stake – at least if I judge through the many misunderstandings of my propositions. Let us try to clarify some of them.

No, singularity is not individuality!

First of all, let us address a translation problem. In Laerman's paper, note number 4 states that 'For the purpose of general demystification, the editor of this article has translated the French expression [*"régime de singularité"*] as "regime of individuality", and used the English word "individual" rather than "singular" in an attempt to avoid confusion.' What a pity! Such a choice precisely destroys the very specificity of what I try to conceptualize, regarding in particular the artistic phenomena in modern times, the reflection on values, on ambivalence, etc. In French as in English, both terms – 'individuality' and 'singularity' – exist, each one corresponding to different meanings: 'individual' is commonly opposed to 'collective', and is not necessarily normative (be it valorising or pejorative); 'singular' is commonly opposed to 'commun' or 'universal', as a way to valorize or to dismiss something or someone. 'Singular' means more than 'specific'

(although the term is more and more widespread under this meaning among social scientists), and more than 'individual': it tends to designate what is '*hors du commun*', exceptional, bizarre, even abnormal. This is why I use the term 'singularity realm' ('*régime de singulorité*') to refer to a mode of qualification (definition *ond* valorization) that systematically favors those characteristics that the 'community realm' ('*régime de communouté*' – and not 'communality realm', as it has been translated), on the contrary, tends to dismiss. This is why it would be irrelevant to speak of an 'individuality realm': individuality is mainly a matter of description, not of value judgement.

It is all the more important that this semantic precision is grounded on the necessity to carefully distinguish between normative and descriptive propositions: see below my answers to Schinkel about my claim for neutrality, and to Laermans about my claim for symmetry. But before addressing these important issues, I would like to specify that – contrary to what Jan Marontate suggests – my commitment to the *concept* (I mean a real concept, not a vague notion) of singularity came directly from my empirical research on art (and primarily that on Van Gogh[2]), and not – unfortunately! – from any intellectual familiarity with the works of Gilles-Gaston Granger (although he was, as it happens, the director of the department of philosophy where I did my studies in Aix-en-Provence – but I was not interested at all in epistemology at the time) or Georges Cangilhem (although he was, incidentally, our neighbor in the family country house where I used to spend some holidays in a remote hamlet in the *Mossif centrol* – but I never had an opportunity to talk with him...).

No, my sociology is not that close to Becker's!

To illustrate this necessary distinction between individuality and singularity, and between description and evaluation, let us take a well-known example, which will allow me to reply to Diana Crane. When Howard Becker shows that artistic actions are mostly collective rather than individual, he describes a factual reality. When I try to understand how and why the actors tend to perceive artistic actions as mostly individual rather than collective, I refer to their commitment to the values of originality, capacity of innovation, and sometimes to their compassion for loneliness: that is, I describe a world of values, which is precisely the dimension of reality that Becker does not take into account (by the way, how can Crane assert that 'the actors' experience', as opposed to real facts, is but 'subjective reactions'? Is there no objectivity or regularity in people's actions and reactions? Is there no room at all between ontology and subjectivism? If so, I am afraid that there is no room at all for sociology!).

But 'describe', 'analyze' or even 'understand' does not mean 'valorize', contrary to what Crane seems to believe. And my interest for 'the entire imaginary and symbolic dimension of reality', as she puts it, is in no way an attempt to *reduce* art to this dimension: on the contrary, it is an attempt to *open* the sociological analysis, not only to the description of the real dimension, but also to the description and analysis of the representations (it is the 'anti-reductionist' attitude that I call for in *Ce que l'ort foit ò lo sociologie*[3]). And I study these representations not in order to 'demystify' them (see my answer to Schinkel below), but to understand what they mean for the actors, how coherent they are with their value system, if not with effective experience – exactly as an anthropologist does when analyzing primitive myths. This scope is the very opposite of

2. See: *The Glory of Van Gogh: an Anthropology of Admiration* (1996) Princeton University Press, (first French publication: 1991).

3. Paris: Minuit, 1998.

4. See: my comment of *Art Worlds*. In: *Boekmancahier*, n° 44, June 2aaa.

5. See: *Du peintre à l'artiste: artisans et académiciens à l'âge classique* (1993) Paris: Minuit. See also 'The Neo-Academic Realm'. In: *Baekmancahier*, n° 47, March 2aa1.

6. See: *Le Triple jeu de l'art contemporain: sociologie des arts plastiques* (1998) Paris: Minuit, and *L'Art contemporain exposé aux rejets: etudes de cas* (1998) Nîmes: Jacqueline Chamban. See also 'Outside Art and Insider Artists: Gauging public reactions to contemporary art'. In: Vera Zolberg, Joni Cherbo (eds.). *Outsider Art and Insider Artists* (1997). Cambridge University Press; 'From ejection of Contemporary Art to Culture War'. In: Michèle Lamont, Laurent Thévenat (eds.). *Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology: Repertoires of Evaluation in France and the United States* (2aaa). Cambridge University Press.

7. See: *L'Epreuve de la grandeur: prix littéraires et reconnaissance* (1999) Paris, La Découverte.

8. See: *Etre écrivain: création et identité* (2aaa) Paris: La Découverte.

Becker's 'skeptical', 'democratic' and 'demystifying' principles, as he states in his introduction to *Art Worlds*: because I think the sociologist does not have to take sides in the actors' beliefs and values, be it to approve or to dismiss them[4].

This change of intellectual position towards the sociological attitude leads to bringing up totally different issues and, of course, totally different outcomes. This is a reason why, contrary to what Crane suggests, I never focused my research on the scope to 'differentiate artists who are insiders or outsiders on the basis of geographical, social and cognitive criteria': neither in my analysis of Van Gogh's posthumous life, nor in my reconstruction of the history of artists' occupational status and evaluating systems[5], nor in my description of 'the threefold game of contemporary art' between the artists' works, the public's reactions and the mediators' actions[6], nor in my study of the way recognition affects writers[7], nor in my analysis of writers' identity[8]... And as for seeing my work as a will to demonstrate that 'the meanings of art works are embodied in the conventions that are used to create them', this is quite a drastic reduction: such a statement seems to me to be, at most, the starting point of analysis rather than its conclusion – unless one contents oneself with mere commonplaces.

No, sociology cannot be reduced to demystification!

Of course, such a reduction of the sociological discourse to the scope of evidencing conventions may appear legitimate if one considers, as Willem Schinkel, that 'The difference between sociology and other (related) disciplines is precisely this capacity to demystify' (p. 408): indeed, evidencing conventions normally leads to demystifying the actors' beliefs in the naturalness of social phenomena. But I must say that if this actually was the task of sociology, I would never be a sociologist: this is much too boring as an intellectual perspective!

The fact is that other disciplines may have the same kind of demystifying effects: anthropology, psychoanalysis, history... But neither those nor sociology could ever be reduced to such a poor scope! Can one really reduce Weber's analysis of the protestant ethics to a process of demystification, or Durkheim's analysis of suicide, or Goffman's analysis of interactions, or Elias's analysis of the control of violence? If so, what a shortsighted view of their work! Indeed, Bourdieu did a lot to demystify the actors' belief in the individual nature of taste and the innate nature of capacities (a perspective that seems to have become quite dominant in present-day sociology, since the editor of the paper took the liberty of translating 'singularity' by 'individuality' 'for the purpose of general demystification' – note 4) ; but all sociology is not reducible to Bourdieu's work – fortunately!

No, sociology does not have to be critical!

This issue directly leads us to another important misunderstanding of my positions in Schinkel's paper. When contesting my claim for 'axiological neutrality', he demonstrates several and – I must say – rather usual confusions.

The first one is the confusion between neutrality and objectivity: 'objectivity or neutrality', he writes (p. 405). But a fair or impartial judgement (objectivity) has nothing to do with the suspension of any judgement (neutrality): it is indeed the very contrary!

The second confusion is the one between suspending the value judgement (of the researcher) and refraining from analyzing value judgements (of the actors): 'These

judgements, according to Weber, are to be excluded from any scientific analysis' (p. 405). But suspending any value judgement never prevented a Weberian sociologist from analyzing the actors' value judgements: on the contrary, it is precisely the condition for such an analysis!

The third confusion is the one between 'values' as opinions and 'values' as mental categories: whereas Schinkel properly distinguishes between *Wertungsfreiheit* and *Wertfreiheit* in Weber's work (p. 405), he seems to confuse them when asserting that 'Any analysis is, by its very nature, non-neutral', 'any way of examining one's object means making a value judgement' (p. 405). Mental categories are of course unavoidable, in the social analyst's discourse as well as in the actors' discourse studied by the analyst: both of them belong to the same culture, and thus, share similar cognitive frames. But this is not a reason for the analyst to introduce his own personal opinions into the issues or controversies he studies! 'Axiological neutrality' does not mean transparency between the sociological discourse and reality. And knowing that this transparency is impossible, because our relationship to reality cannot be *wertfrei*, does not mean that suspending one's opinion – being *wertungsfrei* – is also impossible!

One cannot both understand the principles and logics of the actors' opinions, and try to express or argue one's own opinion: we have to choose between analyzing the actors' experience and inter-

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vening in that experience. I chose the first option: which means, among other things, that I don't pretend to be 'objective', but to be 'neutral'. Or at least, I try, as a researcher – even if I have, of course, opinions of my own as a citizen.

No, not all speech acts are normative!

This issue of neutrality is all the more important because the main misunderstanding of my positions comes from the implicit reduction of any speech act to a value judgement: that is, the confusion between the descriptive and the normative levels of discourse. This, I think, is the reason why Rudi Laermans – whom I have to thank, by the way, for his wide knowledge and his rather positive appreciation of my work – reproaches me for being 'remarkably incoherent', whereas this incoherence is but the result of his remarkable misinterpretation.

'Heinich thus urges sociology to acknowledge the primary moral belief in the particularity of a work of art, in the genius of a painter, or in the unique qualities of a new artistic movement. This conviction is indeed an ethical stance, for it implies a thorough commitment to the value of singularity' (p. 391); 'her legitimate plea for the sociological recognition of the regime of individuality [read "singularity"]' (p. 392); 'her defense of the regime of individuality [read "singularity"]' (p. 397); she tends to 'favour one particular evaluative register' (p. 397)... But I never tried to support any belief, nor to plead for any recognition, nor to defend any value! I just said that beliefs and values deserve to be studied, described, analyzed, understood by the sociologist. Does stating that the actors perceive art as singular, and trying to understand what it means for them, imply agreeing or disagreeing with them? No! No, because not all speech acts are normative! One can describe without judging. One can say 'people think that...' without saying 'people are right (or wrong) to think that...' Is it so difficult to admit?

When I assert, in *Ce que l'art fait à la sociologie*, that the sociologist of art – as the sociologist of science according to David Bloor and Bruno Latour – should treat 'symmetrically' the 'singularity realm' and the 'community realm', it does not mean that he should agree (or disagree) now with the former, and then with the latter! It means that he does not have to take sides in favor of one or the other position (axiological neutrality). The problem is that these positions are extremely asymmetrical in traditional sociology, since the latter ('community realm') is traditionally the one supported by most sociologists: they are so eager to demonstrate the collective, common, cultural (etc...) status of all social phenomena, including art (what I call 'sociologism'), that they are totally unable to understand that there are other ways to conceive and practice sociology; and that focusing on the opposite position ('singularity realm') does not mean 'defending' it! My point is precisely that refusing 'sociologism' does not imply a return to 'individualism' or 'aestheticism': it means that both positions should be the object – and not the basis – of the sociological analysis.

This difficulty not only in accepting, but in simply understanding properly the very simple propositions I made in *Ce que l'art fait à la sociologie* (a non-reductionist, non-critical, neutral sociology, focusing on representations and not only on real experience) is a direct outcome of the present state of sociology: a state where the valorization of opinions and value judgements is so heavy that sociologists hardly imagine that they could free themselves from this cannonball! Art is, of course, more vulnerable than any other topic to the normative: a reason why the sociology of art is the very best (because the most difficult) experimental field for such a turning point: this is, precisely, 'what art does to sociology'...

No, I have nothing to say about the nature of things...

The same applies to Laerman's comment on 'What is an artistic event?': he seems to believe that *for me*, some events *are* original, new etc, and, for that reason, would really 'mark a date'. In other words, he thinks I would have a personal interpretation of the nature of artistic events (which, by the way, might well happen; but doing so, this would not be a specifically sociological proposition, at least as I conceive it).

But he misinterprets my position: I only observe that *for the actors*, there are artistic events; this is the starting point from which I have to evidence the structural properties of these said 'events', and understand the logics of these properties. My perspective is in no way 'ontological', but – as he properly found out – 'ethnomethodological', that is, centered on the actors' experience. But the 'ontological' temptation in sociology seems to be still as heavy as the 'normative' temptation: how difficult it is for so many sociologists to renounce the learned privilege of saying how things are 'in themselves', and how they should be... How difficult it is for our discipline to get out of its philosophical roots! If only sociologists could refrain from systematically asserting their own point of view on what's going on, we would go so much further, all together...

How difficult it is for our discipline to get out of its philosophical roots!

This is why, I imagine, Laerman finds a proximity between my perspective and that of Jean-François Lyotard: he just cannot see the gap between, on one hand, an ontological philosophy of art (be it modern or 'post-modern') and, on the other, an empirical and pragmatic sociology of the actors' relationship to art...

...but I have something to say about their structural properties!

However, this abstention from ontological assertions (such as 'here is the definition of an artistic event...') does not mean that the sociologist should be confined to the 'second order observation' of a strictly 'actor-oriented sociology', having thus nothing to say about the objects dealt with by the actors. As I tried to explain in 'What is an artistic event?', the study of large corpuses allows us to draw out the structural properties that can account for similarities and regularities (for example, the actors' qualification of a phenomenon as an 'artistic event'). In this case, I proposed considering that the structural property of a said 'artistic event' is the fact that it 'marks a date' inscribed in the memories of a more or less large number of people, and sometimes institutions. This allows both the analysis of the actors' experience, and the analysis of the objects that are part of their experience: an analysis that is neither one more interpretation nor one more evaluation made on the same level as the actors' interpretations and evaluations.

This is why Schinkel is wrong when he thinks that I want to 'ignore the objects': I just say that we had better start from the actors' relations to the objects, and then turn to them in order to understand the properties that account for these relationships. In other words: the object, even if it is artistic (and perhaps all the more so if it is artistic!) should not be the main focus of the sociological analysis, but a secondary one, subordinated to the issue of its use and meaning by and for the actors.

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Note that this pragmatic and structural (rather than ontologist) definition allows for the plurality of qualifications by the actors: it accounts for those who do not consider something as an event, as well as for those who do – since the size of the event is the direct outcome of the number of people for whom it marks a date. Laermans reproaches me for ignoring this plurality because of my said 'univocal' definition of events – whereas he himself demonstrates a very univocal interpretation of my position!

No, the sociologist should not defend an exclusive position!

This issue of plurality is of primary importance: I think it accounts for most of our misunderstandings. Why? Because my positions tend to be read – both by Laermans and Schinkel – as being exclusive, whereas I try to propose a plurality of options. For instance: 'Why only study events?' (Schinkel, p. 408) – as if proposing the study of events means imposing the study of *only* events! (I just pretend that studying exceptions is often fruitful for methodological reasons: crisis and controversies provide dramatic opportunities to express and justify representations or opinions – an experience that any empirical researcher can have made). Or else: 'In Heinich's view, the sociologist who analyzes the arts according to the regime of communality [read "community"] – that is, in terms of social interaction, of shared norms or symbols, of collective institutions, etc – necessarily devalues the regime of individuality [read "singularity"] in favor of the value of the social » (Laermans, p. 395).

But I never said that the 'singularity realm' is the only relevant one in art: I just said that it is more 'paradigmatic', more frequent and more 'normal' for the actors, than the 'community realm'. When the latter appears in some qualifications (enhancing, for example, the group phenomena, the importance of conventions, the role of influences),

the sociologist's task is not to dismiss it, nor to consider it as truer: it is to take it into account and to analyze his functions in the perception and judgement of art, as it is articulated with 'singularizing' qualifications, etc. This is precisely what I meant when putting the case for an 'anti-reductionist' position in *Ce que l'art fait à la sociologie*.

The problem is that most sociologists today tend to consider intellectual positions as a kind of militancy: one should be exclusively on *one* side, *or* on the other – as if social reality were not plural. Here we come back to the issue of descriptivism vs. normativism: when you try to say how things are (for the actors), you allow for plurality; when you try to say how they should be, or how they should be considered, you can accept only one univocal conception.

I found out that, once a position is presented in an exclusive or univocal way, it is grounded not on a descriptive, but on a normative scope: roughly, it is more ideological than scientific (to use, forgive me, very thick and somehow inappropriate terms). The problem is that, once more, the weight of ideology among sociologists is such that most of them simply cannot read a proposition as non exclusive: they spontaneously interpret the stress on singularity in artistic experience as a will to demonstrate that *all is* singular in art.

No, we won't go to hell if we are not constructivists!

This exclusive conception of the sociologist's position is particularly disastrous regarding the issue of constructivism, which seems to be considered today by many social scientists as a faith issue rather than as a tool for studying reality. We seem to be forced to choose between the constructivist camp (post-modern theory) and the realist one (classical theory). But we do not have to choose one or the other camp! Reality is made both out of data that cannot be entirely reduced to the actors' views or actions, and out of interpretative and normative constructions. Contrary to Laermans, I will never assert that 'events only exist in the eye of the beholder' (p. 399) – any more than the opposite. Any reduction to one or the other position means nothing but using research in order to foster ideological parties.

'Heinich's critique on a radical constructivism leads – on no solid grounds – to a complete dismissal of the constructivist perspective' (Schinkel, p. 406): but since when does the assertion that reality is not *totally* constructed by the actors mean that it is *not at all* constructed by them? Do we have no other choice but to be *integrally* this or that, constructivist or realist? Is there no truth at all in between? Are intellectual positions nothing but flags under which we fight against the enemy? Is research nothing but a pretext for battlefields?

Is research nothing but a pretext for battlefields?

This conception of intellectual work is the opposite of mine: I am interested in understanding reality, not in defending any kind of ideological position, any kind of 'temple' – and constructivism or deconstruction, at least as they are taught nowadays in Anglo-Saxon campuses, appear to me as the most intolerant and obtuse temples that we have to endure. What is at stake should not be to decide whether reality is or is not constructed by the actors' representations (an issue that usually only leads to the most boring commonplaces): it should be to analyze what these representations are made of, and how they deal with the various ways in which the world accepts, confirms or rejects them.

This, once more, does not mean that I militate against constructivism – no more than for 'singularity' versus 'community', or the contrary: it means that I use intellectual positions as mere tools – multiple tools – to understand a plural reality.

Having reproached some 'inconsistencies' in my positions (inconsistencies that are but the outcome of his remarkably absent-minded reading…), Laermans praises my 'original empirical work'. Thanks for the compliment, but I dare say that what is at stake is also an original theoretical approach to sociology: this would probably become clear if only my positions were not reduced precisely to the ones I try to dismiss! I do hope that this clarification represents an outcome of our discussion. Let me thank once more all those who made it possible.

(Editor: Susan van Elmpt-Bodnar)

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