

# What is an artistic event?

A new approach to the sociological discourse

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The way I conceive of and practice sociology of art<sup>1</sup> is through empirical research rather than theoretical positions connected with the academic tradition, but without the applied dimension which is often associated with empirical inquiry when commissioned for practical purposes. This is why my conception of sociology is more closely related to anthropology: anthropologists always have a research field besides addressing theoretical issues. My theoretical bias is sociology itself; and my research field is our common experience of what is - or is not - an artistic event.

## So many events

The cultural world - meaning here the world of art and literature - is filled with events. Think for example of the art columns of newspapers: 'This film is an event', 'An event in the life of the theatre', 'A book that marks an event in the history of literature'. Historians, too,

continually remind us of such controversial events as - for Parisians - the first performance of Victor Hugo's *Hernani*, the first exhibition of the Impressionists or - elsewhere - the first performance of Richard Wagner's *Tetralogy*.

Some events recur periodically in cultural life: *Salons de peinture*, book fairs, theatre, film festivals. Others, conversely, depend on exceptional occasions, becoming eventful owing to their rarity or even uniqueness: the last performance of a famous singer, a one-off show (such as the 1989 parade on the Champs-Élysées organised by Jean-Paul Goude for the French Revolution bicentenary), an anniversary exhibition (the Amsterdam 1990 Vincent van Gogh centenary).

Some events usher in a new era: for example, the opening of a special building, such as the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1976; some mark a closing: the death of a great creator - Nathalie Sarraute's a few months ago, for example.

Some events are bound up with creation itself (I remember what an event it was for the people of my generation to see Robert Wilson's *Einstein on the beach* in the seventies); some belong not to creation but to its recognition afterwards: Oscars or Cesars for cinema, literary prizes. And this recognition may itself be an event not for cultural consumption alone but for the wider market, as with some auctions when they reach the front pages of newspapers: take the 82.5 million dollars paid at Christie's in 1990 for Van Gogh's *Doctor Gachet's Portrait*. And finally, some events even belong to a form of negative recognition, including destruction or robbery, as with the *Mona Lisa* stolen from the Louvre at the beginning of the twentieth century or, more recently, the masterwork by Barnett Newman ripped in Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum.

## Event and autography

Why is there such an affinity between events and the cultural world (and here I refer to the Western world only)? To answer this question we must pause to consider 'arts' and 'culture' globally and abide by the internal divisions of this multiple world, which cannot be reduced down to a univocal description.

An initial division concerns the very nature of the various arts. We cannot consider in the same way a uniquely occurring work and a multiply occurring work - or, to use Nelson Goodman's terminology, an 'autographic' and an 'allographic' work of art. The first category includes all forms of art that consist in a unique piece, of which any reproduction bearing the name of the author would therefore be a fake: this is essentially the case with the visual arts - painting and sculpture - where the claim for authenticity is central and can be materially attested by experts. The second category - allographic - concerns works consisting in a proposition that can be reproduced infinitely

without losing any value or authenticity, such as literary, theatrical or musical works.

However, in these latter two cases the work is both allographic in terms of what is presented to the public (a text, a score) and autographic regarding the very act of performance (a particular production on a particular day in a particular place which, by definition, will never be reproduced identically). Moreover, an identical medium can be treated as allographic when its reproduction is not controlled, or as autographic when an author's signature appears on each copy: this is so in the case of photography, with all the original photographs occurring as 'multiples'.

The probability of 'making an event' will depend on these different parameters: autographic - a picture in an auction may become an event by its price, whereas in literature this may be the case for autographic manuscripts only. Again in literature, the event may cause an *éclat* only if there is a scandal when the work is presented to the public - as, for example, with the publication of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*. This is because the duration of the work to be elaborated is incompatible with the criteria of immediacy proper to an event: Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu* probably is an event of long duration in literary history, but not in the subjective sense of the sheer length of time it took the author to write it.

A play or a piece of music also become events only when presented to the public, i.e. within a very short space and time, allowing the feeling of a sudden event; when we consider them as works conceived by their author and printed we can call them events only in the very long-term sense by comparing them with what existed before and what will occur - partly because of them - afterwards. That is to say, there is a direct link between the cultural event and the autographic dimension of the works, whereas

the only factor able to give an eventful dimension to an allographic work is time.

### Event and 'singularity realm'

This temporal variable entails consideration of a second characteristic of the artistic world - no longer depending on the nature of the works, as above, but the period. Valorisation criteria have changed greatly since the shift to 'vocational activity' that followed on from the 'craft activity' of the Middle Ages and the 'professional activity' of the classical age. The term 'vocational' artistic activity refers to the demand for originality becoming stronger than the mastered reproduction of aesthetic standards. In France this occurred progressively from the second third of the nineteenth century, with a dual emphasis on the value of innovation versus tradition and personalisation versus submission to academic rules. The same process occurred in literature as well as in the visual arts and, probably, music too.

At the same time there was an increase in creators' opportunities to become famous: an artist *hors pair* (peerless), an exceptional interpreter, an author said to be 'genial' for his inventiveness, are of course more reliable to immediate recognition than will be a good professional appreciated by his peers for his capacity to deepen the channels opened by tradition. We immediately 'recognise' - in the sense of identifying - them by their 'touch', their 'style', their particular 'sound', which at the same time allows us to 'recognise' - in the valorisation sense - them for their originality. Any performance by a celebrated artist can make of an event a mere presence in a TV programme - for his fans or otherwise.

It is this new paradigm of artistic valorisation that I call the 'singularity realm' - in opposition to the 'community realm', which favours the multiple rather than the rare,

standards rather than innovations, choice by a broad public rather than by an elite. Needless to say this community realm is far more powerful in the industrial and commercial domains, whereas the singularity realm governs the domains of art in the modern era.

The singularity realm obviously increases the probability that an artistic or literary creation will become an event. This is why the very notion of event is bound up not only with the autographic dimension of the works but also their historical inscription in a singularity realm.

### A number of 'non-events'

The problem is that the singularity realm concept also increases the probability of 'non-events'. In my view a fundamental characteristic of this realm is its highly specific relationship with number - all the more evaluative in that it is small - and temporality. By definition, a genuinely innovative creation cannot be understood and accepted immediately and by everyone, precisely because it transgresses the existing categories of perception and valorisation. Logically, artistic originality cannot be validated in the short term, unless by a small number of the initiated able to appreciate its value.

As for the general public, only posterity - i.e. the lengthening of the time available for recognition - can be an acceptable condition for valorisation: too small a number of admirers long after the creator's death will mean an absence of artistic greatness as surely as will too many admirers when a work is first presented to the public. Hence the starkly contrasting destinies of Vincent Van Gogh (a few admirers during his lifetime versus crowded galleries a century later) and Bernard Buffet (pictures distributed throughout the world and reproductions in innumerable homes but, as evidenced by the ironic tone of recent

obituaries, given little chance by the critics of going down in history).

But the event is spontaneously associated with the object erupting into an immediate temporality: in these conditions, how can the event acquire value in the long term? How can the eruption of the singular and the certainty of its meaning be put together, how can what transgresses and disturbs the categories of valorisation be assessed, always risking as it does disqualification as the merely bizarre or arbitrarily provocative? How can we be sure that what appears to contemporaries as a cultural event is not a passing infatuation, hardly good enough for snobs looking for distinction, while, at the same time, the true, the 'genuine' creations - the ones that art historians will afterwards describe as an event in art history - remain unperceived? The prime example of this may be the presentation of Duchamp's famous *Urinal* at the New York Salon des Indépendants; totally unnoticed in 1917, two generations later the work had become almost legendary, a foundation myth for contemporary art.

This is why the world of art and literature is as full of non-events as events: disqualifications, ironies, protests, disdain, this is the nitty-gritty of disputes about taste. As soon as one person judges a creation to be an event someone else will condemn this as undue recognition of a false value - either as a simple media effect constituting mere provocation, a snobbish infatuation, a gag for the initiated that will have sunk without trace within a couple of months or, alternatively, as a marketing product, a large-scale something fabricated specially for the wider public, a commercial proposition (remember the recent appearance of the new *Star Wars* film *The Phantom Menace*). Be that as it may, the event will be reduced to something ephemeral, both superficial and temporary.

### What's up with sociology?

So: event, or non-event? How should we assess Duchamp's *Urinal* or the 1990s Van Gogh centennial exhibition? The sociologist cannot avoid this - ambiguous - question. How should it be approached? The various responses draw on the entire repertory of the principal positions currently occupied by sociologists.

The first position consists in situating oneself on the same level as the actors, with the sociologist also taking sides, asserting judgements, defending or attacking values - the 'axiological position', in Max Weber's phrase. And, as usual when somebody takes sides, there are pros and cons. On the pros side the sociologist will try to distinguish the authentic events, to identify what makes sense, what will mark a date and what will really matter.

As a sociologist of art he will prioritise valorisation criteria concerning not the formal characteristics studied by art critics or art historians but contents or significations according to a general perspective: Duchamp's *Urinal* will be classed as an authentic event for being deeply symbolic of industrial society or symbolising a certain reaction to the First World War; or else, the Van Gogh centennial exhibition in Amsterdam will be considered as a genuinely sociological event in that it symbolises the globalisation of cultural consumption at the end of the twentieth century.

In so doing the sociologist will interpret and valorise his object - as actors do naively, and as do aesthetes too but with specialised instruments. This process of interpretation and valorisation proceeds by attribution to the object of an interpretant referring to the whole of the society rather than the psychology of its creator or its formal characteristics. The provenance of this conception of the sociology of art is a wide one, emanating as it does from Pierre Francastel representing the aesthetic

tradition across to Georg Lukács and Lucien Goldman in the Marxist tradition. It is only superficially different from the spontaneous position of the actors since it stands on the same axiological and hermeneutic level, even if the interpretants vary in some way.

But the axiological position - consisting in the distribution of sociological values - is more evident today among the cons than the pros, i.e. among those who criticise the 'pseudo-events'. These critical sociologists denounce the 'false values' of the actors in the name of an objectivity that the sociologist alone is able to unveil. On this perspective the great Van Gogh exhibition in Amsterdam would be denounced as a commercial pandering to popular taste or as a purely media event. On this reading Duchamp's *Urinal*, too, might be regarded as a pseudo-event, fabricated entirely by art critics eager to 'distinguish' themselves from each other by siding with the avant-garde in the contemporary 'art field'. Unless, that is, the work were to be considered as an instrument of 'demystification' invented by a genuine artist to ensnare the critics by 'unveiling' the avant-garde's 'objective structures' and its actors' 'strategies of domination'.

In this second way of practicing sociology - axiological and critical - you may have recognised Pierre Bourdieu's position, now referred to by some French social scientists as *sociologie critique* (critical sociology). Its presence is especially evident in the sociology of art, where the critical sociologist can find plenty of values to dismiss: the valorisation of innate gift and vocation, personal inspiration, the singularity of genius, the uniqueness of masterworks, the irreducibility of art to any kind of collective or social determinant, and so on.

I confess that my presentation of Bourdieu's critical position may lack some of the scientific objectivity he claims for it: this is because I feel

less at home with this critical sociology than with the 'positive' one I evoke above. Why? Because I think that this way of practicing sociology (and it has become very widespread today in France) prevents us understanding the very principles underpinning the actors' values - including the critical ones used by the sociologist.

Mircea Eliade accurately noted that the task of an anthropologist is not to prove that the primitive beliefs in myths are erroneous, but to understand the logic and functions of these beliefs. It should be the same, I think, with sociologists today: their task is not to demonstrate that Duchamp's *Urinal* either is or is not a genuine event, in a sociological sense or otherwise, but to understand the system of values prompting the actors - including some sociologists - to take sides in a dispute and advocate one position or the other.

#### What only sociology can do

Contrary to this double-sided axiological position - pro and contra, favourable and critical - I propose and attempt to adopt another position that differs from the actors' as far as possible. Here, I am drawing on Weber's acritical position that consists in suspending all value judgement: his 'axiological neutrality' of the sociologist. This, I think - and I have attempted to develop the idea in my book *Ce que l'art fait à la sociologie* - is the only path towards a deep analysis of experience - particularly the case in the artistic domain, where the presence of value judgements is sometimes so marked that they are no longer even perceived.

What underpins my refusal to place the sociological discourse on the same level as the actors' discourse and, therefore, my abstention from any judgement of the actors' values? The answer lies in Tzvetan Todorov's 'principle of specificity', which states that the social scientist has to say something different not

only from what the actors say, but also from what other researchers in different disciplines - art historians, for example - are saying.

This is not because the sociologist knows better than they do, or because *he* is the one telling the truth, but because his objective is different. This objective is not Van Gogh, nor is it Duchamp: it is the totality of words, actions, subjects related to Van Gogh or Duchamp. This, in my view, is the only condition under which the social sciences may have any specificity - that is to say, any utility.

#### What the sociologist can say about events

Let me now return to the subject of how an axiologically neutral sociologist should answer the question: 'What is an artistic event?'

Many terms actually convey a normative intention while only appearing to be genuinely descriptive. This is precisely the case with the word 'event', highly ambiguous in that it has a marked capacity to valorise even when appearing to be a merely analytical reflection on what constitutes an event. This will have been evident in the various examples of events I mentioned in my introduction because I chose them for their vulnerability to disqualification as 'non-events', thus confirming the highly normative character of this term.

In such conditions it is not up to the sociologist to define events or classify phenomena in order to decide whether they are or are not real events: this is why I shall not return to the above list to apply a principle of categorisation, which would allow me to assert that, 'in the eyes of the sociologist', this is or is not an event. Once more, the sociologist should close his eyes to the object that makes the actors speak in order to open them to the very reasons that make them speak as they do.

And so: rather than understanding what an event *is*, sociology should understand what *makes* an event for the actors. The quest for the

sociological nature of things is no longer an essentialist but a pragmatist perspective focusing on the way the actors perceive, feel, use and react to things.

The sociologist's gaze, closed to the definition of the event, can then be open to a recurrent characteristic of phenomena when categorised and treated as events - namely, their capacity to *faire date* ('mark a date').

Indeed, an event stands out in the ordinary course of existence in that it marks a date. Year, month, day, time: the temporal markers indicate the acceleration and intensification of time, which make of a particular moment - say twelve o'clock on Monday, November 19th - an event.

But who is it an event for? It all depends on its 'size'. An event's size can be measured by the number of persons it marks a date for: the zero degree is birth (which marks a date for a person and, possibly, his relatives); the birth of a great man is a major event (take the birth of Christ, which marks a date for all Christians), as can be a victory or historical record (the first steps on the moon, the first successful ascent of Mont Blanc), or a turbulent political watershed affecting an entire nation: 14th July 1789, 11th November 1918.

Some events are accidental: a natural catastrophe, a terrorist attack, the death of a princess. Some are recurrent: elections, the World Cup Finals, the award of Nobel prizes. Some are felt to be happy occurrences - the birth of an heir to the throne - others tragic - the outbreak of war. But all these events, big or small, have in common that they mark a date. Those who feel involved can remember at least the year, and often the month and the day, if not the exact time.

Take the Nobel Prize, a media event of average impact in a collective sense since it enjoys media attention for a few hours but is a major event at an individual level since it may

change the recipient's life. It is also a recurring event that has meaning for the recipient, his peers, journalists and the broader public who are informed of it. Not, of course, that it escapes the suspicion of being a 'non-event' for anyone entirely uninterested in cultural life or, alternatively, for those who think the Swedish Academy is not qualified to distinguish the best authors, or who see any scale of distinction as an irrelevance for the sciences and arts and as lacking legitimacy in an egalitarian culture.

At this point a whole research programme opens up: the examination of what does or does not mark a date and who for, in what contexts, under what circumstances; identifying recurring events and the logic they have in common, drawing on the repertory of objects capable of marking an event, demonstrating the quantification scale allowing consensus on the event's size, mapping the zones of social space within which a particular phenomenon constitutes a common reference, describing the temporality according to which a phenomenon is perceived, constructed, instituted as an event. This would serve as the programme for a sociological study of Amsterdam's Van Gogh exhibition and, in my view, it remains an apt one for a sociological analysis of Duchamp's ready-mades.

We would probably discover that the logic of a scientific event does not obey the same regularities as an artistic, political, geological or even love event: an earthquake on the other side of the world would appear to me to have little weight compared with the 'love at first sight' my best friend experienced recently. Moreover, we understand the logic of these regularities, and all the constraints - temporal, spatial, objective, informational, interactional, affective etc. - on organising the variable geometry of the very notion of event.

### Back to principles

So what road did I travel on my way thus far? What have been my guiding principles? It is these questions I wish to develop as my conclusion.

To start with, let me consider what I have rejected. First I dispensed with the notion of event as pure subjectivism, which would deny it any objectivity. This is because there is such a thing as a reality of the 'event' that affects people in a certain way, produces certain effects and generates certain discourses.

Nor does this notion need to be reduced to a mere social construct, immediately denounced as synthetic, as a fictitious problem or pre-fabricated object. A literary prize is probably an artefact but this does not prevent it having a powerful impact as it redefines totally the temporal profile of an existence (as I try to show in my book dedicated to the experience of recipients). Indeed even if the notion of event, as of any mental category, depends on the actors' perceptive, cognitive and valorisation capacities, it is still submitted to real constraints on the efficient categorisation of anything as an event.

This means that sociologists cannot be totally, radically constructivist: a degree of constructivism appears to be a necessary basis for all the social sciences, but a radical constructivism - trying to demonstrate that *everything* is *entirely* constructed by human conventions - would be nothing but a form of integrism. Such a constructivism would be precisely as integrist as the radical substantialism it claimed to oppose. In any case *any* integrism quickly becomes an obstacle rather than an aid to thought.

I therefore considered that objectivity of the event exists, and that I can define the notion. I took a dual approach to this objectivisation, however. The first approach consists in abandoning the intrinsic characteristics of the

object called 'event' by restricting it to the actors' experience; I shifted the emphasis to what I termed a pragmatic rather than an essentialist perspective, focusing on the actors' actions, perceptions, conceptions, values, behaviour, etc.

The second approach consists in rejecting discontinuous description, that is the assertion that the actors either do or not consider a particular occurrence to be an event. Instead, however, I proposed continuous description, demonstrating the degree to which a phenomenon is objectivised - objectivisation here meaning both the actors' capacity to categorise and use a phenomenon, and the phenomenon's capacity to be categorised and used by the actors.

I called this the 'rise in objectivity', which complements the 'rise in singularity': more or fewer words, more or fewer images, more or fewer material objects, more or less time, more or less space are necessary to the 'objective' perception of a cultural phenomenon as an artistic event. And the sociologist's task consists precisely in observing and analysing these movements.

I therefore rejected a substantialist and discontinuous definition with the aim of demonstrating a whole set of multi-factorial criteria on a plurality of continuous scales: private/public, individual/collective, internal/external, short term/long term, etc. And the more the actors treat a phenomenon as public (rather than private), collective (rather than individual), external (rather than internal), long term (rather than short term) the more it will 'objectively' be an event. Such a conception allows for a certain amount of relativism, but, I would say, a controlled relativism. First, because this relativism is exclusively descriptive and not normative: what is at stake here is not a desire to assert that everything is relative, but to elucidate the

plurality of values invested by the actors. Second, because this controlled relativism is not radical enough to oblige the refutation of any criteriology or characterisation of the object, as an integral relativism would. Taking an integrally relativistic approach in this matter would mean denying the notion of event any consistency, prohibiting distribution of the objects of knowledge and, finally, any reflection on what constitutes an event. Once more integrism, whatever it may be, is nothing but an open door to stupidity; and conceptual integrisms are as dangerous as the religious ones, even if they kill nothing but thought.

What is my selection of criteria defining an event based on? Rather than applying theoretical principles I proceeded inductively by adhering to the same markers used by the actors: in this case the temporal occurrence of a phenomenon through a certain change in the temporal flux of experience - the noteworthy concept of *faire date* ('mark a date'). I therefore indicated not the phenomenon's content - artistic value, personal authenticity, purity of intentions, etc. - but its formal characteristics or, more precisely, the characteristics of its empirical - here, the temporal - frame. Objective criteria for analysing our object can then be used in line with its 'relative relativity', which constitutes both its main characteristic and its difficulty, since the event varies according to the number of persons it marks a date for.

### A sociology of artistic experience

So, 'what is an artistic event?' Considering this question gave me the opportunity to set out the methodological principles underpinning all my research on art and literature, whether on the admiration for Van Gogh, the identity of painters or writers, the notion of author, the conditions for an aesthetic perception, the boundaries of contemporary art, or the

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problems encountered by artistic recognition.

In other words, an anti-reductionist, non-critical, pluralistic, neutral, descriptive, 'relatively relativistic' and pragmatist sociology.

Indeed, the notion of event, as I have tried to frame it here, is at the very heart of what I call a sociology of singularity - the sociology I attempt to develop through researching these various fields. As far as artistic events are concerned I may have failed to satisfy your curiosity, but I hope to have at least given you a small insight into what a sociology of artistic experience might be.

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**Note**

1. See also Heinich' review of Howard Becker's *Art Worlds* in this issue.

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