

# Nathalie Heinich, sociologist of the arts: a critical appraisal

**Rudi Laermans** French-born Nathalie Heinich took up her appointment as visiting professor holding the Boekman Chair in the Sociology of the Arts at the University of Amsterdam on 1 January 2000. In her public lecture titled ‘What is an artistic event: a new approach to sociological discourse’ published in the Boekmancahier number 44, she presents her credo, a methodological concept in a nutshell. Rudi Laermans critiques Heinich’s presentation of her ideas on the sociology of the arts and introduces her empirically rich oeuvre.

It must have been the second half of 1993 when I read my first book by Nathalie Heinich. I had just started teaching a seminar for third year sociologists dealing with the main institutional changes since the Renaissance in the production and distribution of what we now call the Fine Arts. Nearly all my material was borrowed from historians. Some of it was very interesting, indeed fascinating. But I was struck yet again by the reluctance of most historians to conceptualize their findings. Besides, I was still anxiously searching for a good overview of the genesis of the process of the ‘academization’ of the fine arts. So it was with a feeling of relief that in the beautiful Brussels bookstore *Tropismes*, I browsed through Heinich’s study *Du peintre à l’artiste: artisans et académiciens à l’âge classique* (1993).

The book offered me everything I was looking for: a detailed account of the development of the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, an in-depth discussion of the main changes this institution introduced within the field of painting, and - last but not least - a sociological interpretation, based on the concept of professionalization, that brought all the strands together. What made the reading of *Du peintre à l’artiste* a definitive pleasure, was Heinich’s clear and fluid written style, something that is not highly-enough praised within academic circles, but for me is the hallmark of the really good author.

All in all, *Du peintre à l’artiste* is an excellent example of historical sociology.<sup>1</sup> The same is true, as I found out later, of Heinich’s first book, *La Gloire de Van Gogh* (1991), subtitled *an Essay*

*in the Anthropology of Admiration* (she returned to this theme in her latest book, *L’épreuve de la grandeur: prix littéraires et reconnaissance*, published in 1999b).<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Heinich is an astute sociological observer of the world of contemporary Fine Arts, witness her many articles on this subject and - particularly - the three books she published in 1998, i.e. *L’art contemporain exposé aux rejets* (‘Contemporary Art Exposed to Rejections’), *Le triple jeu de l’art contemporain* (‘The Threefold Play of Contemporary Art’), and *Ce que l’art fait à la sociologie* (‘What Art does to Sociology’). With this trio, Heinich established herself as a sociologist of the arts. The three books are also directly related to the ideas she presented in her lecture given on her appointment to the Chair of the Sociology of the Arts at the University of Amsterdam for the Boekman Foundation (Heinich 2000). In the following article I shall be referring more than once to these three publications.

## The link between the sociology of the arts and the sociology of culture

Because of the linguistic barrier between France and Holland, there are probably not many readers of the Dutch *Boekmancahier* who are familiar with the above-mentioned trio of books. So I’ll give a brief introduction. In *L’art contemporain exposé aux rejets*, Heinich presents six case studies of negative public reactions towards artworks that appeared within the public space. Among the cases presented are the wrapping-up of the Pont-Neuf bridge by Christo and Buren’s highly contested series of marble pillars of various height in the courtyard of the Palais-Royal. As the concluding chapter clearly states, the six cases are analyzed from a point of view focusing on the clash of conflicting values in the sometimes violent rejections of these works of public art. Heinich is interested in the general principles or evaluative categories to

which people refer in their reactions towards contemporary art. She gives a very particular twist to the study of the reception of works of art and - more generally - to the sociology of the arts. For according to Heinich’s interpretation of the reactions, including the positive ones, contemporary art is synonymous with ‘a sociology of values’ (this is the subtitle of the concluding chapter in *L’art contemporain exposé aux rejets*). In this way, Heinich establishes a direct link between the sociology of the arts and the sociology of culture.

The link is reaffirmed in *Le triple jeu de l’art contemporain: sociologie des arts plastiques*, a relatively lengthy book (380 pages) with much empirical material on the actual situation within the world of the contemporary Fine Arts. Most of the material bears a French stamp but the polemical features of the cases discussed are easily recognizable for anyone at all familiar with recent developments in contemporary art. The title of the book refers to the threefold play that in Heinich’s view structures the production and reception of contemporary works of art. Three parties are involved: artists, specialists and spectators (‘the public’). Artists continually transgress the rules of the museum, of authenticity or of morality. With much anecdotal verve, Heinich presents the different strategies or operations followed by contemporary artists in their avant-gardist attempts to exceed an aesthetic or moral boundary. This skirmishing on the borderlands of art is met with indifference or sheer rejection by the public: it often challenges the contemporary contest regarding the definition of art. The third party involved are the specialists: art critics, curators, members of official committees. They often find themselves in doubt about the artistic value of the activities and objects they observe. Yet if they react positively, the result is a paradoxical integration of the polemical work of art within

that very established world the work defied.

*Le triple jeu de l'art contemporain* is Heinrich at her best: describing numerous cases and analyzing dozens of disputes, while at the same time unfolding a coherent sociological approach to the arts (again, all this couched in lucid French). The particularity of this approach is the explicit subject of the short but incisive book *Ce que l'art fait à la sociologie*, which is in several ways a sequel to *Le triple jeu de l'art contemporain*. In less than hundred pages, Heinrich defends her personal way of practising the sociology of the arts. The presentation is straightforward and strikingly a-theoretical: Heinrich advocates a small set of methodological rules, rather than a general sociological view. In particular, she pleads for an anti-reductive and a-critical (away with Bourdieu!), descriptive and pluralist, even relativist, stance. What does all this imply?

#### **The single and unique versus the social and the general**

*Ce que l'art fait à la sociologie*, ('What Art does to Sociology'): this title is in itself a whole programme. Heinrich holds the opinion that 'more than any other object, art permits us to rethink, and now and then to abandon or to reverse, mental habits that are entrenched within the sociological tradition' (Heinich 1998c, 8). In order to substantiate this thesis, Heinrich underlines a well-known characteristic of the arts: since they became modern, the different artistic genres have favoured originality, individuality, inventiveness. In modern art in the strictest sense of the word, this resulted in a cult of authenticity; in contemporary art, 'the system of individuality' encourages the above-mentioned strategy of transgression. The high esteem for the unique qualities of a person (i.e., an artist) or of an object (a work of art) goes against the grain of sociological reasoning. For in general,

sociologists emphasize the average and interpret individual qualities in the light of non-personal social determinations or mechanisms. In a word, sociology sides with 'the social' (groups, classes) against 'the individual': the general is preferred above the unique.

According to Heinrich, we should take 'the system of individuality' seriously and counter the dominant sociological tendency 'to reduce artistic or literary production to determining instances that are both "bigger" and more anonymous than the individual creator, such as the market, the "field", the social origin incarnated in a "habitus" (to borrow a term from Pierre Bourdieu), or the "world" associated with the creative act (according to the view of Howard Becker)' (Heinich 1998c, 15). Heinrich thus urges sociology to acknowledge the primarily 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. I think that Heinrich's lecture for the Boekman Foundation, 'What is an artistic event?' (Heinich 2000), addresses the same theme from a temporal point of view which is not explicitly discussed in *Ce que l'art fait à la sociologie*. Under 'the system of individuality', Heinrich now stresses, not only the particularity of individual artists or specific works of art is applauded. Sociologists should also study the positive appreciation of the unique nature of, for instance, exhibitions or musical performances. The latter may give something a date (*faire dater*), they may mark the history of contemporary art in a particular way as specific and decisive events.

Although it is very tempting to do so, I will not discuss the striking links between Heinrich's plea for a sociology of artistic events and Jean-

François Lyotard's characterization of postmodernity in terms of a heightened sensibility for the eruptive or the discontinuous - for the 'now', the moment in which the new announces itself (see for instance Lyotard 1988). Instead of such a contextual reading that has no direct relevance for the sociology of the arts, I want to discuss some possible shortcomings of Heinrich's approach, and this notwithstanding my great admiration for her work. I'll proceed in three steps. First, I'll discuss Heinrich's general project and critique her highly restrictive view of what a sociology of the arts should look like. Next, I'll point to some overall ambiguities, contradictions and blind spots in Heinrich's work. This second line of critique thinks with the premises of Heinrich's project against the way she implements it in her publications. My third and last series of critical remarks concern a more particular theme, i.e. Heinrich's characterization of the notion of artistic events, as given in the lecture for the Boekman Foundation.

#### **Bourdieu left too far behind**

First, Heinrich's proposal for a new sociology of the arts. I have nothing but sympathy for her aversion to a (critical) sociology of the arts à la Bourdieu which reduces every individual work of art or aesthetic position to general social determinations or mechanisms. The system of individuality cannot be reduced to the all-too-simple cliché that artists try to distinguish themselves from other artists in view of the generation or accumulation of cultural recognition (or so-called symbolic capital; see Bourdieu, 1992). But must the sociologist - as Heinrich argues - respect the high esteem of the unique within the worlds of modern and contemporary art? May the sociology of the arts only take into account the dominant self-description or interpretation of modern or contemporary art in terms of authenticity,

individuality, originality? I think a sociologist has every right to develop external explanations or interpretations, viewpoints which differ from the dominant self-descriptions of the art world. As a scientific discipline, sociology can claim a cognitive autonomy vis-à-vis the arts, as argued by Niklas Luhmann (1995) on the difference between external and internal descriptions of the arts system.

A genuine sociological description of modern or contemporary art can for instance take as its starting point the simple social fact that many artists do effectively participate in trends and fashions, and this notwithstanding the system of individuality. More generally, even if they do not form a recognizable group or school, artists do influence each other. This direct or mediated artistic interaction is one of the main reasons why critics or art historians can identify particular artistic styles. Thus, the individuality of artists or of works of art is commonly associated with their particular position within a broader stylistic community. Take a well-known example: we appreciate Magritte or Dali for the unique manner in which both were exponents of Surrealism.

Within the arts, individuality or singularity has indeed often more to do with a striking variation of a 'stylistic communality' than with a genuine particularity. Exceptional are those works of art, such as Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades, which open up a new artistic realm. As far as I can see, such a markedly singular transgression is even the exception within the avant-garde, which is precisely the reason why Duchamp is one of the undisputed heroes of contemporary art. In her legitimate plea for the sociological recognition of the system of individuality, Nathalie Heinrich tends to overlook this fact. She ends up with a historically and sociologically questionable generalization about the individuality of the unique work of art or of the unique avant-garde

artist, especially when discussing contemporary art in terms of transgression. For that matter: not all contemporary art - I now use the word 'contemporary' in a temporal meaning - testifies to an avant-garde attitude or wants to redefine the rules of the game. We were witness during the 1980s and 1990s to a striking return of critical or counter-hegemonial art within the realm of the fine arts on the one hand, and of different kinds of social-artistic practices on the other hand (see for example the highly theoretical but astute observations of Hal Foster (1985 and 1996)). We are now quite accustomed to see in galleries or museums works of art which more or less explicitly discuss existing racial or gender stereotypes, or criticize the functioning of the media or of what Guy Debord used to call 'the society of the spectacle' (R.L.: SOURCE ?) And how can the growing number of partly artistic, partly socio-cultural initiatives be reconciled with a view that identifies contemporary art with an attitude of transgression? I cannot recognize that stance in, for instance, the work of video artists who document low life in direct dialogue, in cooperation with the people being filmed.

I suppose that Nathalie Heinich will counter the above remark by pointing to the specific definition of contemporary art she uses in *Le triple jeu de l'art contemporain* and persistently defends in *Pour en finir avec la querelle de l'art contemporain*. As Heinich writes in the opening pages of the first book, 'contemporary art is indeed a genre within current art' (Heinich 1998b, 12 - I; my italics, R.L). It is 'the systematic transgression of artistic criteria', as she argues in the second book (Heinich 1999a, 17), that is the central feature of the genre of contemporary art. The latter 'is therefore essentially based on the experimentation with all the forms of rupture with what has preceded' (Heinich 1999a, 18). I can live with this clarification, but then Heinich should

sometimes be more explicit about the restricted reach of her diagnosis. For she often suggests that contemporary art - in the meaning she gives to this notion - is the hard core of current artistic production. A premise which needs to be proven.

#### **The sociologist as an observer of how artists, public and experts observe art**

Let us return to Heinich's general view on how sociologists should analyze the arts and, in particular, her insistence on the necessity to do justice to the so-called system of individuality. As I have argued, a sociologist may question the description or interpretation of modern or contemporary art in terms of individuality. They can point to the existence of artistic styles and stress the socially mediated nature of individual works or art. In Heinich's view, the sociologist then shifts from 'the system of individuality' to 'the system of communality': the social or the general is emphasized, rather than the particular or the unique. This change in the framing of the arts may indeed be presented as a critique of the dominant belief in individuality within the different artistic realms. Heinich rightly criticizes such a demystifying approach which claims to reveal the ultimate truth of the art world or an artistic field. But even if sociologists avoid the language of criticism and stress the differences between their interpretation and the one dominating the art world, Heinich believes they are taking the wrong tack when they neglect the discourse of individuality. For as she emphasizes in 'What is an artistic event?', her talk for the Boekman Foundation, and repeatedly underlines in *Ce que l'art fait à la sociologie*, her principal methodological treatise, the sociology of the arts should only observe how the actors involved (artists, public, experts) observe art. Heinich thus imprisons the sociologist in the position of what is termed

in neo-cybernetics a second order observer: that is, an observer who observes how others observe, i.e. what categories or principles are used by the actors when they interpret, explain or evaluate (Von Foerster 1982). In this view, the sociologist of the arts should only study the interpretative frames or the accounts of the different categories of members of the worlds of modern or contemporary art. In doing this, they should refrain from a specific interpretation.

Thus, according to Heinich 'the sociologist (...) [takes] the interpretative or normative discourse - be it ordinary or learned, aesthetic or sociological - as the object of their analysis' (Heinich 1998c, 77). Why this highly restrictive stance? Has Nathalie Heinich a sound reason for forbidding sociologists from unfolding their own interpretations of works of art, of artistic movements, or of what Bourdieu terms 'the artistic field', Becker 'the art world', and Luhmann 'the artistic subsystem'? In 'What is an artistic event?' and in *Ce que l'art fait à la sociologie*, Heinich relates her position to Max Weber's famous plea for a value-free sociology. I can agree with the thesis that sociologists should refrain from criticizing actor interpretations, but a value-free sociology is neither for Weber nor in general synonymous with a sociology which refrains from interpreting the researched social world. To understand why Heinich ends up with a restricted view on the sociology of the arts, we need to take a closer look at the implicit theoretical premises of her arguments. Heinich's sharp delineation of the possible scope of sociological research into the arts has indeed everything to do with her innovative but questionable combination of a cognitive approach (inspired by Latour, Garfinkel and - more generally - ethnomethodology) with a sociology of values, inspired by the work of Boltanski and Thévenot.

#### **Ethnomethodology and a pluralist outlook on modern culture**

On the one hand, the author of *Ce que l'art fait à la sociologie* shows considerable sympathy for the path-breaking work of Bruno Latour (e.g. 1987) within the sociology of science and, more generally, for the ethnomethodological movement within the social sciences (Garfinkel 1967; compare Heritage 1984). According to Garfinkel's *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, sociological reasoning in terms of social facts, collective norms, et cetera, actually documents a more widespread method of accountability. The latter expression may be understood in the broad sense of explaining or interpreting actions. Thus, not only sociologists but (Western) people in general explain actions by referring to, for instance, shared rules of conduct. It is thought to be normal that most people behave normally: it is assumed that they have learned to act according to the dominant norms. As is well known, this kind of interpretation can also be found in sociological textbooks. Given this striking symmetry between sociological and commonplace thinking, ethnomethodology urges sociologists to relinquish the habit of explaining actions in the same way as the actors themselves do. For they should not take sides with everyday sociology but rather study in depth this very 'everyday' reasoning, that is, common ways of interpreting, explaining or evaluating events or actions. It immediately becomes clear that Nathalie Heinich's approach is very close to this ethnomethodological attitude: she also encourages sociologists to observe how actors observe the world (i.e. the world of art).

On the other hand, Heinich regularly refers to the work of her French colleagues Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (1991) on justification.<sup>6</sup> The theory of Boltanski and Thévenot is that modern culture consists of a series of distinct *cités* or realms of grandeur.

Thus, within the sphere of capitalist economy, one is considered to be an important figure if one succeeds in making profits. This appreciation differs completely from the moral standards of appreciation within other realms, such as the *cit  civique* or the political domain, in which excellence equals the honest defence of general interests. Art also has its characteristic regime of estimation. According to Boltanski and Th venot, artists are admired when their work witnesses the existence of a state of inspiration. They therefore speak of the *cit  inspir e*, the realm of inspiration, in which they also include the domain of prophetic religion. Heinich clearly subscribes to this pluralist view of modern culture: the latter is divided into several *regimes* (systems, orders, organizations) or registers of values (see especially Heinich 1998a and 1999b). But as we have already seen at length, Heinich does not identify the artistic sphere with the realm of inspiration. She sees modern and contemporary art as both being ruled by the value of individuality.

In *Ce que l'art fait   la sociologie*, Heinich implicitly links the main lesson of ethnomethodology with the pluralist outlook on modern culture advocated by Boltanski and Th venot. More, Heinich contrasts the moral 'register of (artistic) singularity' with the system of communality' based on an ethic of conformity, which tends to privilege the social, the general, the collective, the impersonal, the public' (Heinich 1998c, 11). It is such terminology that Garfinkel and ethnomethodology refer to when emphasizing the link between sociological and commonplace thinking. Indeed, within the 'regime of communality', actions or events are explained in terms of, for instance, internalized norms or shared social rules. By doing this, the individuality or the particular quality of

actions or objects is denied. But in Heinich's view, the system of communality is not only a cognitive frame, an interpretative scheme or procedure used by actors in daily life to account for observed behaviours or events; in line with Boltanski's and Th venot's sociology of values, Heinich also considers this register to be a moral one. For Heinich, sociological reasoning or the 'system of communality' implies an ethical preference: if one explains an action in terms of 'communality', one also values the social above the particular, or individual.

In sum, it is only because she identifies cognitive or interpretative frames with moral regimes or ethical registers, that Heinich can conclude every sociological account is also an evaluation. Indeed, in Heinich's view, the sociologist who analyzes the arts according to the system of communality - that is, in terms of social interaction, of shared norms or symbols, of collective institutions, et cetera - necessarily devalues the system of individuality in favour of the value of the social. This is a highly implausible conclusion. And we perceive that Heinich makes a simple but far-reaching logical fault when she identifies the cognitive or explicative framing of an artist's actions or of a work of art, in social (or sociological) terms with an appreciative attitude that depreciates the individuality of the studied subject or object. More generally, it is far from evident that we should identify the communal or sociological way of reasoning with a moral *parti pris* against the dominant self-description of the arts as the realm of the unique, of the authentic or the transgressive. Thus, a sociologist may well admire the work of an artist for its unique qualities while simultaneously making a profound analysis of that very oeuvre that neglects the highly-valued individuality.<sup>7</sup> In short, I cannot see any immanent or logically necessary relationship

between a merely cognitive description of the arts in social terms and an appreciative stance that give priority to the social or the general above the particular or the exceptional.

#### An incoherent view

My second critique deals not with the principal shortcomings of Heinich's general thesis, but concentrates on the internal flaws in her sociological view. So let's take a closer look at Nathalie Heinich's position. She deliberately limits herself to the neutral observation of actor observations or appreciations. As she stated in her Boekman Foundation lecture, it is the sociologist's task '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' (Heinich 2000, 163). The sociologists' specific contribution then lies in the explication - in the literal sense of the word: *making explicit* - of the often obscure coherence of the arguments used by actors when praising or rejecting, for instance, a work of art. As *L'art contemporain expos  aux r jets* clearly demonstrates, this coherence should be found primarily in the moral or evaluative principles to which actors refer when justifying their personal attitudes. Such general values are linked with the different ethical realms or systems within modern culture. Thus, an actor's critique of contemporary works of art may invoke the register of aesthetics (the well-known distinction ugly/beautiful), the system of civility, the hermeneutical register ('I don't understand this'), or the system of individuality (see especially Heinich 1998a). But in the confrontation with contemporary art, it isn't only moral principles that matter. With regard to the transgressive character of this artistic genre, we often question our convictions or cognitive beliefs about the nature of a work of art. A contemporary work of art also regularly raises the ontological

question as to whether it is a real work of art, as Heinich argues in *Le triple jeu de l'art contemporain*, and see also De Duve (1984) on pictorial nominalism, a study of Marcel Duchamp, to which Heinich more than once refers.

Heinich admits that her actor-centred approach and the emphasis on the explication of an implicit or unconscious discursive coherence (of the underlying logic) are both heavily indebted to anthropology. Even if I leave out the epistemological question of whether a sociology of the arts equals an anthropology of this subject, I detect at least two major problems here.

The first is a logical one: Heinich's view is remarkably incoherent. On the one hand, she repeatedly stresses the necessity of acknowledging the system of individuality that holds sway within the worlds of modern and contemporary art. In support of this approach, Heinich condemns every form of sociological interpretation, since it takes sides with the system of communality, preferring the general above the particular. On the other hand, she defends an actor-oriented sociology of the arts: we should only observe how the public or the various kinds of specialists classify and evaluate artists or works of art. However, the problem is that if we follow the latter advice, we are forced to question Heinich's characterization of contemporary art in terms of individuality. For as the material collected in *L'art contemporain expos  aux r jets* or *Le triple jeu de l'art contemporain* clearly demonstrates, the reference to the system of individuality does not dominate the various public communications of non-specialists on contemporary art. Indeed, this register is primarily one used by professionals or specialists; and for this very reason we may speak of a self-description of modern or contemporary art. In contrast, actors coming

from the general public fluently combine the vocabulary of individuality with civic, moral and other values.

We can formulate this contradiction in more general terms. On the one hand, Heinich pleads for a neutral and descriptive sociology of the arts, focusing on actor interpretations and evaluations. When she practises this methodological rule, she ends up with a plurality of interpretations: contemporary art is the locus of a clash of almost unreconcilable moral, political or aesthetic values. On the other hand, Heinich (especially 1998b and 1999a) identifies contemporary art with one, and only one, evaluative register, i.e., the system of individuality. In the name of this discourse, she condemns every form of sociological interpretation, since it necessarily results in a moral appreciation of the system of communality. But in the light of the empirical plurality found in appreciative interpretations of contemporary art, we cannot but conclude that Heinich's defence of the system of individuality also takes side with one particular register within the broad range of actor interpretations (that is, the professional register). In sum, Heinich contradicts herself: one cannot advocate a descriptive and pluralistic posture, and at the same time favour one particular evaluative register - the system of individuality - against another one (the system of communality). Heinich thus appears to defend a methodological position that denies her critique of a sociological interpretation of the arts.

#### **The distinction between individual thoughts and public communications**

My second problem with Heinich's position is that she fails to draw a clear distinction between individual thoughts and public communications. In line with Emile Durkheim's sociology of collective consciousness, Heinich assumes that the

observed positive or negative communicative reactions to works of art, refer to personal beliefs and conscious moral attitudes or to individual mental representations, an expression she regularly uses in *Ce que l'art fait à la sociologie*. It would of course be highly implausible to deny every effective link between what people say and what people think. Nevertheless, as N. Luhmann (1984) rightly stresses, the structural link between consciousness and communication - between psychic and social systems - cannot be interpreted in terms of a rigid identity. For as we all know, we can think A and say B.

The difference between consciousness and communication has several important theoretical consequences, but these are not my subject here (compare Laermans 1999). Rather, I want to make a methodological point that logically follows from Heinich's approach, but which she appears to have ignored. As I have showed at some length, Heinich urges sociologists to observe the way in which actors observe (within) the world of art. Since we don't have direct access to the mental realms of the subjects studied, Heinich's sociological advice implies that we observe the actions (or in her terminology: the operations) of artists on the one hand, and study the public statements of experts and the general public, on the other hand. This is precisely what Heinich does in *Le triple jeu de l'art contemporain*. In the first part of the book, she analyzes the different strategies developed by contemporary artists in order to transgress aesthetic, moral or civic norms. The second and the third part deal with the reactions of, respectively, the public and of the various kinds of expert (critics, curators, members of official committees). And indeed, the reactions observed are public communications on works of art, varying from words collected in interviews about written texts to observed discussions in gatherings of profes-

sionals. We see that the dominant attitude towards contemporary art does not enter the picture. For as Heinich herself admits, 'the paradox is that the most extensive reactions are also the most invisible: nothing is less palpable than indifference, which does not make a sound; but nothing is more efficient. Nevertheless, most of the time it is with silence that contemporary art is met' (Heinich 1998b, 177).

Observing how the public and the experts observe (interpret, categorize, appreciate) works of art or the actions of contemporary artists equals the observation of communications. If the latter are missing, the sociologist has nothing to analyze: they lack empirical material.<sup>8</sup> This is so in Heinich's approach, for as - once again - Niklas Luhmann convincingly argues in *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (1995), it is also possible to describe works of art as communications (see Luhmann, 1997; compare Laermans 1997 and Baecker 1996). Luhmann even defends the viewpoint that works of art are the primary elements of the artistic subsystem, understood as an autonomous communicative realm within modern society. In contrast, Heinich restricts the sociology of the arts to the analysis of artistic operations and in particular to the observation of the different sorts of meta-communication about artistic communication.

#### **The notion of artistic event not defined**

I want now to take up the reconfiguration outlined above giving Heinich's view in communicative terms, for a final comment on her Boekman Foundation lecture. In 'What is an artistic event?' subtitled: *a new approach to the sociological discourse* (sic! R.L.), Heinich correctly stresses the importance of events within the various art worlds. A new book by a famous writer, a path-breaking choreography, the Venice Biennale or Documenta Kassel: current art life is in more than one way a never-

ending stream of events. But what is precisely an event? When does an art work or an exhibition qualify as an event?

Concerning the notion of the artistic event, I would like to emphasize briefly two critical points with regard to Heinich's (printed) lecture. First, as becomes immediately clear when reading the examples she gives in the opening lines of her article, the category of artistic event is heterogeneous (Heinich 2000, 159). Thus, Heinich mentions recurring events (such as book fairs or festivals), unique occasions (for example, a one-off show), artistic creations (one may think here in particular of the importance of premières). At the same time, she also refers to economic events (for example, the high price of a picture at an art auction) and to the fact that recent artistic phenomena are sometimes called artistic events within the media. What holds all these examples together is their newness, as Heinich argues: 'The event is spontaneously associated with the object erupting into an immediate temporality' (Heinich 2000, 162). Thus we see that an event is something unexpected, and precisely this quality of not-being-expected is favoured by the modern artistic system of individuality in general, and contemporary transgressive art in particular.

In line with her general sociological position, Heinich doesn't want to give a straightforward ontological definition of the notion of the artistic event. '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 categorized and treated as events - namely, their capacity to *faire date*

(mark a date)' (Heinich 2000, 164). This is a curious statement, which actually brings us back to a contradiction which I already observed earlier on. For on the one hand, Heinich defends an actor-oriented sociological approach, and on the other hand she already seems to know what is the hard core of the views about events held by all kinds of actors. Could it not be that different categories of actors have different views on artistic events in different settings? Is it really the case that, notwithstanding these possible differences, the capacity to *faire date* is the hidden essence of all actor perspectives on artistic events? Is it not more plausible to expect heterogeneous categorizations of works art, exhibitions, et cetera, as artistic events? We have already encountered this kind of inconsistency in Heinich's argument. Indeed, we must once again conclude that Heinich's methodological option to observe the possible plurality in actor interpretations contradicts her univocal sociological characterization of the phenomenon studied; this inconsistency concerned the variety in moral evaluations of contemporary works of art on the one hand, and Heinich's definition of contemporary art in terms of one specific ethical register, that is, the system of individuality. For that matter, the same contradiction between Heinich's methodological option (observe actor observations!) and an objectivist tendency marks in a very striking way the paragraph on *Back to principles in What is an artistic event?* (Heinich 2000, 165-167). For how can we rhyme the choice for an actor-oriented sociology with the plea against a constructivist approach to artistic events? How can the idea of what I called second order observation accord with the statement that 'objectivity of the event exists, and that I can define the notion' (Heinich 2000, 166)? I am anything but convinced by Heinich's vague statements concerning the rise in objectivity.

### The social construction of events

So I arrive at my second point, which is indeed a constructivist one and hopefully one that is also constructive. Events, I would argue, only exist in the eye of the beholder. The world is full of occurrences, but they have to be observed in order to become events. From the sociological point of view I introduced in the previous paragraph, only communicatively observed (or constructed) events really matter. For only when one or more communications mark something as an artistic event, does a work of art or an exhibition become an event within society. Socially, *faire date* is synonymous with speech-making: the personal idea that, for instance, the exhibition visited is a real artistic event is in fact of no social importance. Once we recognize this communicative nature of socially constructed events, we will develop a keen eye for the different forms (or formats) of speaking (about) events. Thus, in interactional situations, a work of art or an exhibition will be individualized as an event in a different way than it would within the media or in artistic organizations and their public communication. It is these different communicative constructs of the same artistic fact in terms of an event, that should prove interesting to the sociologist of the arts.

Several other comments could be made on Nathalie Heinich's inspiring article 'What is an artistic event?' There is the fact that communications may retroactively define a work of art as a big event. Duchamp's famous ready-mades are a case in point: they only became events after their rediscovery at the end of the 1950s (compare Foster 1996, 1-32, who uses psychoanalytical vocabulary, on the *nachträglichkeit* of the so-called historical avant-garde). But I only wish to underline once more the remarkable ambivalence, resulting in inconsistencies, in Heinich's project for a new

sociology of the arts on the one hand, and the fact that a more rigid conceptualization of the social implies a communicative (or discursive) approach on the other hand. The latter also opens up an autonomous cognitive space, in which it becomes possible to unfold - with all deference to Heinich's indictments - genuinely sociological interpretations of actor interpretations and of works of art, of artistic styles and movements, and so forth.

A final word - of appreciation. I have presented several critical, possibly harsh comments concerning Heinich's views on the sociology of the arts. But my critique embraces an enormous appreciation of her work, not least because of its rich empirical content. It should be said that in the above lines, the theoretically oriented sociologist has overshadowed the sociologist of the arts. In the latter position, I greatly appreciate Heinich's original empirical work and her courage to criticize the Bourdieusian doxa. So it is that my seminar students - to return to my introduction - have to read her, for together with Howard Becker's, Pierre Bourdieu's or Niklas Luhmann's writings on the arts, Nathalie Heinich has become a quintessential voice within the contemporary sociology of the arts.

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### Notes

1. For a succinct summary of the view developed in this book on the changes in the status of the fine arts and in the position of the artist, see Heinich 1996.
2. In the light of her interest in historical processes, it comes as no surprise that Heinich (1997) has devoted an introductory study to the work of Norbert Elias, one of the founding fathers of historical sociology.
3. As Heinich (1999a) vividly argues in her monograph defiantly titled *Pour en finir avec la querelle de l'art contemporain*, transgression is the hidden law of contemporary art, whereas authenticity was the core value of modern art.
4. I prefer a literal translation of *régime de singularité* above the expression 'singularity realm', used in the publication of Heinich's lecture 'What is an artistic event?' (Heinich 2000). Readers who are familiar with French theory will undoubtedly recognize the Foucaultian undertones in the word 'regime'. For the purposes of general demystification, the editor of this article has translated the French expression as 'system of individuality', translated 'regime' as 'system' and used the English word 'individual' rather than 'singular' in an attempt to avoid confusion.
5. The importance of the concept of style for the functioning of the modern arts system is also underlined by Luhmann 1990 and 1995.
6. Boltanski's and Thévenot's work is heavily inspired by Michael Walzer's (1983) well-known philosophical ideas on different spheres of justice, but gives it at the same time an interesting sociological twist.
7. As the outstanding study of T.J. Clark (1985) on French Impressionism brilliantly demonstrates, it is even possible to argue for the particularity of an artistic movement on the basis of a thorough sociological interpretation. But alas, this is an all-too-rare scholarly combination of the system of individuality with the system of communality.
8. For that matter, one may also speak, in line with the tradition started by Michel Foucault (1972), of the discursive (or textual) status of the material one collects when studying verbal or written reactions towards works of art.

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