

# What do we do when we say: 'This is an artistic event?'

A response to Heinich

**Willem Schinkel** In her article 'What is an artistic event: a new approach to the sociological discourse' (Boekmancahier 44) Nathalie Heinich claims relative neutrality for her approach. She is wrong in also leaving the object out of sight, critiques sociologist Willem Schinkel in his reaction.

Earlier this year Nathalie Heinich presented her new approach to the sociological discourse in the *Boekmancahier* (Heinich 2000). Such interesting contributions call for debate and can lead to a critical review of many of the pre-reflexive mechanisms sociologists employ. I therefore regard Heinich's contribution as a challenge, and in response would like to challenge certain characteristics of her approach. I shall address four points. Two of them can be said to be the basis on which Heinich's theory rests - these I term assumptions - two others are more practical. On the level of assumptions, two focal points are considered. First, I question the relative neutrality Heinich claims for her approach. With respect to such widely different perspectives as those of Bourdieu and Goldmann, she states that her 'relative relativism' is less 'normative' (p. 166), and more 'neutral' (p. 167). Second, I shall raise questions

concerning Heinich's 'leaving the object out of sight', since this course of action seems to cut off many legitimate sociological analyses. These two points - the neutrality of the approach, and the attitude towards the object - are intertwined in Heinich's argument. For it is the act of ignoring the object that is assumed to make the analysis more neutral and less normative. On a practical level, two issues are critically reviewed. First, I shall question the subject matter Heinich chooses: that is, the artistic event. Second, the question arises as to why it is 'events' that the sociologist should study. To conclude this contribution, I shall present a complementary approach to the sociology of art. It seems to me that several approaches may appear valid and complementary, and that the one doesn't exclude the other. Rather, they combine to offer a more comprehensive perspective, which has a multi-disciplinary nature.

## The neutrality of a sociology of art?

First of all, we should consider Heinich's claims of relative neutrality. With regard to what she calls radically constructivist and relativist perspectives, in particular, Heinich states that her approach is less normative, and more neutral. I shall indicate why 'neutrality' is an ill-chosen concept, using a brief discussion of Weber's ideas on value-freedom in social science. The problem of neutrality in (social) science is an old one. In sociology, Max Weber in particular attempted to make definitive pronouncements on this subject. His ideas have, however, often been vulgarized in two ways. First of all in the sense that his concept of *Wertfreiheit* has been misunderstood, secondly in the sense that this concept has been linked with the idea of 'objectivity' or 'neutrality'. When speaking of value-judgements (*Wertungen*), Weber means *praktische Bewertungen*, which stands for the judging of a phenomenon which may be influenced by our actions, as objectionable or reasonable (Weber 1964a). These judgements are, according to Weber, to be excluded from any scientific analysis since they belong to a different realm which should not be tainted by an air of scientific superiority. Does this mean a social science which excludes such value judgments from its analysis can be called neutral? Perhaps more neutral than one that doesn't, but still: neutrality is a misleading term in this respect. For any analysis is by its very nature, non-neutral. We stumble here, when speaking of neutrality, upon the difference between *Wertungsfreiheit* and *Wertfreiheit*. *Wertungsfreiheit* means suspension of value judgment in the sense mentioned above, whereas *Wertfreiheit* is a totally different thing, which is a neutrality that cannot be achieved by any (social) scientist. Sociologists analyzing the social world studies something of which they are an inseparable part. They are therefore

never value-free in their analysis, since their work is *Wertbezogen*, and therefore not in any way neutral. The work of Kuhn (1970) and Latour (1987) has shown that, although many would argue otherwise, the same can be said about the natural sciences. For this reason alone, linking a suspension of value judgment to neutrality would be a mistake. Furthermore, objectivity is for Weber always a kind of subjective objectivity, since he sees objectivity as a way of ordering which is made possible by the Kantian categories (Weber 1964b).

However, two more points need to be made in relation to a supposedly neutral analysis. The first is that answers to epistemological questions are always at the basis of any social scientific analysis. In other words, philosophical decisions have been taken, most of the time in a pre-reflexive, socialized manner. The outcomes of these decisions live on as a kind of tacit knowledge, but when examined closely they raise sizable questions concerning the neutrality of the analysis examined. The second point to be made here, is that Weber perhaps didn't go far enough when separating *Wertbeziehung* from *Wertung*. He states that he knows the choice of a subject of analysis implicitly leads to a kind of value judgment. He finds this an unnecessary form of critique of his opinions on the matter. However, I would like to add that any way of examining one's object means making a value judgment. Eliade's note, paraphrased by Heinich, could be a perfect example of this. It is an example of a mistaken neutrality, which may be found in a functionalist way of analyzing, and for that matter, in any other way of analyzing. But let us take a functional analysis as an example here. Asking for functions means at the same time taking a stance with respect to the object of analysis. When Durkheim saw in the totem a symbolization of society as a whole, he

instantaneously admitted to taking sides against its official meaning, which was one of a religious nature. So in any case, 'neutrality' is a misleading concept, the use of which hints towards a false kind of security and validity of analysis. Furthermore, linking the terms 'descriptive' and 'neutral' to each other as Heinich does (pp. 166, 167) is a connection which is from a hermeneutic point of view, to say the least, illegitimate.

#### **The object: in or out of sight?**

I took the functionalist perspective as an example of an analysis with a mistaken neutrality. Such an analysis shows, furthermore, the same tendency to dissect the object, that Heinich dismisses. For the second key characteristic of Heinich's approach is to ignore the object: 'the sociologist should close their eyes to the object that makes the actors speak in order to open them for the very reasons that make them speak as they do'. In order to clear the way for her perspective, Heinich criticizes several approaches that tamper with the artistic object: the subjectivist, the relativist and the constructivist approach. Thus Heinich's approach could be said to encompass a pragmatic - as opposed to an essentialist - perspective. The point here, however, is that ignoring the object means at the same time not keeping it free from judgment, and thus not keeping it entirely out of sight. I will now try to concretize this, by briefly commenting on the object of a sociology of art. A radically functionalist view is but one example of a perspective that has a way of dissecting its object of analysis into symbolizations and social functions, leaving not a shred of the object itself - whatever it may be - intact. Heinich mentions Bourdieu's structuralist view as another example. But this critical view is in no way different from any sociological or anthropological analysis which tries to uncover

the social aspects of an object or 'singularity' (in the sense of individual, peculiar). And this is indeed a legitimate course of action for a sociology of art. It means a questioning of the object with a sociological imagination. Heinich's ignoring of the object cuts off many social processes that can and should be examined by the sociologist. On the other hand, not bringing the artistic object into the picture is to incline an air of substantiality, ergo Heinich's critique on a radical constructivism, which - on no solid grounds - leads to a complete dismissal of the constructivist perspective. A sociologist analyzing an event, without studying the nature of its being-an-event, thereby makes it an event. He or she contributes to a substantiality which may or may not exist on intrinsic grounds. Studying a Van Gogh exhibition as an event without taking into account the forces which make it an event, all the more adds to its being an event, just as media-exposure does. In a similar way, the sociological analyses presupposing a hierarchy within society which is actually a social construction with no natural ground of existence, adds to the supposed naturalcy of the social ladder.

The question Heinich poses is: why can the reactions people have towards an event - be it an actual event or a non-event - not be examined without focusing on the nature of the event? The answer would have to be that it is possible to do this, but that it leads only to a kind of secondary understanding, whilst dismissing legitimate possibilities which are at hand for the sociologist. For the object might or might not retain its substantiality, but not after its relations with the social world can be examined. In Heinich's analysis, the object might just, to some degree, be a social construction, but that is simply forgotten. My counter question would therefore be: why shouldn't the sociologist

investigate any social construction? Why leave the crucial relations between object and social world out of the analysis? And, furthermore: why should the sociologist take as a starting point something which may be partially constructed and, moreover, that has not been adequately defined? Is it, on the contrary, not also the sociologists' task to inquire into the ways people construct their world, their objects? I would agree that the sociologists' perspective deals with the way actors perceive, feel, use and react to things. However, that which makes actors speak as they do, is not a well-defined object. Rather, it is an ideology of the object, which is merely symbolized by the object. When, for instance, we ask why so many people recently went to Amsterdam for Sail 2000, the answer that 3 million people liked to see a lot of boats would probably be inadequate, and complementary facets of their actions have to be examined by careful sociological analysis of, for instance, the ways in which these people heard about the event, and in general of the way the event has been turned into an event. For if the sociologist wants to explain the way actors act, the conditions of their perceiving, using and reacting to things have to be taken into consideration. It is curious to see a sociological actor perspective without taking the links between actors, actors and structures, and so forth, into consideration. The sociologist's gaze cannot be entirely closed to the definition of the object, and at the same time open for its capacity to mark a date, simply because phenomena have no intrinsic capacity to mark a date. *Doctor Gachet* (Van Gogh) did not mark its own date. Speaking of marking, speaking of dates, presupposes social processes, which in turn involve balances of power and positions of interest. Such an analysis may be critical because it questions what is taken for granted and below the surface, but it is none the less legitimate precisely

because it questions what is. I would therefore say that the sociologist should not just study people's reactions to what they themselves call 'events'. Staying close to what people commonly experience as an event would rather suggest a research question along the lines of: What do we do when we say: 'this is an artistic event'? But this is only one of many legitimate perspectives. Another one would be to define the parameters of the artistic object as an individualized object within a mode of communication, as Luhmann has done (Luhmann 1996). Lukacs's and Goldmann's perspective - again criticized by Heinich for being less neutral - is another way of analyzing relations of a social nature which exist in the artistic object. The world views which, according to Goldmann, become evident in works of art have everything to do with social structuring processes (Goldmann 1964). For this reason, I would say Goldmann's view is not merely a perspective which includes the role of actors; it is also one that takes a metastance and investigates the relations between larger social processes and works of art.

#### **Sociology and events?**

Heinich's question was: what's up with sociology? Her answer cut off many legitimate ways of practising sociology, since it cut off many social processes from its analysis. I think I have clarified my position on what a sociology of art can study. The question is: are events part of its subject matter? The answer would have to depend on the definition of an event, so we are stuck on this matter, as Heinich herself is. For it is somewhat odd to see that considering the question 'What is an artistic event?' gives Heinich, as she puts it, 'the opportunity to set out the methodological principles' which underpin her research. In other words, in trying to define her subject matter, she is able to discuss the methodology with which to describe

this as-yet undefined subject matter. Heinich's insistence on studying artistic events can be said to be more of a programmatic slogan than a real program of inquiry. She suggests, quite reasonably, that many people have a common understanding of what an event would be. In that sense, those things labelled as events are part of processes of meaningful social action, and thus of sociology. However, another question - already posed - would be: where do people get their common understanding of what an event is? Surely this is not an 'immediate understanding' coming from a perception through the naked eye? Such an idea rests upon the notion of certain things being self-evident. But nothing delivers evidence regarding its own nature without the existence of a hermeneutic theory about the interpretation of this evidence. The self-evident is therefore a misleading term for the sociologist who wants to dig deeper under the world-taken-for-granted. And the sociology of art should certainly have to say something about that as well. So, while Heinich tries to limit the scope of sociology, I would instead make a plea for a sociological study of anything social, especially of the world-taken-for-granted in which people involved in art live. Curious in this respect is Luhmann's statement on the choice he made between going into law and going into sociology. He said that in the end he chose sociology because it enabled him to study just about anything. And he made the right choice, for yet another question would be: why only study events? Why not study the times in the social life of people that are, later on, not seen as having marked a date? Is not the largest part of social life made up of the times we replicate a thousand times and the social constellations we reproduce? Perhaps events would be the least likely things to study, in a sociology which wants to understand social life. Events are exceptions. Why stick to exceptions and exclude

all social processes - so sociologically rich - going on daily, which, perhaps without us noticing, set the course towards long-term changes with radical consequences?

#### **What difference does sociology make? An alternative to Heinich**

But one last question remains. For Heinich emphasizes the idea that sociology should have something different to say from what other disciplines say or do. Sociology should set itself apart from those other disciplines by studying people's reactions to events. It is indeed a prerequisite for the independent existence of sociology that it should be able to say something different. Though I would again like to state that a multi-disciplinary approach would seem to yield better results than the proposed differentiation, I think sociology is capable of proving its worth in relation to other disciplines without resorting to a radical numbing of its own resources, which is what ignoring (or closing the eyes to) the object and dressing its analysis up with a false sense of neutrality, would in fact be. The way for sociology to be relevant consists of two things: recognizing the complementary validity of different perspectives, and working towards a separation of essence and contingency. It is true that sociology has a tendency to strip its objects of analysis of all essence, but that is its perspective: it tends to over-emphasize the social, whereby essences may become blurred. The difference between sociology and other (related) disciplines is precisely this capacity to demystify, to strip the object of its social construction and to point out the fact that it is more than an object with intrinsic qualities, but also the stake of social struggles, the symbolization of power, the medium of communication or the means of integration. The sociologist cannot stop until he has dissected what there is to be dissected; that is,

until he has explained in what social environment the object is situated and what its relations with that environment add to its intrinsic qualities. There the sociologist stops, and passes the torch to, in this case, philosophers, art historians and others.

#### **Towards a separation of essence and contingency: the socio-semiological analysis**

I would now briefly like to sketch the contours of an approach in which a separation of essence and contingency is an analytical focal point. This approach consists first of all of taking the object as a sign, but with an as-yet unspecified denotation. As soon as the object is investigated with a focus on its external relations, the sociologist will be able to form an image of denotation. This image will never be complete, for it is the art connoisseur, the art historian, the philosopher, and, let's not forget - the public at large and the artist, who complete this idea of the object's denotation. Put simply: the official meaning of an artistic object can only very faintly be described by a sociological analysis. In any case, I would refer to Lucien Goldmann's or John Berger's work as examples of analyses that focus on this smaller part which belongs to the sociological inquiry. For the rest, we shall have to leave it to other disciplines, although Gadamer has a point in saying, in his introduction to *Wahrheit und Methode*, that there exists a kind of truth in art that lies beyond the realm of the sciences (Gadamer 1986). But there is more. For the artistic object can be seen as a sign carrying not only denotation, but also connotation. This last form of reference bears much greater sociological relevance. Connotations can, in this context, be seen as those significations that are socially added to the sign's essential singularity. A socio-semiological analysis may thus be seen as an investigation into sign-reference creation, into the social establish-

ment of the relation between signifier and signified - or to put it in other words: into the social control over signification. This suggests research into both what precedes the artistic object and of what is set off in the name of the object. First of all, what precedes the object can be subdivided into what goes into the object - ideas and values: think of an ideology or world view; the work of Lukacs, Goldmann, Berger and others - and under what conditions these ideas and values go into the object - see the work of Peterson, Becker, Bourdieu. The notion of an artworld, or a field of cultural production, is of special interest here. Those within this social space can, in terms of Bourdieu, be seen to act according to the specific logic of their field. Later on, this observation will be of relevance. Secondly, what is set off in the name of the object is mediated by its being perceived. Here, the work of Heinich and Bourdieu has relevance. The latter's work again covers the conditions which facilitate perception. What is set off in the name of the object creates new preceding conditions for other artistic objects. These objects are thus socially interlinked. At this point however, we see emerging the first objective of a socio-semiological analysis when applied to the sociology of art. It seeks to answer the questions how certain meanings or values of the object come into being, and who play a part in these social processes. In doing so, it concentrates only partly on the denotation of the artistic object as a sign. For its official meaning or value is to be determined by others supposedly more suitable for such a valorization than are sociologists. Next to the part of the object's denotation in which the social influences become visible, in other words: next to that part of denotation the sociologist takes into account, the objects connotations are to be studied sociologically. Questions arise here. For whose meanings and values are we speaking of? To whom are connotations relevant?

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### Sign manipulation as object creation

A differentiation of both sides of the object is needed. On the one hand, there exist certain enabling conditions, allowing an artistic object to come into being. On the other, there exist reactions set off by this object. Or rather: set off in the name of the object. For the object does not set off anything by itself, just as no object is able to mark its own date. We here encounter the ambiguity of the object. Initially, there is no well-defined object, the status of which is clear to every spectator. The consensus surrounding the object once it has been a subject of discourse for a longer period of time is, in part, the outcome of a struggle in which those with lesser means of domination, i.e. with lesser means of sign manipulation, resort to the object interpretation of those with more means to legitimately do so. Sign manipulation thus leads to reference creation, which in turn leads to object creation. The struggle for the legitimate meaning of the object is facilitated along the lines of what Bourdieu calls a field logic (Bourdieu 1993; 1994). To add a more historical dimension to this concept, I shall refer to the term 'legitimate positional logic' instead. This terminology is suitable both in synchronic as in diachronic use. Synchronically, a world of art can be seen to have a positional logic which is at that time the legitimate way of positioning for those involved. Diachronically, a legitimate positional logic can be seen to have always been present, though in changing shapes. Whatever means those who wish to dress the object up with meaning have, they will need to employ them according to the legitimate positional logic. In the end, the logic linking sign and signification and the legitimate positional logic within the social space in which this sign manipulation takes place, can be often seen to merge and be dominated by the same positions. However, when we take, for instance, the Dutch

world of art, it may be observed that the legitimate positional logic is to a large extent influenced by actors that scarcely take part in the production of meaning. Government and businesses exert considerable influence in Holland (see: Bevers 1993), but the production of meaning is an exclusive right of those who know about meaning. Relatively autonomous positions can be seen to have affected the legitimate ways of object creation because of specific historic achievements in their sign manipulation. André Breton is one example of an occupant of such a position, though the term 'positions' need as such not be restricted to individuals; a museum or an academy might just as well be seen as having positions, and thus as having to behave according to the legitimate positional logic. Because the social practices which condition this object creation take place out of sight for anyone not familiar with the legitimate positional logic, and because they are concentrated on the object which is brought forward as the only discursive focal point, the object appears to speak for itself when, in fact, it is often a mere symbolization of itself, assisted by an ideology of the object, a legitimate logic linking sign and signification. So, meaning can be seen as an outcome of social processes in which legitimate ways of positioning within a field containing more and less relatively autonomous positions create a differentiation of means of sign manipulation and thus of object creation. This way, the artistic object is in part socially constructed. This is the part sociologists are equipped to study in a focus on both the conditions of the object coming into material being and on the conditions under which the object is perceived. I already mentioned that it is impossible to speak, under such circumstances, of a well-defined object. For the object is subject to manipulation. When taking the object as a sign, the question appears for

whom its values are just that. Mediating between signifier and signified are social actors. If we call the material object the factual object, the actual object can be seen to emerge in the following way:

factual object → social actor(s) → actual object

This course of action is repeated several times, by all those who wish to control the creation of meaning. Several actual objects thus seem to emerge. Conformity can be the result of the struggle over the value of the object as a sign, and thus the ideal-typical legitimately real object appears:

factual object → actor(s) 1 → actual object  
factual object → actor(s) 2 → actual object  
factual object → actor(s) 3 → actual object

real object

The real object will, however, never really be just that for everyone outside the artistic field. So the same factual object may, in social life, be several actual objects. It may as a sign have different values. This is how a socially constructed kind of what Gadamer (1986) has called *Wirkungsgeschichte* appears, which is differentiated through time and social space.

The real object, which will as such only exist in ideal-typical form within the artistic field, becomes part of the canon of artistic objects, though its connotations may still vary. For instance, when a Rembrandt exhibition is held which is presented to us as a real event, the objects that are a part of this event have a special connotation which differs from the one(s) they have when they are being held in their museums, apart from their brothers and sisters,

to whose physical presence this change in value is sometimes attributed. Inasmuch as real objects become canonized, they are part of the conditions which facilitate both the appearance of new factual objects, as well as of these manipulations towards actual and real objects. Objects as signs can thus - apart from the constraints of the legitimate positional logic - only be manipulated within the space allowed by the tradition of object creation. To the extent in which historical and social circumstances offer such space, there exists a relative autonomy from which the object can be manipulated as a sign. It is this manipulation, which leads to a construction of meaning, that should be the object of a sociological analysis which seeks to work towards a separation of essence and contingency. Only an inquiry of such nature would be able to answer the question 'What do we do when we say: 'this is an artistic event''?. This is what a socio-semiological analysis stands for. As such, it is but one legitimate perspective the sociologist can employ. Recognizing that any perspective is only one of many non-neutral ways of looking at the object is certainly a prerequisite. In that recognition, the sociologist admits his coloured way of ordering what he sees, and challenges his colleagues in other disciplines to in turn dress the object up with intrinsic qualities. But these will then once more have to stand the test of a sociological inquiry into their degree of social construction and their external relations in general.

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