Art Events vs. Art Worlds

Nathalie Heinich on Howard Becker

Diana Crane In Boekmancahier 44, professor Nathalie Heinich published her methodological credo, 'What is an artistic event?' In connection with this she re-read the classic study by Howard Becker titled Art Worlds. Culture sociologist Diana Crane sees little support for Heinich's argument about the discrepancies between her standpoint and that of Becker: the similarities in their work are greater than the differences.

In her commentary on Howard Becker's *Art Worlds*, Natalie Heinich assesses the major achievements of this classic work. She portrays Becker as being concerned with 'structures of collective activity', 'factors peripheral to the creative act', and characteristics of the process of creating artistic works. In her view, Becker is engaged in the demystification of art and artistic genius, by not distinguishing major from minor artists and by showing that all artists face similar opportunities and constraints in the creative process. At the same time, she faults him for his neglect of 'the entire imaginary and symbolical dimension of reality' by which she seems to mean the essence and specificity of the aesthetic experience. As a result of his emphasis on the analysis of 'real experience' related to aesthetic phenomena rather than subjective aesthetic experience, she sees his work as representing a 'very special and dated conception of sociology'.

Heinich evidently views her own work as an alternative to Becker's, one which incorporates and valorizes elements that he has purposely omitted. This raises an interesting question. In what ways is her work actually similar or different from his? In her position paper, 'What is an artistic event?', she indicates that she is interested in very specific types of artistic events, those that are considered significant or pathbreaking. The examples she mentions can generally be characterized in terms of their 'newness'[1] as individual works or as aggregations of new works (such as festivals, book fairs) or, alternatively, as activities intended to generate controversy or to symbolize the importance of an artistic work (celebrations, auctions). She tells us that it is not her objective to provide criteria that the reader could use for identifying such events, nor is she concerned with the ways in which events are endowed with prestige. She states that she is interested in 'what makes an event for the actors', 'how actors perceive, feel, use and react to things'. In other words, she wishes to restrict her attention to the actors' experience. Here she seems to be much more concerned with subjective reactions than Becker but later when she says that she wants to understand 'all the constraints - temporal, spatial, objective, informational, interactional, affective, etc. - on organizing the variable geometry of the very notion of event', we begin to see that their concerns overlap, even if they do not entirely coincide.

Many similarities

Few of us attempt to provide a definitive rationale for our scholarly works of the sort that Heinich provides in her paper. More typically we discuss the principles underlying specific works in the introductory pages of articles and books, in which case the works themselves constitute a specific context for our ruminations which 'grounds' our comments. A general statement about the theoretical and methodological principles underlying one's work may in fact turn out to be an idealized version of what one actually does, either narrower or more all-encompassing than the actual works. Therefore, in order to assess Heinich's work in relation to Becker's, it is useful to examine her recent research in which she has studied artistic events in the context of a very specific art world, one which is centered around artists who perceive themselves and who are perceived by others as constituting a certain type of avant-garde.[2]

Curiously, the methods used by Heinich and Becker in their analyses of phenomena related to the arts are strikingly similar. For example, both Heinich and Becker make frequent use of typologies. Both create typologies that differentiate between artists who work within or outside the boundaries of accepted art forms.

Heinich differentiates between artists who are outsiders or insiders on the basis of geographical, social and cognitive criteria (Heinich 1997). Becker identifies four categories of artists, each of whom has a different relationship with contemporary art worlds: integrated professionals, mavericks, folk artists, and naïve artists. Heinich opposes the perspectives of artists, specialists, and the general public. Becker compares serious audiences and occasional audiences.

Heinich would say that, unlike Becker, she concentrates on the types of values that different categories of artists, specialists, and publics use in creating and evaluating art works. For example, she argues that the general public's rejection of controversial art works can be understood in relation to 'deep, commonly held public values and mores'. Rejection is often based on the public's assessment of an art work's value which in turn is likely to reflect an evaluation of the work in terms of its contribution to general welfare or civic values. Rejection may also be based on the opinion that the price of an art work is exaggerated in relation to the levels of skill or effort that were expended in its creation. Moral judgments in the sense that an art work is thought to contain inappropriate material also influence the public's rejection of art works. Finally, the general public rejects controversial art works on the basis of their perceptions that these works lack artistic authenticity and therefore do not fit the standard definition of art.

But is this really so different from what Becker is attempting to do when he discusses the importance of artistic conventions? Becker differentiates between serious and occasional audiences on the basis of how much they know about the nature of artistic conventions, about how they are being used, and about how they are changing at a particular time. He interprets the rejection of controversial art works by the

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general public on the grounds that occasional audiences distinguish between art and non-art on the basis of what they perceive to be its lack of authenticity, the absence of conventional formal elements in its composition or performance that avant-garde artists often seek to replace (Becker 1982, 50). Serious audiences consist of people who have considerable exposure to a specific art form, ranging from passive consumption to active acquisition of some of the skills involved in the creation of such works. For Becker, the public's experience of art is strongly influenced by their awareness and understanding of the conventions on which it is based. In other words, the values they express in their judgments about art reflect their level of understanding of artistic conventions.

Heinich sees avant-garde artists as being engaged in 'transgression', as constantly attempting to transgress or extend the boundaries of what is defined as art (Heinich 1998b). Both Heinich and Becker interpret this activity in theoretical terms as a process of consistently challenging and replacing accepted conventions for producing specific forms of art. For example, Becker discusses how avant-garde artists who 'invade' crafts 'transgress' the conventions of uniformity, utility, skill, and beauty used by craftspeople in evaluating craft objects by replacing them with entirely different conventions: uniqueness, lack of utility, absence of virtuosity, and indifference to beauty.

A few differences
What then is Heinich doing that Becker does not do? As Becker demonstrates, sociological studies of art worlds examine either their social organization or their cultures or both. In spite of the fact that Becker stresses cooperation in art worlds while Heinich emphasizes conflict, the topics discussed by the latter in her analysis

of a specific art world and by the former in his analysis of art worlds in general are very similar: for example, the operation of systems for distributing art works, including differences in the roles of galleries and museums; the functions of the critic; relationships between the arts and other systems of ideas, such as philosophy; the arts and the state. It is even the case that the artist to whom both authors refer most frequently is the notorious Marcel Duchamp.

The difference between them lies in the fact that Heinich focuses her analysis primarily on culture, specifically, conventions underlying art works. She analyzes disputes and controversies surrounding art works that challenge artistic conventions and examines the roles of artists, specialists, museum curators, and publics in producing and resolving these disputes.

Does Heinich's emphasis on culture mean that she is paying more attention to the meanings of art works than Becker does? Like Becker, she rejects an analysis of meaning in art works that is based on an evaluation of their social significance. Both agree that art works are not to be interpreted as reflecting or commenting on social life. Both insist that the sociologist of art must refrain from making aesthetic judgments. In fact, Heinich's approach to meaning in her research on contemporary art is very similar to that of Becker: the meanings of art works are embodied in the conventions that are used to create them.

Although Heinich endeavors in her position paper and in her review to distinguish her perpective as much as possible from that of Becker, an analysis of her recent work suggests that the two approaches have in fact more in common than she admits. Why should this be the case? In spite of her stated commitment to the 'system of individuality' inherent in art works and to the 'realm of singularity', she

nevertheless finds it necessary in order to study contemporary artists to situate them in an analysis of a distinct subsystem of contemporary society. Becker's approach to this subsystem is more comprehensive than that of Heinich because he devotes as much attention to its social organization as to its culture. In her review, Heinich tends to slight Becker's contribution to our understanding of the cultures surrounding the arts while in her own work, and particularly in her discussions of her work, she slights social organization in favor of culture.

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Notes
1. See also Laermans' discussion of this point in his commentary (Laermans 2000).
2. This art world is the subject of several of her articles and three of her books, *Le triple jeu de l'art contemporain* (1998b), *L'Art contemporain exposé aux rejets* (1998a), and *Pour en finir avec la querelle de l'art contemporain* (1999).