

Singularities and the sociological imagination

On Nathalie Heinich's sociology of the arts

Jan Marontate Nathalie Heinich, holding the Boekman chair in the Sociology of the Arts at the University of Amsterdam, presented her methodological concept in her public lecture 'What is an artistic event: a new approach to the sociological discourse', published in *Boekmancahier* 44. In her public speech 'What is an artistic event?', Nathalie Heinich strongly insists on the integrity of her approach. This is a manifestation of her Parisian academic style, according to Jan Marontate, sociologist of arts and culture.

Policy-makers and scholars often confront difficulties in reconciling the distinctive qualities of specific artists or artworks with the need for an analysis or program that is generalizable. How can we make meaningful statements about patterns in the arts? Can we study artistic phenomena 'scientifically', if by 'scientific' we mean engaging in a repeatable process that yields reproducible results? As former professor in the Boekman chair, Vera Zolberg, and others have observed the conflict between the internal approaches (focusing on singular qualities of the artistic phenomenon) and the external approaches (favoring patterns and contextual factors) has deeply marked the field of sociology of the arts (Zolberg 1990). Nathalie Heinich's article 'What is an artistic event?' continues the tradition of questioning this relationship by speaking to the status of singularity in sociological studies of the arts in innovative ways (Heinich 2000).²

Heinich begins her paper with a provocative statement in which she identifies adherence to her view of sociology as a 'theoretical bias' that she brings to bear in her praxis. She describes her substantive area as the study of 'our common experience of what is - or is not - an artistic event' (Heinich 2000). Her article is more than a simple presentation of a definition of a socio-aesthetic phenomenon. It is an eloquent and subtle embodiment of Heinich's far-reaching program for studying the arts, a program she has presented in more detail and with different emphases elsewhere (see for example, Heinich 1998a, 1998b, 1998c and comments by Rudi Laermans 2000).

In her paper and other recent work Heinich proposes a way of making sense of the apparent incommensurability between the nomothetic bent of sociology - the search for patterns, regularities and laws - and the ostensibly ideographic character of singularities that



'de singularibus non est scientia'
(H.-R. Jauss)¹

constitute distinctive artistic events (or rather experiences thereof). I have come to believe that one of the key strengths of Heinich's *oeuvre* is her remarkable tenacity in confronting the epistemological and methodological challenges presented by this apparent incommensurability in studies that present luscious, evocative empirical research and determined argumentation grounded in strong theoretical convictions. Although at times her insistence on her own theoretico-methodological program appears excessively evangelical from the viewpoint of a North American raised in a culture of diversity, I delight in her insightful scholarship and welcome the opportunity to help make her work better known to English-speaking audiences. Here I present a brief account of my own particular reading of her work as it pertains to the status of singularity in sociology of the arts.

A new approach

Nathalie Heinich has been exploring and refining the notion of singularity in sociology of the arts for some time. I first came in contact with her work in 1990 through a journal article in a rather obscure Quebec publication that I read just before attending a series of lectures she gave in Montreal (Heinich 1989). This was prior to the publication of her book about the creation of belief in Vincent Van Gogh subtitled an 'anthropology of admiration' (Heinich 1991b). This was also several years before the appearance of her book on the transformation of the identity of the artist in seventeenth and eighteenth century France (Heinich 1993).

In one very memorable talk she investigated the apparent internal contradiction of the idea of an artistic career, combining as it does the notion of career (premised on 'regularities' in the form of a pattern of accomplishments that can be repeated) and artistic achievements (premised on originality and unique practices

that distinguish the art and the artist from those who have come before).³ Roughly put, she proposed that the need to be seen as singular (avant-garde) became a pattern (regularity) and a necessity for recognition of twentieth century artists. She has continued to develop this idea in ambitious studies that investigate the place of singularities and transgressions in recent practices related to the arts (Heinich 1998c).

At the time I first came in contact with her work I was shocked by the way she talked about the arts and society, unfamiliar with intellectual traditions on which she drew and profoundly uncomfortable with what I perceived as the occultation of aesthetic considerations in her analysis. She seemed to be proposing a whole new framework that was alien to someone (like me) trained in North American traditions of sociology. It is a framework that is difficult of access for readers unschooled in French methodological and epistemological debates of the last three decades. As I later encountered more recent French sociology I became aware of issues that may be helpful for situating Heinich's work in context.

Parisian-style intellectual integrity

In her work Heinich devotes a great deal of attention to working through the logical details of her sociological praxis and insists heavily on the integrity of her approach.

Willem Schinkel and Rudi Laermans have both expressed doubts about the restrictive range of events and observations Heinich prescribes for sociologists of the arts (Schinkel 2000; Laermans 2000). I think the restrictive nature of her proposals for sociology of arts is a manifestation of her strict insistence on what I might loosely term consistency and commitment. The perceived need for this can be best understood in the context of Parisian academic styles.

Heinich studied and worked for many years in Paris, at a time when it was a lively battlefield for proponents of clashing theoretical and meta-methodological agendas. During the late 1970s and 1980s, when she was in the early stages of her scholarly career, aspiring sociologists made mandatory pilgrimages to the seminars of leading sociologists where heated debates about fundamentals fomented lasting alliances and irreconcilable rifts. Central to the emerging field of sociology of the arts were the seminars of Pierre Bourdieu (one of the best-known sociologists of that time to study the arts) and Raymonde Moulin (then director of the Centre de Sociologie de l'Art). Nathalie Heinich, Antoine Hennion (director of the Centre de Sociologie de l'Innovation at the École Nationale Supérieure des Mines de Paris), and Pierre-Michel Menger (current director of the Centre de Sociologie de l'Art at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales et Économiques) are among the young sociologists who came of age in Paris at that time. Art historian Dario Gamboni, who is also recently arrived at the University of Amsterdam, was involved with these circles too.

This was an era marked by the emergence of numerous Parisian intellectuals as 'stars' of international importance for the study of the arts and culture, among them Jean Baudrillard, Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and Alain Touraine to name a few. I do not mean to imply that all these particular names are necessarily vital to understanding Heinich's work but rather that they were constituents of the French intellectual 'scene' during her formative years. This is evident in her writing. In fact we would need to caste our net much wider in order to do even a cursory inventory of varied intellectual traditions that she draws on (many of which are not French) and this is not the point here.

Rather we want to make a quick sketch of an intellectual milieu that is still largely inaccessible to people who do not read French by referring here to some well-known intellectuals of the time.

During the 1970s and 1980s other figures a generation or so younger than these leaders were also beginning to make their mark, notably Luc Boltanski, Laurent Thévenot and Bruno Latour. These last three are perhaps of more importance for understanding Heinich's recent writing about methodology and sociological praxis. At any rate, to situate Heinich's insistence on integrity in context I think it is important to recognize that a disdain for 'mixing' theoretical approaches is characteristic of the groups that formed around leading French scholars when Heinich was a young scholar. This intolerance of diversity or eclecticism may result of from competition for acolytes and among members of the various schools of thought, or from the hot-house atmosphere engendered by intense competition for positions in French academia. Nonetheless, though their proposed solutions differed, the various schools of sociological thought shared many preoccupations or problem sets - among them a strong interest in applying the notion of singularity to the study of society.

Singularities as observation points

Throughout the post-war period, but especially after the student riots of May 1968, many French-speaking sociologists and philosophers looked at the idea of studying of 'irregularities' or breaks with 'normal' or expected patterns in order to seek insights into social phenomena (see for example Granger 1982; Granger 1988, 109-122). Advocates of the potential insights offered by the study of singularity in French-language sociology (ex. Granger 1988) have drawn heavily on notions developed outside of sociology, notably in Georges Canguilhem's highly

influential work on singularity in biology as well as in works by mathematicians and physicists on chaos and catastrophe theory (Canguilhem 1968; Thom 1980; Halmos 1990).

The ability of singular events to yield generalizable findings provided new avenues to explore in methodological debates about so-called qualitative versus quantitative approaches. In this connection there were vitriolic disputes about the position of values, beliefs, subjectivity, reflexivity and commitment in sociological praxis that continue to this day. Elements from these disputes are taken up by Heinich for example in her presentation of what sociologists can study in 'What is an artistic event?' and in her typology of sociological positions or 'stances' published under the title *Ce que l'art fait à la sociologie* (Heinich 2000 and 1998a).

Other scholars of her generation have explored the heuristic value of singularities. One landmark in the study of singularities in French sociology of the arts was a paper by Gamboni published in Bourdieu's prestigious journal *Actes de la Recherche Sociologiques* in 1983. The paper presents work on destruction of art as acts of reception (Gamboni 1983b; see also 1983a). Gamboni studied cases of acts of aggression against European art for almost 20 years - although his first major publication in English on this topic only appeared in 1997. In his view 'works of art are rarely - though not never - meant to be degraded or destroyed. It follows that attacks generally represent a break in the intended communication [pattern] or a departure from the 'normal' attitudes and modes of communication (...)' (Gamboni 1997, 11). Thus, Gamboni uses acts of aggression as observation points for studying the multiple functions and meaning of objects or events described as works of art. Acts of vandalism or iconoclasm provide markers for observing the expectations and meanings ascribed to art

allowing us to examine the plurality of corresponding attitudes and relations that exist around art.

The study of disruptions and conflict was approached quite differently by two other sociologists who have had contact with Heinich: Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot. In their work *De la justification* they proposed an interesting model for how people justify their points of view in conflicts that provides another example of how sociologists have used singularities to apprehend multiple registers of meanings and arrive at generalizable insights (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991). They derived a typology of higher authorities and different models of justice (e.g. political philosophies of common good) and called these different systems of justice 'economies of greatness' (*économies de la grandeur*).

Heinich's approach to singularity also resonates with work of scholars associated with the Center of Sociology of Innovation, among them Antoine Hennion, Madeleine Ackrich and Bruno Latour. She uses artistic events as vantage points in a manner that is not unlike some of their studies in which technical objects and practices serve as devices (or *dispositifs*) for observing the complex interplay of material practices, tastes, ideological factors and other conditions in lived experiences of articulate actors. Her connections with this group are particularly apparent in her expressions of belief in the knowledge of actors and of her pragmatic goal 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.'.

There are powerful differences between Heinich's proposals for how to 'do sociology of the arts' and the approaches of many her French colleagues but interesting connections in their adventures in exploring the potential of singularities for sociological insights.

Singular - not exclusive, extraordinary or particular

It is important to distinguish carefully between the notion of singularity in recent epistemological debates and other words that may sometimes loosely serve as synonyms. When Canguilhem proposed the value of studying of morphological or functional singularities for biological epistemology he maintained that 'the singular is not so much the being that refuses the type as the being that constitutes itself its own type (...) unclassifiable because unique in its type. In this respect it must be distinguished from the extraordinary, which does not break with the type but with the rule of the type (...). We encounter the singular in experience in relation to concepts considered as types or laws of nature; it is in relation to habits of perception that nature seems to us to contain the extraordinary' (Canguilhem 1968, 214).⁴ According to Canguilhem then 'the singular acquires scientific value when (...) it attains the status of an exemplary variation'.⁵

This seems to me to correspond very closely to Heinich's use of singularity in studies of the arts. Consider for example her discussion of the capacity of an artistic event to *faire date* (mark a date) or the power of an artistic career (like that of Van Gogh) to establish a new model against which future artists will be judged. Consider too the place of singularities (the defining feature of artistic events) in her theory that likens contemporary art to a French children's game called 'the hot hand' (*la main chaude*). The game entails keeping one's hand on top of others in a frantic but rules-oriented series of manoeuvres (Heinich 1998a). In Heinich's analysis artists, art world participants and publics now engage in a three-fold game of transgression (of norms by artists), rejection (of the arts by publics) and integration (of new art endowed with the

critical acclaim of specialists). New art deliberately challenges the boundaries between good taste and bad, between art and non-art. Artistic practices become increasingly provocative to attain the recognition as singularities - acquiring the status of 'artistic events' that *faire date*..

Writing on Method, Theory and Practice

In 'What is an artistic event' Heinich presents a treatise on how to do sociology of the arts and therefore we may consider it a methodological text. Jennifer Platt, an historian of sociological methodology, observed that texts about methods are written for many different reasons, for example, in response to demands for student texts, to review work done by others or to respond to critical analysis on one's own work, in particular in the context of controversy (Platt 1996).

Although Heinich's work speaks to shared concerns and tactics as we have indicated above, her work is controversial. One important area of dissent centers on her complex notion of committed neutrality (*neutralité engagée*) that she presented in detail in *What art does to sociology* (Heinich 1998a). She discusses this idea again in connection with the Weberian notion of 'axiological neutrality' in her recent paper. In her work she eschews political stands favored by Marxists, distancing herself from proponents of a committed critical approach. As well she insists that sociological discourse is not on the same level as actors' discourse (a position called into question by Hennion and other more extreme social constructivists). The refusal to admit to a bias other than that of being a sociologist side-steps contemporary debates in anthropology and cultural studies of crucial importance for the study of many forms of artistic practice that have been neglected. Remarkably, the specific status she accords the sociological perspective suggests yet another

register in which singularity may operate in her work.

Overall, I propose that Heinich's methodical exploration of singularity in her studies of the arts provides a beguiling alternative to what I consider to be fruitless conflicts between humanistic and sociological approaches. There is a place for specificity of aesthetic phenomena in her work, particularly in her case studies. Although her work sets forth a strict agenda for sociological praxis that not everyone will embrace in its entirety, her approach presents a clear and highly imaginative vision of how singular events become generalizable in ways that form and inform experiences of the arts.

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Notes

1. Roughly translated, this means ‘no (scientific) knowledge comes from singularities’ (Jauss 1981).
2. This paper was a revision of her inaugural address on the occasion of assuming the Boekman chair of sociology of art at the University of Amsterdam. My comments are based on an off-print of this article and not the actual address which I did not hear.
3. She subsequently published a revised version of this talk (Heinich 1991a).
4. Free translation by the author of the following text: ‘Le singulier n’est pas tant l’être qui refuse le genre que l’être constituant lui-même son propre genre, faut de pouvoir participer à d’autres. Inclassable puisque unique en son genre. C’est en quoi il doit être distingué de l’extraordinaire qui ne rompt pas avec le genre mais avec la règle du genre (...). Sans analogue, tel est le singulier; hors analogue tel est l’extraordinaire. C’est relativement à des concepts considérés comme types ou lois de la nature que nous rencontrons du singulier dans l’expérience; c’est relativement à des habitudes de perceptions que la nature nous semble contenir de l’extraordinaire.’
5. ‘Le singulier acquiert une valeur scientifique quant il cesse d’être tenu pour une variété spectaculaire et qu’il accède au statu de variation exemplaire’ (Canguilhem 1968, 221).

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