

Machete Interview with Nathalie Heinich

For a Comprehensive Sociology of Artistic Imaginaries



Gabriel Rockhill: In much of your work, you have sought to denaturalize the social imaginary that undergirds the modern conception of the artist. This social imaginary, which is less than 200 years old, has produced a powerful network of images and associations linking the purportedly

innate, original talent of the 'creative genius' to a bohemian lifestyle in which material poverty is supposed to function as the inverted guarantee of a spiritual legacy. In demonstrating the contingency of these imaginary constructs, your goal is not, however, to discard the imaginary in favor of the real via a positivist form of sociology. On the contrary, you argue that this social imaginary is a powerful force that produces real effects. Why has it been important for you to contextualize and relativize the figure of the modern artist? What role do the imaginary and symbolic representations of artists play in the 'material reality' of artistic production?

Nathalie Heinich: It is true that my work started with the aim of demonstrating the "socially constructed" nature of the notion of art and of the artist, as we say now – but as we did not yet say as I prepared my Ph.D. in 1981 with Pierre Bourdieu on the French academic system and the "constitution of the field of painting" in the 17th century (see my book *Du peintre à l'artiste*, published in 1993). However, this was but a starting point. After a while, I had to break off with this critical point of view, this conception of sociology as having to dismiss the actors' preconceptions, which appears to me now as a kind of prehistorical step in the history of the social sciences. My first book, *The Glory of Van Gogh* (1991 in French, 1996 in English), was the turning point in this evolution, since I understood that the interesting point was not to demonstrate that the history of Van Gogh as a misunderstood painter was but a legend, as I did in the first chapter of the book: the real thing was to understand why such a legend had emerged and proliferated during the 20th century. This radical change in my scope of analysis is what I now call a kind of "comprehensive turn" – as I tried to theorize it in my book *Ce que l'art fait à la sociologie* (1998). In this view, legends, myths, misconceptions, preconceptions do not have to be dismissed (unless they come from social scientists, of course, since they have to search the truth), but to be understood, that is, related to the basic reasons—values, expectations, emotions...—which give them, not their truth, but their coherence, and their meaning in the eyes of the actors. And here you're right: in such a perspective, these conceptions are all the more interesting that they have strong implications and effective consequences. For instance, most artists today act according to the imaginary role of the bohemian artist that developed during the 19th

century; or rather, most people expect artists to match this role, whereas the smartest among contemporary artists play with these expectations, flirting with kitsch, conspicuous wealth and cynical behavior, in the path opened by Andy Warhol one generation ago (just think of Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst, among others). But once again, my role as a sociologist is not to criticize such attitudes, nor the expectations behind them: my role is to describe and investigate their "axiological" background (the set of values which support them), exactly as a grammarian aims to make explicit the basic rules of a language.

Gabriel Rockhill: You have claimed that contemporary art has been marked by a general displacement from the object of art to the subject of creation such that it is the life of the artist that becomes the true work of art. How does this novel status of the contemporary artist relate to the commodification of media personalities in which the lives of stars offstage becomes as important—if not more important—than their lives on stage? How is the cultivation of an artistic persona related to the media personas cultivated by what Adorno and Horkheimer called the culture industry?

Nathalie Heinich: Here we have to be very precise, in order not to confuse distinct issues.

- First: it is not so much contemporary art, but modern art, which emphasizes the very person of the artist. It started with what I call the "singularity realm," which progressively replaced the "community realm" during the 19th century: originality, unicity, personality, individuality, transgressions of conventions, began to be considered a quality and no longer a flaw – the turning point for this new conception having been personified in the case

of Van Gogh. Such an emphasis on the person only keeps on with contemporary art, as we see, for example, in the case of Duchamp, and the tendency to consider the work of an artist mostly according to biographical issues.

- Second: this distinction between modern and contemporary art is essential to understanding what has been at stake during the whole 20th century (whereas the distinction between classic and modern art is relevant for the 19th century, from the Impressionist movement onwards). I developed this in *Le triple jeu de l'art contemporain* and *Pour en finir avec la querelle de l'art contemporain*. Both modern and contemporary art rely on the transgression of previous norms (whereas classic art relies on the reproduction of conventional norms, even if they happened to change slowly from generation to generation). But the norms transgressed by modern art are formal, stylistic norms: that is, the way to depict (or not depict) things in painting or sculpture; whereas the norms transgressed by contemporary art are ontological: that is, what defines art for common sense, what makes the difference between art and non-art (including the expression of the artist's interiority, which is the main requirement in modern art – contrary to classic art). Here again, Duchamp's readymades are the perfect illustration of this specificity of contemporary art.

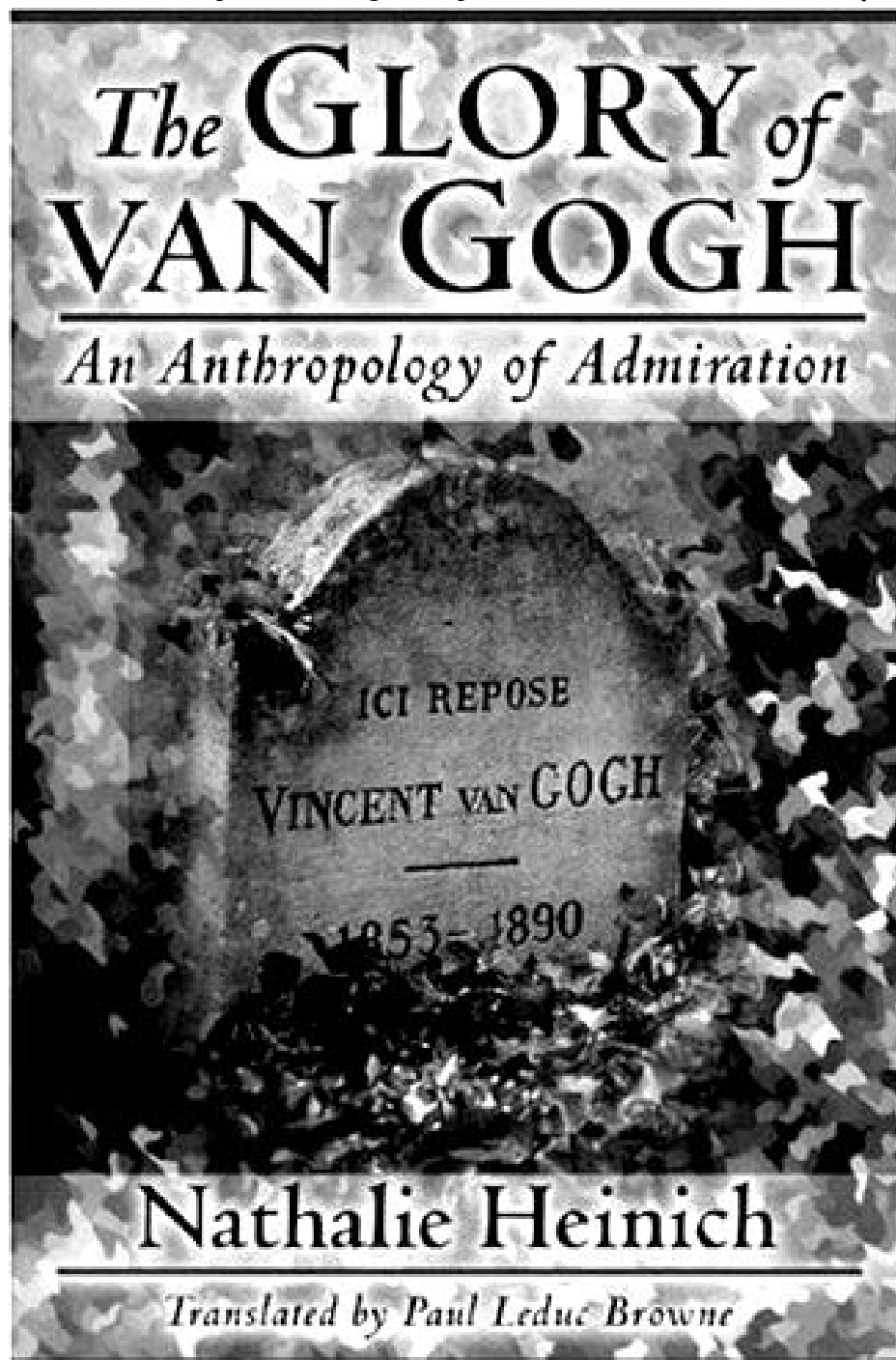
- Third: things are quite different if you consider visual arts, or literature, or music. And they are still more different if you consider the creative side of art (painting, writing, composing...) or the interpretative side (acting, playing, dancing...). Your question starts with a phenomenon I observed mostly in visual and literary creation (my basic fields of research) and continues with a phenomenon—"media personalities" and "cultural industries"—which mainly deals with actors, musicians, famous

athletes or TV personalities. This last issue—on which I am presently writing my next book—has very little in common with the former issue, except for this emphasis on the individual, the person. And even this phenomenon appears quite different in both worlds: the image is fundamental in celebrity culture, whereas words, stories are more important in traditional "major" arts (among many other differences).

- Fourth: the "Frankfurt School" view of "cultural industries" is exactly what I try to break with: that is, a critical point of view supported by a theoretically ambitious discourse (very poorly grounded in empirical data). My deep antipathy towards these kinds of intellectual positions—which continue to flourish today on all the campuses of the Western world—relies on both political and scientific grounds. Politically, I consider that it is only a "chic," "politically correct" way to reject popular culture for mere elitists reasons. Scientifically, I think that this transgression of Max Weber's "axiological neutrality" is the main obstacle to the development of social sciences.

To be continued in the next issue of Machete

- This interview was conducted in Paris, France in October, 2010.



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Gabriel Rockhill: In the modern reconfiguration of the social imaginary of art, you have argued that beauty has largely been discredited as a criterion of evaluation, in favor of aesthetic criteria based on the historical evolution of the arts. You have even claimed that artists today are incited to ‘make history,’ to intervene in their specific conjuncture in such a way that they leave an indelible mark on the march of art history. This suggests that modern artists are working within a novel regime of temporality in which their inscription in history is of central importance. Do artists today have a new relationship to history? Do modern artists—and their critics—need to justify their practices by producing historical narratives that situate their activities in a temporal trajectory giving meaning and value to their work?

Nathalie Heinich: Once again, the blurring of the criterion of beauty is proper to contemporary art rather than to modern art. In modern art, the main criterion—though rarely explicated as such—is the expression of the artist’s interiority (Kandinsky’s famous “inner necessity”). In contemporary art, the systematic game with common sense expectancies towards the very nature of art automatically brings out an ostensible indifference or even antagonism to the value of beauty – just think of Duchamp’s *Fountain* or of Manzoni’s *Merda d’artista*. A much more relevant criterion today is that of meaning, signification – whatever its modes of expression. This is why the most common comment on contemporary art work is not “it is beautiful,” but “it is interesting.” The “meaning” may be related either to the artist’s biography, or to the general state of society, or else to art history. Young, unexperimented or bad artists try to provide their own discourse on the “meaning” of their work. The best ones are clever enough to leave this work to specialized commentators (art critics, curators, art historians), as Duchamp did for his readymade. Contrary to a commonplace quite frequent even in art history books, Duchamp never said or wrote “*ceci est de l’art*” (this is art) about his readymades – he just let it be assessed by those who have the authority to say so, even if he had to wait almost forty years.

Gabriel Rockhill: Against the various descriptions of artistic modernity or post-modernity as an era of pure liberation and unbridled experimentation, you have argued that the “vocational regime” of the modern era is structured by clear criteria of evaluation that are neither arbitrary nor ephemeral. Do you find that there is a stable and consistent social imaginary behind what is often seen as the anomic free-for-all of contemporary artistic production?

Nathalie Heinich: There is indeed a common misunderstanding about the artists’ freedom in the modern and contemporary art world: the idea that they would be allowed to do “*n’importe quoi*” (“anything goes”), because their works do not respect the traditional rules of depiction or even art. In fact, the rules of the game are

quite strict: in order to deconstruct the traditional forms of an art work, one has to understand (even if it is not conscious) the implicit rules, and to possess a certain knowledge of the previous deconstructions in order not to repeat what has already been done – because originality has remained a major criterion since the “regime of singularity” imposed itself in the course of the 19th century. Once an artist is accepted inside the field of contemporary art, a lot of possibilities are offered him – though they tend to be reduced with the passing of time (the spectrum of possibilities was enormous in the sixties, when contemporary art came out; it is much smaller now). But for a beginner, it is quite difficult to be recognized as a “contemporary artist”: it requires an excellent intuition of what may or may not be done – an intuition which is mainly sociological: I regularly say that contemporary artists are the best sociologists, but through their acts rather than through their writings.

Ordinary people usually ignore this set of constraints: it is as if someone were watching a chess game without knowing its rules, without even knowing that it’s a game – he or she would



believe that the two people sitting there were just pushing the pieces randomly (“*n’importe comment*”), or freely (“*en toute liberté*”). Moreover, I do think that artists today are unconsciously invested with the task of embodying a collective phantasm of total freedom, of “*toute-puissance*” (“omnipotence”). They are somehow like those children who are allowed to do whatever they wish, because adults perceive them as embodying the very personal freedom they long for. This is why, I guess, the illusion of the artists’ “total freedom” is so strongly grounded in so many minds.

Gabriel Rockhill: You have boldly affirmed that the avant-garde dream of uniting aesthetics and politics is a myth because it purports to resolve an irreducible “objective contradiction”: aesthetic avant-gardism is linked to the autonomization of art and tends toward elitism, whereas political avant-gardism implies artistic heteronomy and tends toward populism. Does this mean that social practices, on your account, abide by the strict logic of conceptual oppositions, and that artists are thereby forced to choose between the purity of their art and the sincerity of their

political commitments? Doesn’t this presuppose an *a priori* distinction between art and politics? If so, what are we to make of the various aesthetic practices that appear to be part and parcel political, such as national anthems or the tradition of protest songs?

Nathalie Heinich: The very fact that you are not convinced of the distinction between art and politics clearly demonstrates the strength of that modern belief in the necessary conjunction of artistic and political aims – a “myth,” as you say, that emerged during the second half of the 19th century and flourished during the whole 20th century, as I demonstrated in *L’Elite artiste*. Such a belief has almost no grounding in reality (except for the Surrealist and the Suprematist movements, for a few years), but it has solid axiological reasons: after the French Revolution, the privilege bestowed on artists (creators) in place of aristocrats had to be compensated by their marginality in order to match the democratic values of merit and personal achievement. Marginality meant either the famous “*vie de bohème*” (“bohemian lifestyle”), or a political involvement on the side of poor people. The problem is that the poor do not understand or appreciate avant-garde art, because they lack the cultural clues for it; and that avant-garde artists are in greater need of the approval of their peers and of specialists than that of the general public. This is why politically involved art is usually considered “bad” art, whereas “good” art (that is, innovative art) only meets with the misunderstanding or even disdain of the “*peuple*,” the lay people with or for whom politically engaged artists dream of working. It is a kind of “tragedy of culture,” as Simmel would have said – a tragedy that may find a solution only in phantasms...

As for “protest songs,” we move from major arts to “popular culture.” They are obviously not the core of the ideal-typical concept of art in our societies. Instead, they constitute a rather marginal (conceptually), though quite massive (numerically) expression of a political commitment through artistic tools. The singers who grounded their careers only on protest songs are quite rare, if not totally unknown: a protest song is rather a special genre inside a much broader repertoire. Using this genre, singers try to combine their political commitment as citizens with their artistic aims. This is a quite respectable desire, though one might just as well consider that these two aspects of a personal identity—citizenship, professional competence—belong to different arenas and do not have to be mixed up. This is indeed my position as a social scientist, and I strongly stick to it. This is also the reason why I am so skeptical in the face of the discourse on “political art”: mixing up two very different values has never been the best way to achieve both. It is much more efficient to separate them and try to do one’s best in each respective domain. But people commonly consider plurality as a flaw, and unicity as something to long for – probably an old inheritance from monotheism...

- This interview was conducted in Paris, France in October, 2010.