

## ESTETIKA IR MENOTYRA



Skaistė Ašmenavičiūtė. Linoraižinių darbų ciklas „23 psalmė“,  
„X. Ps 23, 6 Tik gerumas ir ištikimoji meilė lydės mane <...>“, linoraižinys, 2017, 35 × 44 cm

# Nathalie Heinich's Pragmatic Sociology of Art

ANTANAS ANDRIJAUSKAS

Lithuanian Culture Research Institute  
aandrijauskas@gmail.com

Nathalie Heinich is a French sociologist and a disciple of Pierre Bourdieu. Since the 1980's she has produced innovative analyses of art. This article considers the development of her concept of the sociology of art by relying on her major works. The article also briefly discusses Heinich's peculiar approach to the theoretical and methodological problems of the sociology of art as well as its status and relationship with other social sciences and humanities. Next, the article discusses Heinich's researches on key institutional shifts in 17th century French culture, thanks to which new art academies triggered the scientific and artistic activities, differentiation, changes in the social status of arts and artists. Much attention is paid to Heinich's sociology of exclusivity of an artist, the growth of his fame, his works recognition and marketing. Subsequently, focus of discussion is moved to the sociological problems of production, mediation, reception, museums, galleries, critics, curators, and art historians. The paper is concluded by the consideration of Heinich's comparative studies of American and French approaches to the analysis of contemporary art.

**Keywords:** Nathali Heinich, art sociology, Bourdieu school, reception, mediation, comparative studies.

In any discussion of the specific features and leading figures in today's sociology of art since Bourdieu, one's gaze naturally turns toward the representatives of his school, which has been dominant during the last few decades. New directions have primarily come from his most influential student and the leading light in today's French sociology of art – Nathalie Heinich (1955–present), whose research stands out for its consistency and the gradual expansion of its fields of interest. She is a surprisingly productive scholar who has inherited her teacher's industriousness and his talent for meaningful research. Heinich is the author of more than 27 books and many

scholarly articles, many of which have been translated into the major languages of the world. Currently, she is the research director of the *Centre de Recherches sur les Arts et le Langage* (CRAL), a subdivision of the *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique* (CNRS).

An encounter with the charismatic Bourdieu at a seminar in 1977 and, later on, doctoral studies under his direction at the prestigious *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* (EHESS) became a fateful turning point in Heinich's scholarly career. Her early work developing sociological principles in the field of art unfolded under her teacher's powerful influence; this fact is obvi-

ous from a close comparative analysis of the main problems discussed in her works: the object, goals, relationship to the social sciences and humanities, reception, mediation, distinctive nature, etc. of the sociology of art. With the eventual crystallization of her main areas of scholarly interest, she gradually moved away from some of Bourdieu's positions, but *what remains, nevertheless, is his fundamentally sociological approach, which connects the problematics of the sociology of art more with the social sciences than with the humanities*. Hence follows her programmatic assertion that "sociologists of art know their objects of study not as art historians guided by the aesthetic, emotional, or material value of works of art, but as sociologists focusing on the epistemological value attributed to specific objects" (Heinich, 1997, p. 15).

This ambitious student's growing distance from her teacher was undoubtedly also influenced by the scale of these personalities sociologists, their creative potential, fundamental character traits, scholarly interests, differences in education, way of thinking and explicating their thoughts, and competence in different fields of scientific knowledge. As a scholar, Bourdieu exhibited a high level of conceptual thinking and was naturally inclined to make broad theoretical generalizations. Because Heinich lacked a multifaceted academic background and a solid foundation in ethnological and anthropological research and because she received the fundamentals of sociology solely in Bourdieu's milieu, she naturally began her career by developing her teacher's theoretical insights. Here, I would also like to mention Heinich's acknowledgement: "Apart from what I learned from Bourdieu," she writes, "in sociology I was completely self-taught"

(Heinich and Ténédos, 2006, p. 38). Indeed, her later professional growth was greatly influenced not only by her immersion in the classical works on sociology by Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, Erving Goffman, Pierre Francastel, Arnold Hauser, and Norbert Elias but also by her study of various records of the classical period and of the history of culture, fine art, and literature.

A comparison of Heinich's early and more recent work reveals fundamental metamorphoses in her conception of the sociology of art. After beginning the study of specific problems and expanding her field of interest, she usually discusses these problems exhaustively in a series of articles and monographs that appear one after the other. Such a clearly focused view of the strategic goals of scholarly work and a sharp sense of relevant problems, immediate trends, and social commissions have helped this scholar find her academic turf in the colorful landscape, enriched by many strong personalities and ideas, of the French sociology of art during the last three decades.

Continuing Bourdieu's conceptual research stance, Heinich is also interested in the object of the sociology of art as well as the ideas and methodology of sociology. However, she is famous for dealing with **the sociology of singularity, reception, and mediation**, the identity of the artist (primarily the painter and the writer) and how he functions in society, the apprehension, assessment, and recognition of works of art, art administration, the activities of museums, fashions in art, remuneration, amateurishness, professionalism, artists' habits, types of careers, etc. Seen from this aspect, her concept of the sociology of art is, in some of its theoretical

and methodological positions, akin to so-called pragmatic sociology and the historical sociology developed by Norbert Elias.

Under Bourdieu's influence, Heinich regards the sociology of art as an inseparable part of the system of social sciences. "In my opinion," she writes, "the sociology of art must be integrated into the science of sociology as one of its specialized fields just like the sociology of sport, religion, education, etc. and with the same rigorous criteria, methods, problems, concepts but adapted to art" (Heinich and Ténédos, 2007, p. 49). At the same time, however, she also defends the autonomy of the sociology of art, which has already achieved some solid results, as an independent sociological discipline. She believes that, because of the privileged status bestowed by the French humane tradition on its object of study, the sociology of art remains very dependent on the cult of art and close to art history and aesthetics; for this reason, it lacks a clear relationship to sociological research strategies and methods.

Another important feature of Heinich's conception is her reaction against the systems of artistic hierarchy entrenched in the classical philosophy of art. Perceiving the collapse of the classical systems of artistic hierarchy and their lack of promise in the postmodern age, she seeks to include in her research not only the formerly privileged arts but also all the others that are considered less significant (*les arts mineurs*) and that she is convinced are just as important as the ones that are considered significant (*les arts majeurs*). In Heinich's works, these ideas are intertwined with the spread of the sociology of art into everyday life and with her desire to include in it many phenomena formerly on the periphery of

academic science. Connected with these positions is a special emphasis on context when doing research in the sociology of art. Heinich justifiably criticizes her colleagues' research for being closed off within the narrow confines of their academic community. Hence follows her invitation to her colleagues to be more attentive to the reactions to their work because their research "is disseminated not only in their own professional world (of specialists in the social sciences) but also among those who are interested in these matters – and there are many such people" (Heinich, 1998, p. 83).

Finally, Heinich's conception is characterized by attention to the sociology of survey research (*sociologie d'enquête*) emphasized by Bourdieu – a sociology based on data from surveys and questionnaires and on research strategies and methods that are extremely important to the direction taken by sociology and to the study of the relationship between art and society. Her works have eventually focused on four basic themes and on the problem fields connected with them: 1) works of art; 2) their public or apprehension; 3) institutions or art mediators (these themes vary with the researcher and his theories); and 4) the status of the artist.

In her conception, Heinich seeks to ground a new science of works of art – one closely connected to postmodern culture and sensitive to the powerful influence of commercialization and market processes. Hence follows this scholar's solid contribution to the sociology of works of art, which by nature was not formerly a priority for sociological research because these problems were traditionally dealt with in aesthetics, the philosophy of art, and the history of painting, literature, music, film, and other arts. She is convinced

that *works of art must be analyzed not as a separate object of sociological research, but as important auxiliary documentary material that helps the scholar better know the objects and phenomena he is studying*. This position determines her special attention to the sociology of reception and mediation, to the highly complex problems of the relationship between the creators, mediators, and consumers of art.

The point of departure for many of the main themes and problems in Heinich's conception of the sociology of art is her doctoral dissertation, defended in 1981 – the first one devoted to the changes in French artistic life during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Here and in a series of articles on this theme, this young scholar applies Bourdieu's ideas to a sociological analysis of the historical preconditions for the origin and functioning of the artistic field in France. The essence of this process was the differentiation that emerged in the culture of that time between scientific and artistic activity and that is reflected in the appearance in Paris of independent academies, separate from the Academy of Sciences, of painting and sculpture, music, and architecture. These institutional changes not only formally separated painting, sculpture, music, and architecture from crafts but also attested to their privileged position in the artistic hierarchy of that time.

Also directly connected with these institutional changes was the establishment of a new social status for painters and sculptors – one that was higher than that of craftsmen and that was based on special professional preparation. In artistic culture, moreover, other processes were also unfolding – ones connected with the spread of the new concept of the fine arts (*beaux-arts*). These processes changed soci-

ety's attitude toward the place, function, and social status, first, of painting and sculpture and, somewhat later, of music and architecture as well as toward the creators of this art, their talent, their relationship to patrons, etc. Hence followed the theory, comprehensively developed by the creators of Romanticism and the nonclassical philosophy of art, of the special nature of the genius or unique artist in contrast to the grey mass of humanity.

Hence emerge both the fundamental theoretical positions of Heinich's so-called sociology of singularity (*sociologie de la singularité*) and the huge complex of problems connected with the artist, his social status, the products of his creative work, and the apprehension and assessment of works of art. In her early articles, when analyzing the historical preconditions for the appearance of the artistic field, Heinich already observes that, as the stratum of artists expanded and their social status grew, the specific characteristics emerged of the lifestyle attributed to this stratum of original authentic creators. Hence followed what later crystallized and was artificially poeticized – the so-called bohemian lifestyle, which in turn led to the entrenchment of the influential theory of the special nature of artists.

The point of departure for her sociology of singularity and for the study of the artist's status was provided by her first monograph, *La Gloire de Van Gogh: Essai d'anthropologie de l'admiration* (The Glory of Van Gogh: An Anthropology of Admiration, 1991). Citing van Gogh's work and tragic life, this scholar reveals the hidden mechanisms behind the formation of the new concept of the modern artist: after boldly breaking the established canons of official art, despised by all and

shoved to the margins of artistic life, van Gogh became an object of universal admiration and adoration, and the recognition that came made him into a legendary personality, thus laying the foundation for his glorification after his death. Heinich discusses in detail the various aspects of the relationship between this new authentic type of artist and his social milieu and of the reception of his work – the changes that emerged in society's attitudes toward the artist's social status.

Discussing various aspects of van Gogh's social milieu, she shows that the appearance and functioning of a legend enriched with tragic motifs of an undeservedly rejected artist of singular talent gave him a special aura after his death. Moreover, this fascination heroizes its object and makes legends out of even banal biographical events, which their interpreters combine with concepts that legitimize singularity, such as marginality, originality, asceticism, devotion to one's art, eccentricity, and madness. Thus, fascination with these legendary traits entrenches the singularity of this type of artist in the history of art, sacralizes him, and at the same time makes his works singular products in the art market. This process, in turn, affects the price of his creative products in the art market because a tragic biography embroidered with legends promotes constant speculation about the personality of an original artist and leads to constant increases in the price of his works.

Ideas that had already emerged during work on the book *La Gloire de Van Gogh* – about the singularity of the artist and his social status – were further developed in various directions in other monographs important for Heinich's intellectual evolution: *L'épreuve de la grandeur* (The Test of Greatness, 1999),

*Être écrivain: Création et identité* (To Be a Writer: Creation and Identity, 2000), *L'élite artiste: Excellence et singularité en régime démocratique* (The Elite Artist: Excellence and Singularity in a Democratic System, 2005). These later books deal with the sociological aspects of how the renown of great artists grows and functions in society and with the various factors that influence the identity and work of singularly talented artists.

Although Heinich's main research material is based on examples drawn from the history of fine art, since 2000 her scholarly interests have taken a different course because she has become interested in literature, especially the works of Claude Simon. She wrote a separate work analyzing the writer's social status and identity – *Être écrivain: Création et identité*, which sociologically highlights the characteristics of the *writer*, a category narrower than that of the creator or artist, and defines the specific features of a representative of this field of creative activity. These features are primarily connected with a specific lifestyle, social status, manner of writing, the nature of production, i.e. of literary activity, the various social ties connected with this activity, the presentation of oneself to public opinion, the problems involved in publishing, apprehending, and distributing works, etc.

A separate and important part of Heinich's research is related to the sociology of the reception and mediation of art, which also develops Bourdieu's ideas and has attained a special popularity in today's sociology of art. In this field, she is a recognized authority. Her work *Le triple jeu de l'art contemporain: Sociologie des arts plastiques* (The Triple Game of Contemporary Art: Sociology of the Plastic Arts, 1998) is a comprehensive study of the

three aspects of the sociology of art directly connected with artistic activity – *production*, *mediation*, and *reception*. Analyzing specific phenomena in the art world, she depicts complex interactions involving agents, institutions (museums, galleries), and private collections, and she touches upon the interdependence of a multitude of artists, mediators (critics, gallery owners, exhibition curators, sociologists, art historians, dealers, etc.), and apprehenders and consumers of art.

Alongside the traditional themes of the boundaries of art, the status of the artist, the politics of art, museology, professional expertise, public reactions, etc., most of the nine texts in Heinich's book *Faire voir: L'art à l'épreuve de ses médiations* (To Show: Art in the Test of Its Mediations, 2009) are devoted to a thorough discussion of the problems of mediation in its various aspects. This scholar also plunges into an analysis of artistic politics, the principles for collecting contemporary art, and the criteria for selecting and buying works of art. She discusses the conflicts between various institutions and agents in solving these problems and reveals the additional difficulties that arise when regional museums form collections of contemporary art. She shows that often, when assembling collections of contemporary art, the responsible people solve these problems only on the basis of their personal likes and dislikes. They leave aside the other important factors that influence the nature of their specific choices.

In her research, Heinich discusses in detail the three basic factors that usually determine similar decisions: first, the appropriate presentation of the work of art itself; then, the artist's personality; and finally, the composition of the commission making these

decisions (Heinich, 2009, p. 116). Hence follow Heinich's rationally based suggestions on how to democratize the purchase of art works for museum collections and make this procedure more effective. She highlights the fundamental shortcomings in the formation of modern art collections, and by analyzing specific facts, she shows that, when groups of experts at institutions undertake the purchase of art works, they often fail to perform the necessary procedures for a more objective assessment of these purchases and they do not provide a systematic and clearly argued justification of their choices. Her research and recommendations were received favorably by experts and the artistic community.

One of Heinich's most significant works is a comparativist monograph published in 2010 with the intriguing title *Guerre culturelle et art contemporain: Une comparaison franco-américaine* (Cultural War and Contemporary Art: A Franco-American Comparison). This study is based on a theoretical summary of the results obtained from comparative sociological research performed in 1996 by the Political and Moral Sociology Group of EHESS under the leadership of the American professor at Princeton University Michèle Lamont and the French professor Laurent Thévenot. This research covers one specific decade from 1980 to 1990. After researching contemporary art for many years, Heinich performs a comparative analysis of society's attitudes toward contemporary art in the two main countries, France and the United States, that are competing for worldwide influence in this field.

These comparative studies reveal the characteristic attitudes toward new art forms in those countries at that time and in the

institutions that dealt with the problems of contemporary art. Research showed that during the decade chosen for the American study there was a fierce struggle against new art forms, and ideas of a “crisis in contemporary art” and of a “culture war” were being widely escalated – ideas that greatly influenced American aesthetic consciousness. This book discusses the reactions of American society, which was then still rather conservative, to the radical forms of avant-garde art in New York, Boston, Washington, and Philadelphia; some of these reactions were so drastic that they disrupted the exhibitions of famous masters of the new art, for example, Andres Serrano. This reaction, which came from those socially active Americans who had grown up under the powerful influence of religious ideals and the traditions of realistic art, turned into a peculiar “culture war” that assumed very diverse forms of expression (Heinich, 2010, p. 18), while in France this fierce reaction against new forms of art did not occur, and in 1990 the press contained relatively few articles on a “crisis in contemporary art.” Hence follows what is characteristic of French society, art specialists, and the artistic community in general – a much more tolerant attitude, in comparison to that of Americans, toward new forms of art.

This comparative analysis performed by Heinich highlights the fundamental differences during this period between French and American attitudes toward new forms of art. Unlike the United States, where we see the tense atmosphere of a “culture war,” in France, in general, no clear-cut social movement crystallized against radical forms of new art. Hence followed the heated debates in American society, while French society limited itself to internal polemics among art specialists on

the problems of the new art. In the United States, a torrent of books and articles appeared on the “culture war” provoked by the radical forms of new art, and much space was devoted to this problem on television and in the other media, while in France very little was written on this theme, and the media did not focus on it. Heinich’s explanation of these fundamental differences is based on the traditions of culture and the social status of modern art in these societies and the degree to which new forms of art have been integrated into American and French consciousness as well as other sociocultural factors.

In summarizing Heinich’s conception of the sociology of art, we may state that during three decades of creative activity she has undergone fundamental metamorphoses. During the early period of her creative evolution, Heinich pursued her teacher’s ideas about the sociology of the artistic field, and her works continued propagating many of the themes and ideas defined by the reorientation of the sociology of art toward the social sciences. At the beginning of her scholarly career, Heinich consistently moved from the influence of Western institutions on the differentiation of artistic activity toward a theoretical and methodological discussion of the sociology of art and, later, toward the study of the artist’s singularity, his status, and the functions of creative products in society. A decade after the publication of her first works, the most intense period of Heinich’s research activity began to unfold, and one after the other new books appeared that made her the leader in today’s sociology of art, both in France and throughout the West. At this time, her contribution to the “sociology of singularity” emerged with research into



the art industry, its market and products, the evaluation, reception, and mediation of works of art, the various characteristics of agents, mediators, and museums operating in the artistic fields, professional expertise, the development of collections by museums, and the reactions of the public.

Thus, in the French sociology of art Heinich emerges not only as the most influential representative of the Bourdieu School but also as a leading figure whose research reflects, not only in France but also throughout the West, the latest tendencies since Bourdieu's death and the establishment of new directions and problems.

Now, after a brief assessment of Heinich's contribution, we can move on to a summary of the latest tendencies in the sociology of art at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. First of all, what we see in Western scholarship since Bourdieu's death is the dominance of a new *sociological* trend in the sociology of art and the gradual displacement of the earlier *art-historical* approach to the margins of academic discourse. This process has primarily been influenced by changes in the cultural and aesthetic consciousness of postmodern society, by the emergence of new cultural and artistic practices, by the growing commercialization of art, and by shifts in the hierarchy of the arts and in research strategies and methods. On a purely sociological level, this process is directly connected with Bourdieu, with the establishment in various fields of sociological research of the ideas and methodologies propagated by the journal he edited and the school he founded. Hence follows *the dominant view in the academic world that the sociology of art is not an art-historical discipline, but an*

*inseparable part of sociological knowledge.*

Moreover, there have been rapid developments in France and other Western countries during this period: a fundamental change in conceptual theoretical attitudes, the emergence of new fields and problems to be studied, the growing differentiation of research in the sociology of art, the specialization and professionalization of scholarship in specific fields of research, the growth of interdisciplinary interests, and the intensifying contacts between this discipline and other fields in the humanities and social and exact sciences (history, aesthetics, philosophy, literary studies, art history, anthropology, political science, law, etc.). There has been special growth in the role of economists and statisticians, who were formerly ignored by researchers in the sociology of art, for example, in the popular study of the economic activities of the painting market (*le marché de la peinture*) and art industry as well as of museums, galleries, and many other mediators (dealers, collectors, experts, etc.). The economic and statistical methods that Bourdieu emphasized are widely employed by his followers. Fundamental changes are emerging in the growing torrent of research in the sociology of art; ever-greater importance is attributed to various aspects of the culture and art industry: the politics and administration of art; its market, evaluation, and institutions (museums, galleries); the singularity, social status, and identity of the artist; the criteria for selecting works of art for collections; the reasons behind increases in the market value of art; the patterns in these increases; etc.

During the last few decades, studies on the reception and mediation of art have grown in importance and become almost classical themes in today's sociology of art.

The spread of these studies has been markedly promoted by the growing activity of scholarly research centers and the cultural and educational services at the great museums of various countries and by the growing number of workers at these institutions – people with diverse academic backgrounds for whom sociological research is an important part of their activity. The strategies of great museums are also changing because their curators, aware of the economic benefit, are changing their traditional ways of serving a passive stream of visitors and are devoting ever-greater attention to various untraditional events that attract public interest and to sociological studies of their economic effectiveness.

This orientation toward economic goals and toward increasing the number of visitors is also changing the nature and goals of the research being performed by the scholars connected with these museums. For this

reason, alongside the study of art history, which has traditionally been dominant at the research centers associated with great museums, increasing importance is being attached to what is connected with the successful day-to-day economic operations of these museums – the practical and applied sociological problems of the reception and mediation of art. Thus, what is changing at museums is not only the proportion of traditional art historians to sociologists of art but also the understanding of the importance of researching the reception and mediation of art. These changes are elevating the academic status of research into the sociology of art, and they are promoting an increase in the number of specializations and workers in this field, in their professionalization, and thus in the financing of effective research and in the stream of scholarly works connected with various aspects of museum activity.

## Literature

Heinich, Nathalie and Julien Ténédos. *La sociologie à l'épreuve de l'art: Première partie*. Collection Entretiens. Paris: Aux Lieux d'être, 2007.

Heinich, Nathalie and Julien Ténédos. *La sociologie à l'épreuve de l'art: Deuxième partie*. Collection Entretiens. Paris: Aux Lieux d'être, 2007.

Heinich, Nathalie. "Pourquoi la sociologie parle des œuvres d'art et comment elle pourrait en parler," in *Sociologie de l'art*. 1997, Nr. 10, pp. 11–23.

Heinich, Nathalie. *Ce que l'art fait à la sociologie*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1998.

Heinich, Nathalie. *Du peintre à l'artiste: Artisans et académiciens à l'âge classique*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1993.

Heinich, Nathalie. *Être artiste: Les transformations du statut des peintres et des sculpteurs*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1996 (rééd. 2005, 2012).

Heinich, Nathalie. *Être écrivain: Création et identité*. Paris: La Découverte, 2000.

Heinich, Nathalie. *Faire voir: L'art à l'épreuve de*

*ses médiations*. Paris: Les Impressions nouvelles, 2009.

Heinich, Nathalie. *Guerre culturelle et art contemporain: Une comparaison franco-américaine*. Paris: Hermann, 2010.

Heinich, Nathalie. *L'Élite artiste: Excellence et singularité en régime démocratique*. Paris: Galilée, 2005.

Heinich, Nathalie. *L'Épreuve de la grandeur: Prix littéraires et reconnaissance*. Paris: La Découverte, 1999.

Heinich, Nathalie. *La Gloire de Van Gogh:*

*Essai d'anthropologie de l'admiration*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1991.

Heinich, Nathalie. *La Sociologie de l'art*. Paris: La Découverte, 2001.

Heinich, Nathalie. *La sociologie de Norbert Elias*. Paris: La Découverte, 2002.

Heinich, Nathalie. *Le Triple Jeu de l'art contemporain: Sociologie des arts plastiques*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1998.

Heinich, Nathalie. *Pour en finir avec la querelle de l'art contemporain*. Paris: L'Échoppe, 2000.