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Nathalie Heinich and Roberta Shapiro (eds.), De l'artification. Enquête sur le passage à l'art. Paris: Éditions EHESS, 2012, 334 pp.

Ente di afferenza:
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Book reviews

Nathalie Heinich and Roberta Shapiro (eds.), *De l'artification. Enquête sur le passage à l'art.* Paris: Éditions EHESS, 2012, 334 pp.

The collection edited by Nathalie Heinich and Roberta Shapiro focuses on a specific process of categorization, called *artification*, which concerns the ways in which different forms of action, their agents and their products come to belong to – or, as the subtitle suggests, transit to – a specific category of practices and practitioners, objects and performances: i.e., the art category. Fully in keeping with Nelson Goodman's anti-essentialist philosophical approach to art, the volume aims, firstly, at displaying the "deeply contextual dimension of artistic categorization" [p. 267], and, secondly, by positioning itself in a broadly understood "pragmatist" approach, at doing so through the analysis of the concrete situated actions – both discursive and material – that constitute the process, "that *do* – and not only say – the accession to the status of art"/artwork/artist [p. 268].

With a socio-hystorical perspective taking as a beginning some point in the Nineteenth century, each of the empirical essays of Part I, as well as each of the "summarizing notes" [p. 25] of Part II, describes and analyses the diverse changes – "modification of the content and form of the activity, transformation of people's physical qualities, reconstruction of things, introduction of new objects, rearrangement of organizational devices, creation of institutions" [p. 20] – through which the considered objects, activities and actors – ranging from photography (Brunet) to the silver screen (Chaudron and Heinich), from hip-hop (Shapiro) to graffiti (Liebaut), from circus (Sizorn) to conjuring (Jones), from fashion (Crane) to comic strip (Seveau), from *art premiere* (Heinich) to *art brut* (Shapiro and Moulinié), from typography (Fraenkel) to artistic craftsmanship (Melot), from theatrical staging (Proust) to religious objects (Notteghem), from unusual art (Moulinié) to cultural heritage (Heinich) – cross the threshold between non-art and art (or, sometimes, the other way around, through a process of *désartification*) [e.g. Heinich, p. 210].

Alongside the index of names and that of subjects (the latter very helpful and well organized), a foreword by Shapiro – whose attempt to establish artification as a legitimate research issue dates back to 2004 [see Shapiro 2004a; Shapiro 2004b] – and a postface by both curators complete the volume. Taken together, the two make a good frame for the essays within: the effort of theorization as well as schematization is evident and mostly successful, especially if one considers the wide range of empirical cases and "artificative" operations under discussion. Particularly appreciable the clear explanation of the reasons underling the introduction of the neologism [pp. 24-25], a sort of deferred answer to a question that has been repeatedly asked to Shapiro during conferences and seminars. The issue hides a second one, what artification is not. This is particularly relevant with reference to Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, Richard Peterson's "production perspective" and, more generally, U.S. cultural sociology and its preoccupation with hierarchies (e.g. Howard Becker's *Art Worlds*), as well as, finally, social constructivism and its emphasis on semantic operations. Editors underline the distance separating the

concept of artification from the – subsequent – one of legitimization, the problem of identification from that of evaluation [pp. 21-23, 273-274; see also Shapiro 2007], and stress their concern with (collective) material action and the concrete change processes "trough which new objects and practices emerge and relationships and institutions are transformed" [Shapiro and Heinich 2012].

The postface, furthermore, offers a summarizing overview, in the valuable attempt to make theory out of foregoing analyses. Firstly, the curators recall the variety of fields from which a process of artification may emerge. The latter, indeed, forcedly consists of a *re*-categorization, a displacement *from* some category – "craftsmanship, industry, leisure, entertainment, sport, technique, science, religion, politics and social services, everyday life, criminal practices" – to the art one. Secondly, the authors examine the diverse devices, or "operators", of artification [pp. 281-288]. These are terminological (e.g. "danse hip-hop" instead of "smurf"), juridical (e.g. copyrights), cognitive (e.g. classification lists), temporal (e.g. graffiti creation during day instead of nigh), spatial (e.g. comic stripes exhibited in galleries), institutional (creation of museums, academies, awards, festivals, or associations), commercial (e.g. *art brut* in auction houses), editorial (books, catalogues, etc.), semiotical (e.g. theatrical stagers' name on posters, photos' title and/ or legend), media-related (e.g. graffiti reproductions on paper), corporeal (e.g. trapeze artists progressive concern with movement elegance and beauty besides technical and athletic prowess), organizational (e.g. introduction of the position of theatrical stager), practical (e.g. materials related), aesthetic (e.g. "pictorialism" in photography, or "narrativism" in hip-hop) and discursive (exemplar the role of *Cahiers du cinéma* for the invention of the "cinéma d'auteur"). Thirdly, Hienich and Shapiro briefly identify four groups of actors – or "circles of recognition", borrowing from Alan Bowness – that put into practice the above mentioned operators [pp. 288-290]. They then focus on the possible outcomes of that change process they call artification [pp. 290-294]: the latter, indeed, may result as complete and durable (e.g. theatrical staging); ongoing (e.g. hip-hop or graffiti); partial, in regard to a branch of a broader field of production (e.g. art photography) or a section of the larger public (e.g. comics); unstable (e.g. artistic craftsmanship); unattainable (e.g. typography or gardening); till the already mentioned de-artification. Finally, the curators (non-exhaustively) list seven effects of the considered process on the activities, objects and practitioners undergoing it: legitimization, autonomization, enlargement of art thresholds, aestheticization, individualization, authentification, rarefaction [pp. 294-296].

This being the framing picture, many chapters, though adopting as analytical tool the "artification lens", put most of the emphasis on State intervention, public/administrative acknowledgement and the role of the media, which amplify the former two. This is not completely surprising since the focus is on Western countries yet more specifically France, where public policies in the field of art and culture play a fundamental role, and where the State constitutes, as Graham Jones [p. 130] recognizes, the "primary vector of cultural consecration." This, however, takes nothing from the above mentioned "lens" as a useful research perspective. Evidence of that lays in the numerous insights that the diverse essays offer the reader. Just to name a few, I found very interesting the idea of "in retrospect", or *ex-post*, artification that François Brunet [p. 40] puts forward concerning photography. The same applies to the ways in which Diana

Crane, on the one hand, and Magali Sizorn, on the other one, interpret the artificative strategies of, respectively, fashion designers and trapeze artists in terms of *avant-garde*-like [pp. 245-248] and contemporary-art-like [p. 142] strategies. Similarly, Jones talks of "magic as avant-garde – a radical art" [p. 125], and Vincent Seveau, in analysing comics industry, looks at the opposition between alternative and mainstream authors/products as that between classicism and *avant-garde,* and concludes that "the artification of comics is still a matter of artistic activism" [p. 260]. Such ideas, I think, could be usefully exploited as analytical tools for researching a variety of similar or contrasting processes.

Moreover, I would like to touch on some issues that revolve around instability and fluctuation, on the one hand, and, on the other one, with particular regard to performative arts/activities, conflicting ideas about what ("essentially") is the artwork and who ("essentially") is/are its author/s and creator/s. In a similar manner as Émilie Notteghem (p. 62) regards the artification of religious objects as "tensions," "flows," "permanent oscillations," Véronique Moulinié talks of "a sort of hide-and-go-seek game, an hesitancy between display and dissimulation" [p. 79], and Marisa Liebaut refers to a simultaneously material and temporal "instability" of graffiti art (p. 169). Not so differently, Serge Proust, concerning *théâtre d'art*, interprets the process of artification as a "conflict for legitimacy" [p. 97] – which, to me, would be better defined as *conflict for authorship* – between dramtists, who provide for staging (*mise en scène*) in their written artworks, and stagers (*metteur en scène*), who consider literature as an element among others of theatrical performance, i.e., of their performative artworks. The case of the *Nouvelle Vague*, of which Martine Chaudron and Heinich talk about, depict a similar struggle between, on the one hand, movie directors-scriptwriters, who think of themselves as "authors," and, on the other hand, actors and producers [p. 228]. The same but opposite process, finally, applies to trapeze artists who, by limiting the role of the *metteur en scène*, "remain owners of their technique and co-authors of a collective production" [Sizorn, p. 147]. A comparison could be drawn between circus and western theatrical dance: in fact, with post-modern and contemporary dance, and their emphasis on improvisation and "choreographic co-construction," the relative positions of dancers and choreographers change in favor of the former ones, who are recognized as co-authors. In this case, however, the process is internal to a practice (and its practitioners) which (who) is (are) already member(s), in a manner of speaking, of the art category: it is about the *authorial/creative legitimization* of the contemporary dancer, not the artification of the trapeze artist and his/her practice.

Underneath these issues runs a more general one, which concerns the idea of the artwork – or, more specifically, the performance – as a whole, as an "overall project," borrowing the term from Atkinson [2006, 45-49] who, in discussing Opera, assigns its authorship to the producer, firstly, and, secondly, the production team. Proust similarly talks of the *project d'ensemble du spectacle*, on the definition of which stagers as André Antoine claimed monopoly to the detriment of actors [p. 97]. It is the very existence of this concept – the performative artwork as a whole, with at least a *primus inter pares* who holds most (creative) responsibility for it – that lays the groundwork and set the (war) field for tensions and conflicts like those mentioned above. It is worth considering that it is no accident that the art fields more concerned with the considered issue are

those of performative arts. The relative artworks, in fact, emerge more than others from a collective dimension, not to mention their ephemeral existence. It is more difficult, therefore, to establish (once and for all) where their "artistic essence" exactly resides and who we should thank for that.

Moving, as customary, to some critical aspects of the book, there are a couple of issues on which I would have liked more clear-cut coverage. First, I would have appreciated a few more words on the research method(s) that the authors regard as more convenient for the proposed pragmatist approach. Second, there is an issue, mentioned by curators, that could have been more expressly stated. Artification appears to be peculiar to "industrialized countries": western ones, firstly, yet, "[w]ith the globalization of the exchanges, […] all societies" (Shapiro, p. 19). Moreover, it seems to occur since the nineteenth century, point of departure of most of the chapters not accidentally. The point is, in my words, that the process of artification itself is situated. It is not only that the processes of art categorization are situated, each in a specific context, as the essays well demonstrate; it is also that such a category of social processes belongs to – or, at least, was born in – a larger but equally specific context, that is western modernity, as Heinich and Shapiro briefly note [p. 294].

Let me close with a more general observation. The proposed approach is concerned explicitly – and this is one of its most valuable aspects – with social change. Its disengagement, so to speak, from the work of scholars like Bourdieu, whose work has been diffusely criticized for its claimed incapability to see and explain change in classification structures, is framed in terms of focus difference. That is, artification is considered and presented as a change process that precedes those structures, and encompasses but is not limited to legitimization [see also Shapiro and Heinich 2012]. This is, to me, a good point of departure for reasoning and debating, and – I would suggest – for confronting again with Bourdieusan theory and comparing diverse processes of (positive or negative) *displacement*, both material and symbolic, of people, objects and activities. On the other hand indeed, and I disagree on this specific point with curators, Howard Becker, although his focus on marginal artists and mavericks, has considered changes in art hierarchies *as well as* the "birth and death" of art worlds, and has framed the latter in terms of *practice* transformations, changes of the "way of doing." To conclude, *De l'artification* certainly constitutes a thought provoking book, and a one dealing with some the issues that lay at the heart of sociological debate since, one might say, the beginning. It is a thick reading, which I hope will reach scholars also beyond art sociology.

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