Gabriel Rockhill: In much of your work, you have sought to denaturalize the social imaginary that underpins the modern conception of the artist. This social imaginary, which is less than 200 years old, has produced a powerful network of social associations linking the apparently prehistorical and legendary figure of the artist. This is the main requirement in modern art – as we say now – but as we started with the aim of 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 sociologism. 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 artist? This social imaginary is fundamental in celebrity and symbolic representations of artists play in the social imaginary 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 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—what I call an ‘axiological’ 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 artist’s position, and even this phenomenon appears quite different in both worlds: the image is fundamental in celebrity culture, whereas words, stories and their narrations are more important in traditional ‘major’ arts (among many other differences).

- Third: 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 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 continue with the normative side (acting, playing, dancing…). I developed this in Le triple jeu avec la querelle 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 sociological: 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.

Machete Interview with Nathalie Heinich
For a Comprehensive Sociology of Artistic Imaginaries

Gabriel Rockhill: You have claimed that contemporary art has been marked by a general displacement of 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 not 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 discard the artist mostly according to biographical issues.

- Second: this distinction between modern and contemporary art is essential to understanding what has been called the obsolescence of the artist 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 avec la querelle 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).

To be continued in the next issue of Machete

- This interview was conducted in Paris, France in October, 2010.
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 invited 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 under an axial 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 providing an historical narrative that situates 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 conventional aesthetic expectations toward 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, unexperienced 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 art, and tends toward elitism, 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 phantasmagoria. As for “protest songs,” we move from major arts to “popular culture.” They are obviously not the core, the paradigmatic or even disavowed of the “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 of their 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.