Sociological Art Practice in Post-1968 France

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Two complementary turns took place in the 1960s and 1970s that initiated unprecedented exchanges between the visual arts and the social sciences. A ‘cultural turn’ in the social sciences led to lasting changes in the humanities with the emergence of visual anthropology and the sociology of art as subdisciplines. At the same time, a ‘social turn’ in art and art history inspired social art historians and socially engaged artists to reconceive art as a cooperative process of communication operating within an enlarged visual field. These methodological shifts built upon a popular and academic boom in the field of sociology following World War II as governments, marketing firms, architects, and many others turned to sociology to understand social groups and behavior. The social sciences, however, rarely figure in histories of 1960s and 1970s art, despite the fact that sociology, anthropology, and psychology inspired novel artistic practices during that period. My research examines these historical and intellectual ‘turns’ to understand their implications for art history and artistic production.

My doctoral project focused on ‘sociological art,’ a movement and artist collective that developed in France following the upheavals of May and June 1968 and declined by the election of the Socialist François Mitterrand in 1981. Artists and critics associated with the movement, including artists Hervé Fischer, Fred Forest, and Jean-Paul Thenot, who founded the Sociological Art Collective in 1974, and critics François Pluchart, Pierre Restany, and Bernard Teyssèdre, sought to make art more responsive to the world by combining sociological methods and theory with new artistic currents and media.¹ During their six

¹ The papers of Fred Forest are archived at Inathèque, Paris; the papers of Hervé Fischer are archived at the Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Paris; and the papers of François Pluchart and Pierre Restany are archived at the Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes. A sincere thanks to all of these archives for providing access and support during my research, and to the Council for European Studies, Mellon Foundation, Fulbright Commission, La Société des
years of collaboration, the members of the Sociological Art Collective drew on an international network of artists, sociologists, philosophers, and students to organize exhibitions, conduct questionnaires, mount large-scale urban interventions, write books, and open a free school in Paris. They sought to make art more responsive to the world by researching and developing an “active practice in the social field,” staging their projects in such major international venues as the Venice Biennale and Documenta.  

The members of the Collective turned to sociology because it provided alternatives to certain pitfalls of modernist artistic practice and its attendant ideologies, moving away from subjective expression, the production of commodities, and self-referential autonomy. Social science methods of observation, inquiry, and data collection, as well as the representation of findings through photographic media, text, and diagrams, appeared to the Collective as more neutral than conventional artistic techniques and media. Furthermore, the idea of research conducted collaboratively by a group attracted the artists, who sought to avert the fabrication of finite, saleable objects and the isolation of individual authorship. In contrast to traditional aesthetic and art historical discourses, the sociology of art situated cultural objects in terms of non-cultural forces, underscoring the importance of social, economic, and political contexts often obscured by art’s aura of exceptionality. By importing sociological methods and approaches into artistic practice, the artists sought to make visible the conditions and ideologies that shape contemporary society and thereby critically interrogate art’s (and people’s) relationships to them. As the group wrote in its founding manifesto, published on October 10, 1974 in *Le Monde*, “the Sociological Art Collective, through its artistic practice, calls art into question, brings to light sociological facts, and ‘visualizes’ the elaboration of a sociological theory of art.”  

The models denounced by the Collective, however, were themselves passing out of fashion by the 1970s as a rapacious hunger for radical formal experimentation, political engagement, and participation took hold in multiple spheres. The group argued that its specific and epistemological relation to sociology – its use (and misuse) of the field’s methods – distinguished sociological art from the artistic tendencies with which it was often confounded, including the “carryall cultural theme of ‘art and society’,” ‘militant art’, and conceptual art. According to the Collective, sociological art acquires a distinct connection to the “objects” of sociology’s study, namely, human social behavior. As the group writes in its second manifesto of 1975: “sociological art attempts to question the ideological superstructures, the system of values, the attitudes and mentalities conditioned by the massification of our society. It is for this purpose that the group uses sociological theory, its methods, and that it develops a pedagogical practice of animation, inquiry, and disruption of communication channels.”  

The Collective, however, did not simply take from sociology, but also contributed to it by generating “a field of investigation and experience for sociological theory.” The artists often pointed to  

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5 “[L’]art sociologique tente de mettre en question les superstructures idéologiques, le système de valeurs, les attitudes et les mentalités conditionnées par la massification de notre société. C’est dans ce but qu’il recourt à la théorie sociologique, à ses méthodes et qu’il élabore une pratique pédagogique d’animation, d’enquête, de perturbation des canaux de communication.” Hervé Fischer, Fred Forest, and Jean-Paul Thenot, “Collectif d’art sociologique, manifeste II,” May 1975.  

6 “[Le collectif d’art sociologique] recourt fondamentalement à la théorie et aux méthodes des sciences sociales. Il veut aussi, par sa pratique, créer un champ d’investigation...”
sociology’s lack of an active practice in comparison to psychology and anthropology, and they envisioned their work as means of testing, applying, and modifying sociological theories and methods in the field. In his 1975 essay “Art Sociologique?,” Vilém Flusser, the Czech-born philosopher who lived in São Paulo and Paris and was a significant supporter and critic of the Collective, beseeched the group not to renew art through science, but rather to renew science through art. He asked rhetorically, “To create a new sociology inspired by artistic activity and, from there, a new kind of knowledge about reality. Is this the reason that the Collective calls itself ‘sociological art’?" If not the initial reason, the practice of sociological art did challenge many aspects of what the artists called ‘official sociology’, which they sharply criticized for its underlying positivism and its service to those in power. In lieu of the presumed distance between observer and observed and the impulse to construct and represent ‘man’ and ‘human experience’ through rationalist frames of reference, the Collective employed certain sociological methods, such as questionnaires and fieldwork, to initiate micro-scale events that involved individuals in dialogical exchange and encouraged reflection on and modification of existing conditions according to participants’ ideas and desires. “It is not to enslave art to sociology,” wrote Fischer in 1977, “but to use one against the other, to get out of the current ideological impasse.”

What makes this story especially complicated and compelling is that just as the Collective sought to renew art and sociology by tactically merging them, those fields were undergoing massive changes following the upheavals of May ´68, especially on account of the French state’s program of ‘cultural action’. The newly elected President Georges Pompidou dramatically reshaped the government’s engagement with art as a conduit for broader social issues through diverse efforts grouped under the policy of ‘action culturelle’ (‘cultural action’). In 1969, just six months after being elected, Pompidou wrote a letter to the new Minister of Culture, Edmond Michelet, in which he affirmed the importance of cultural affairs in state politics and expressed his desire to build an art center and mount an ambitious exhibition of contemporary French art, both of which would be underway within months. The state was taking a cue from the sociology of art, a field undergoing professionalization in large part due to the seminal work of Pierre Bourdieu. Between his first publications in the mid-1960s and his best-known book on taste as a means of class reaffirmation, La Distinction: critique sociale 10 The letter is dated December 15, 1969. Laurent Fleury, Le Cas Beaubourg, mécénant d’état et démocratisation de la culture (Paris: Armand Colin, 2007), 23.

11 While the identification of the sociology of art as a sub-discipline began in the 1950s, the first foundational studies and texts did not appear in Western academic circles until the mid-1960s to early 1970s. In 1948, Pierre Francastel was named the first Professor of the Sociology of Art at the École pratique des hautes études in Paris, but Francastel did not write his first overview of the field as such until Études de sociologie de l’art: création picturale et société (Paris: Denoël-Gonthier, 1970). This foundational text was quickly followed by Jean Duvignaud, Sociologie de l’art (Paris: Presses universitaires françaises, 1971). The first collect ed volume of texts in English was Albrecht Milton, James Barnett, and Mason Griff, The Sociology of Art and Literature (1970). A session on the sociology of art was listed in the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in 1954, and beginning in 1974, the annual meeting included a session on visual sociology (that is, the integration of visual means into sociological research). For an overview of the history of the sociology of art, see Jeremy Tanner, ed., The Sociology of Art: A Reader (London: Routledge, 2003), and for visual sociology, see Leonard Henny, “A Short History of Visual Sociology,” Current Sociology 34, no. 1 (1986): 1–4, and Douglas Harper, Visual Sociology (London: Routledge, 2012).
du jugement (1979) (Distinction: A Social Critique on the Judgment of Taste, translated into English in 1984), Bourdieu founded the Center for European Sociology in 1968 and the academic journal Actes in 1975, co-published innumerable articles on cultural issues, and advised a generation of young sociologists of art. Bourdieu’s influential concept of ‘cultural capital’ succinctly captures his fundamental argument that culture, rather than simply economics, reproduces social hierarchies. Individuals embody and reaffirm their class position in society by, for instance, visiting a museum, expressing certain tastes, or dressing in a particular style – in other words, through the acquisition of cultural capital. The French state intended to intervene in this process through a program of cultural democratization and cultural action.

The most visible and costly embodiment of the state’s new agenda was the conception and construction of Beaubourg (named Centre Georges Pompidou after the president’s death) as a new kind of museum, interconnected with its public and environment and serving multiple needs. Conceived as a hub of diverse activities rather than as a keeper of the past, the museum was founded with the explicit mission to serve multiple social and culture needs and to attract a more diverse public than traditional art museums. When the Center opened to the public in 1977, with a record 1 million visitors in the first two months, it included Paris’s first public library, industrial design laboratories, theaters, cafes, bookstores, a museum of modern and contemporary art, and a large public square. In what might seem like a remarkably ironic contortion, the Centre Pompidou hired Bourdieu and his team to carry out multiple studies of its audience between 1977 and 1981. These questionnaires became the chief mode of analyzing the center’s public and, thus, of understanding its mission and its fulfillment of it.

This small window into the widespread collusion between art, sociology, and politics provides the ground upon and against which the Sociological Art Collective formed and operated. Fischer, Forest, and Thenot and their circle in Paris resisted the state’s increasing involvement in art and sociology and the many ways that these intersecting fields advanced the state’s cultural and political agenda. Like fellow artists across the world, the trio championed collaborative modes of working, founded alternative spaces, used expanded artistic media such as video and performance, and began to see their work as critics, curators, and teachers as essential components of their artistic practice. Equally important, though less visible and wholly unaccounted for in the history of art, was the artist working as social scientist, especially when such work embodied a strain of dissident sociology central to the post-May ’68 period.

In many respects, the early events that led to the protests in May and June 1968 – to 10 million workers, or two thirds of France’s workforce, striking – issued from discontentment within the field of sociology. Among French students include Luc Boltanski, Nathalie Heinich, and Loïc Wacquant. Bourdieu first used the term “cultural capital” in his essay “Reproduction culturelle et reproduction sociale,” Social Science Information 10 (April 1971): 45–79.

13 Documents associated with these studies are archived at the Archives du Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.
students, the field of sociology, “the historian Richard Wolin writes, “had become little more than ‘data provider’ – a handmaiden to the forces of ‘governmentality’.” Just after leading the pivotal occupation of administrative buildings on March 22, 1968, at the University of Nanterre, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a key organizer of May ‘68, and three other sociology students wrote and distributed a tract called “Pourquoi des sociologues?” (“Why sociologists?”). The tract, which *Esprit* republished in May, denounces sociology for supporting capitalist rationalization and reaffirming authoritarian structures, and calls upon students of sociology to interrogate the field’s social function. Grafitti scrawled on the walls of the Sorbonne in May echoed this disgruntlement: “When the last sociologist has been strangled with the intestines of the last bureaucrat will we still have ‘problems’?”

The question exposes the circular, dead-end process of sociologists defining ‘problems’ so that bureaucrats could occupy themselves with fixing them. Many of these sentiments stemmed from the Nanterre sociology department’s own radicalized professors, including Henri Lefebvre, Alain Touraine, and Edgar Morin, who each infiltrated the field in his own way in the 1960s and 1970s.

Along with René Lourau, these sociologists sparked novel sociological approaches that appealed to qualitative, interpersonal, and creative dimensions of research. These sociologists sought dialectical relationships between the observer and observed, whereby analysis constantly adjusts according to the profoundly variable inputs of the unfolding events and behavior. This renovation of sociology was influential to the Sociological Art Collective, who combined their interest in expanded artistic practices with these emerging methods in sociology to carry out their diverse projects over the subsequent six years.

The story of the Sociological Art Collective draws bridges between these distant intellectual histories, compelling scholars to search beyond conventional disciplinary purviews in order to elaborate enlarged contexts for art, social history, sociology, and the little-studied history and practice of sociological art.

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17 The other authors were Jean-Pierre Duteuil, Bertrand Gérard, and Bernard Granautier.
18 The tract was re-published as part of the section “Journal à plusieurs voix,” *Esprit* 6–7 (June–July 1968), n.p.
20 Touraine outlined what he termed “sociology of action” in his 1965 text by the same name. He began to study the work of groups in minoritarian social movements, such as feminism, regionalism, and anti-nuclearism (cf. *Le mouvement de mai ou le communisme utopique*, 1968; *Vie et mort du Chili populaire*, 1973). Lourau focused on episodes of radical self-management, such as the takeover at the watch factory LIP (*L’analyseur Lip*, 1974), and the processes of institutionalization (cf. *L’instituant contre l’institué*, 1969; *L’analyse institutionnelle*, 1970). He outlined his views of sociology in *Le gai savoir des sociologues*, 1977. Lefebvre developed his well-known work on cities and urbanism, advocating the interventionist occupation of space (cf. *La révolution urbaine*, 1970; *La production de l’espace*, 1974).