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System theory and Art: Micro-diversity and Self-organisation

Abstract. This paper makes a renewed contribution to system theoretical thinking within the context of Niklas Luhmann's theory. The paper suggests that in Luhmann's late writings, he made a range of interesting and stimulating remarks about more recent developments on self-organising processes that are inspired by evolutionary economics. He proposes that these ideas can provide an understanding of meaning-making in the arts that overcomes older approaches that relied on a very mechanical understanding of self-organisation. The paper will show that the idea of micro-diversity and self-organisation provides a new framework that enables us to understand the emergence of singular and unique artworks and the differentiation of self-defined arts in the 18th and 19th century. Furthermore, the paper will show, that the distinction between micro-diversity and self-organisation provides a framework integrating a range of empirical phenomena, for instance, the rise of emotions, intentions, expression and practices, but also the development of art events (festivals, fairs, exhibitions), art capitals (from 19th century Paris to contemporary Berlin) and art networks (movements, narratives and art about art). Finally, these theoretical considerations enable us to overcome the problematic distinction of micro- versus macro structures by accepting the circular process of meaning-making based on micro-diversity and self-organisation.

Keywords. System theory, Niklas Luhmann, art, events, cities, networks

System Theory and Art

Pierre Bourdieu (1993:139) once famously said that sociology and art are not close companions.[1] Perhaps the same could be said for system theory and art. Given the wide-ranging application of system theory (including complexity theory, cybernetics and information theory) to biology, computer science, engineering, psychology, geography, sociology, economics, political science, religious studies and social work, to name a few disciplines, it is perhaps surprising that very little exchange has occurred between it and the arts. The last of such exchanges took briefly almost 50 years ago, when a few scholars, mainly in France and in Germany, proposed an information theory of aesthetics (see Bense 1969, Frank 1964, Moles 1958, Nake 1974). Around the same time, a number of artists used cybernetic system theory as a source of inspiration. For instance, Roy Ascott developed a number of cybernetically influenced ideas of behaviour that were associated with creating art. Stephen Willats also explored art's relationship with cybernetics, which resulted in the landmark exhibition *Cybernetic Serendipity* in 1968. Cybernetic thinking also sparked the animist kinetics of Robert Breer and Jean Tinguely. Perhaps, the best-known person of that time to employ system theory, information theory and network theory in his curatorial and intellectual discussions of the arts was Laurence Alloway (1984), who coined the term 'systemic art' in 1966. However, these ideas were not taken up by later generations of artists and art professionals (for an overview, see Halsal 2008).

It seems that terms like system, feedback, signal and information did not lie easily with the more individualised narratives of art that highlighted creativity, surprise, feelings and genius. Nor were they adopted by those political and intellectual critics, who saw the arts as driven they were by the industrial mode of production that dominated the late 1960s, exemplified by the revival of Adorno and Horkheimer's culture-industry diagnosis.

This criticism may have prevented a more profound consideration of system theory approaches for an analysis of the arts, and discussion of these approaches has now fallen silent. The only other system theory thinker who showed an interest in art is the sociologist Niklas Luhmann (2000, 2008). Luhmann also employed a language similar to that of earlier approaches, focusing on systems, functions, codes and programs. He does not write about particular works of art or particular artists. Moreover, he sees artists or the materiality of works of art as existing in the environment of the art system.[2] On one hand, his publications have received some consideration by art historians (and even a few artists), but on the other hand, they were greeted with the criticism that was prevalent in the 1960s, i.e., emphasis on the status quo, political conservatism and lack of social critique (see Sevänen 2001, Rampley 2009, Schinkel 2010). These concerns may not be completely unjust, but such a

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[1] An English translation of the French expression 'faire bon ménage' as 'making good bedfellows' stretches the French meaning a little too far.
2 The edited collection by Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht and Ludwig Pfeiffer (1994) provides an excellent overview of question of the interface between materiality and information theory.

critique should not be formulated purely on political or moral grounds. Furthermore, these superficial and rather stereotypical accounts seem to have been one of the reasons why subsequent changes in his theoretical oeuvre tended to be to be overlooked. In these, Luhmann proposes a very different conception of the processes of meaning-making, using much more recent thinking about self-organisation.

This paper intends to develop these later ideas. The first part will briefly outline Luhmann's conception of art until the publication of *Art as a Social System* (published in German in 1995 and in English in 2000), followed by a theoretical discussion of two papers that were published just before his death. The second part will outline the implications of this new theoretical framework. It will reconsider the role of works of art and artists and embed these within the context of the macro-structures of the art world, for example, major art events (biennials, theatre and music festivals and literary conferences), art capitals (New York, London, Berlin) and artistic networks (movements, narratives and intertextuality).

Luhmann and Beauty

Luhmann's idea of the formation of the art system rests on the idea of the code, for which he suggested the idea beautiful/ugly (Luhmann 1976). His notion of beauty does not refer to a quality in the artwork nor is it determined by the beholder; rather, it is a requirement of communication. Luhmann, therefore, speaks of a bivalent communication code that serves a communicative and motivational purpose. According to Luhmann, that an artwork should actually seen as an artwork and that this observation should be accepted by others is extremely unlikely. For him, it is, due to the great number of object, unlikely that a certain object will trigger communication. He suggests that this unlikelihood cannot be overcome by the artist, the work itself or the viewer. In order to be perceived as a work of art it requires a generalised communication code. Only in a context where this codes has developed and become institutionalised is it likely that the suggestion that a work could be a work of art can be entertained; on then does their acceptance as art becomes more probable and leads to more stable co-expectations. Luhmann, therefore, does not ask 'What is beauty?' but is interested in the question of how communication can and cannot expect to deal with beauty.

Given the huge variety of objects produced, it would be difficult to order them according to individual preferences.[3] Here, communication codes have developed that make the acceptance of a communicative offer, for instance, the request to acquire something, more likely. Communication codes pre-structure a situation and, in the case of art, they divide the roles of the person who

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3 Kant's (1987) analysis of the judgment of beauty relies on a cognitive approach, where an object is called beautiful, when its form enables the 'free play' ((§22) of a person's imagination. Martin Seel (2004) stresses the need to take the interplay between art works, the demands they make, and the person experiencing them, more seriously.

experiences the actions, the making of the artwork, and the artist. Someone who asks 'Is this art?' is already operating in a setting that differentiates between these different roles. The work of art is attributed to the activities of an artist, which trigger a search for meaning on the part of the viewer. Luhmann defines such a situation as art, not because the actual object may or may not be beautiful, but because the distinction between beautiful/ugly is employed to explain the actions of the maker. Luhmann is, therefore, not interested in the producer or viewer and his or her motivation, but how communication reveals such a division, namely through the code. In sum, Luhmann explicitly does want to define beautifulness, but asks what are the codes that enable a system to register what belongs and what does not belong to itself. In short, the code is a very generalised device that exists independently of an actual interaction; it provides a selective framework by its bivalent structure and thereby orients a situation through this either/or.

Codes thus have a very top-down feel and may seem to condense a multiplicity of social possibilities into just two dimensions. This is, of course, not a direct, criticism. From a theoretical perspective, the idea of a code as a communicative device is extremely elegant. However, it is also notable   the art system, and in particular its bivalent code, has been subjected to more criticism than any other. Several suggestions for different codes have been made (for an overview, see Krauss 2012:47). Luhmann may perhaps have been influenced by these debates or perhaps by his own observations (Luhmann was a keen observer of artistic production), but just before the end of his life, he made an alternative suggestion that deviates from the idea of the code, but also engages in a vocabulary that is less reliant on older versions of system theory. In a presentation he delivered at the Berlin Kulturbrauerei in 1996[4], Luhmann noted that art cannot be completely defined by any external criteria, such as taste or the interests of a buyer, but has itself developed criteria that make some things art and exclude others. This expresses virtually the same conundrum that is solved by the code. However, in this context he proposes that the only solution for art is self-organisation. "The great variety of works of art constantly being produced in very different fields, such as painting and music, poetry and sculpting, guarantee a necessary 'micro-diversity' that is required for self-organisation" (cited in Luhmann 2008, p. 433; my translation). Luhman therefore does not suggest a new code, but an alternative to principle of the code.

Micro-Diversity and Self-Organisation

The ideas outlined above are based on a short paper published shortly before Luhmann's death (Luhmann 1997). In this paper, Luhmann reconsidered the virtually unquestioned concept of the individual as a kind of social basis or last resort (see also Boli & Ellio 2008). Luhmann's quest to

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[4] The Kulturbrauerie is a complex of arts and entertainment venues in a former brewery (Brauerei), one of the few well-preserved examples of industrial architecture in Berlin.

reconsider the individual starts with the observation that the functional differentiation of society was recognised in the 18ᵗʰ century, but so was its grounding on an individualistic foundation like the division of labour (Mandeville), where individuals pursue different interests. The new political order after the French Revolution was to be based on the 'volonté générale' (general will of the people). Luhmann asks why macro-structures, such as the economy or politics, have developed such a strong preference for individuals in the last 200 years. He suggests that the autonomy of politics and economics is actually based on an anthropologic version of the individual.

The individual appears as existing in its own right while also being designated as a subject who is open to education- education designating a learning from the world. The diversity of individuals is thus not the result of an essentialist typology, but results in a radical way from their openness. Essentialist notions of the individual are abandoned and replaced by their dynamic, uncertain and undefined status, and it is this quality out of which social definitions of the individual can emerge. "Their specific humanness is now their indeterminateness, their lack of having a fixed characteristic, their reliance on milieu and education, which alone create the conditions through which individuals can operate socially." (Luhmann 1997, p. 28; my translation)

This emergence of the 'open' notion of the individual corresponds with another social development. The emerging economy and politics no longer align with the hierarchical order of previous societies. Their structural organisation cannot be secured through overarching religious narratives or birth rights. The loss of an external determination that structures social reality creates a surplus of possibilities which can only be tamed through the system itself, which now has to operate under conditions of self-organisation. For instance, Adam Smith differentiated quite clearly between firms, their microeconomic division of labour and their societal welfare effects, and Hegel's terminology of the 'the system of needs' means that the economy presupposes a self-reproducing diversity of interests. Similar ideas emerge in politics, ideas that stress the notion of people or citizens as collectively constituting the diversity of the population. This then becomes the founding concept of a democracy that is not simply a transmission of interests, but is built on the notion that diversity is the reason why everybody should participate in political decisions. In a representative democracy, political decisions are not oriented according to social origin or the social status of interest groups, but by the ideological scheme of left and right.

These examples should illustrate that the newly-reached autonomy of the economy and politics creates a surplus of possibilities which must be tamed within the system. Only self-organisation can achieve this, whether in its operative or structural modes. "Such a self-organisation is, however, not possible as a lofty intellectual idea or as mere 'theory'…. self-organisation has to create a reference to an area, which it organises." (Luhmann 1997, p. 28) Hence, economic transactions must exist before a market can develop; teaching in schools must exist before a pedagogic theory can develop; and legally regulated conflicts must exist before a legal dogmatic can emerge. "This insight can be

summarised by the thesis that self-organisation presupposes micro-diversity." (Luhmann 1997, p. 28; my translation)

Luhmann was not able to spell out the full consequences of this argument, but a number of important conclusions can be drawn from this line of thought. Self-organisation and, in the case of social systems, the self-organisation of meaning-making is a self-defining process. It is not based on a pre-existing essentialist typology. This leads to the question of how a system that changes from moment to moment can define itself. Luhmann's answer is that this occurs through the development of bivalent codes that serve as defining filters. However, the micro-diversity argument leads in a different direction. Self-definition is like a self-refinement; it involves an idea of comparison, a kind of testing of who I am, and who I am not. An identity is tested against the diversity of other identities.[5] In a predefined world such testing, such a constant reformulation and description of meaning-making, would not be necessary. Rather, it is almost as if a person's individuality could be shaped by external dictates or definitions. However, this is something that the system needs to discover by itself. Therefore, such a self-organisation requires a constant stream of perturbations, a kind of constant challenging or becoming, through which sufficient 'material' is created to fuel that self-defining process. Perturbations, therefore, have almost the opposite structure to codes. Codes validate or confirm the selectiveness of meaning, whereas those perturbations, that are based on micro-diversity, shape the system by excluding what cannot be incorporated into its self-definition. This is where Luhmann sees the contribution of the modern notion of the individual. The emphasis on the individual that it is indeterminate and thereby able to be conditioned "manoeuvres individuals into the necessity to reproduce the required micro-diversity for the societal order and its self-organisation." (Luhmann 1997, p. 28, my translation)

Micro-Diversity, Artworks and Artists

It is not until the 19th century that works such as paintings, poems, songs or theatrical performances become associated with notions of originality, authenticity and novelty (Moulin 1978, Melot 1999). What is more, the term 'artwork'[6] was to become transformed into an individualistic category of unique expression.[7] Before that time, such a notion of unique works of art did not exist; even the very

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[5] "Moreover, the individual is only individual in its difference from others, which means: micro-diversity." (Luhmann 1997, p. 30; my translation)

[6] This term, like 'art' usually refers to visual art only. However, in the context of this paper, the terms artwork and art will also apply to literary formats, performances and artistic approaches to sound.

[7] Wellmer (2004) provides an excellent theoretical elaboration of this transformation. This is not to say that there were experiments with singularisations in earlier societies, for instance, with Renaissance sculptures, ancient Greek vases, romantic poetry in 13th century Arab world and shan shui landscape painting in China. However, individualism has only found a stable, historical and effective form because it is stabilised in the context of the distinction between micro-diversity and self-organisation.

term artwork was not applied to works like those mentioned above, and they were not presented in a way that suggested a relationship existed between them (Kristeller 1980, Shiner 2001, Müller-Jentsch 2005, Clunas 2009, Johnson 2015). For instance, the Renaissance did not know of the meaning of fakes in our modern sense. Forging or copying was not a criminal or problematic practice. Quite the contrary, copies were even admired for achieving the same quality or for being good imitations. "Clever forgeries were appreciated and collected" (Wittkower & Wittkower 1963, p. 201). Even the early museums or royal collections did not make a strong differentiation between original works and reproductions; engravings or even photographic reproductions were to be found in most of them (Fyfe 2004). Barasch (1990) noted that the production of paintings, sculptures, theatre or music was not considered as expression but as imitation, displaying fine execution and skill in following rules (*Techne*). The painter or musician was not an innovator, but was either just executing the instructions of the client according to a highly regulated legal contract or merely reproducing common knowledge in a different form. "The artist was seen as [rediscovering] an inheritance which was there for anyone to take" (Martindale 1972, p. 67).

Furthermore, the way art was displayed before the 19th century did not emphasise a sense of individuality. Giovanni Paolo Panini's depiction of the Gallery of Silvio Valenti Gonzaga in 1749 shows that the paintings were plastered against the wall, from top to bottom, with no space in between them. Where and how they were fitted in depended on their size and the space available. They appeared more like an expensive form of wall-paper. Other buildings, like temples, churches and other places of worship, integrated artworks into a pre-existing, overarching religious framework, which they had to fit into (Lewis 1992). In the 19th century, artwork was transformed to become a highly individualised. To be an artistic work, composition or production now meant it had to be unique. This occurred against a background of industrialisation, mass production and strict economic rationalism.

We can now legitimately ask what the source of that uniqueness is, how the animism of works of art is secured, how we come to see a work of art as conveying a meaning? The work of art becomes an expression of the artist who created it. Initially, the unique expression or the notion of the artist as inventor is largely associated with the concept of genius, with the uniqueness of these men (women are rarely mentioned) being explained as an inherited quality; a great painter, poet or composer is born, not made (Zilsel 1972:38). In the mid-19th century, this notion of the genius slowly faded, and it is then that the word 'artist' is employed (Pelles 1963, Heinich 1996, Wilson 2009). The artist signifies creation through 'unique individual experience as the ground of all meaning' (Izenberg 1992: 16). This was quite a radical change. Uniqueness was not explained through a divine external impression, but through an experience-based expression. We see this in the notion of vocation, which was historically seen as a personal appeal, a 'calling' from the outside. However, about this time the concept of vocation became transformed; it became linked to one's individuality. A vocation as a

calling from outside was replaced by something linked to one's individuality and became a personal vocation (Schlanger 1997).

The concept of the artist combines two important developments. The artist, as a person, as an individual, is shaped by the infinity of experience of the world. Infinity implies an endless diversity of life-forms (Halbfass 1988, Clarke 1997). The individuality of the artist's work 'is equivalent to its self-limitation, for it is through the author's choices and constructions that the formless chaos of unlimited raw material is delimited and defined, and the work takes on unique characteristics' (Izenberg 1992:60). This idea is often picked up in Marxist writings that consider the artist as a mirror of society (Harrington 2004). However, this ignores the other side of the story. This that the infinity of the world and its shaping, constraining and limiting through the selectiveness of social experience leads to a reformulation of the concept of freedom that is not grasped simply through an absence of coercion, but rather through the ability to imagine and project alternatives. In the sciences, this same concept drives an understanding of freedom as a cognitive matter. In the arts, however, such freedom is an affective freedom.[8] It is the body of the artist, in its physical and metaphorical sense, its unique combination of social incorporation (experience) and imagining of alternatives to that incorporation, that becomes a defining practice.[9] Initially, in the heydays of Romanticism, affective freedom was largely interpreted as an emotional state. It is here that feelings and emotions were invented (Stewart 2010, Stalfort 2013). Artistic practice, practice defined as incorporated imaginary performance, foregrounds the notion of experience and freedom through emotion. The body of the artist is shaped by emotion, manifested, for example, by an unconventional, idiosyncratic and eccentric lifestyle, but also often in a negative sense, for instance, through a life of poverty, loneliness or illness (de Duve 1997, Matravers 2001[10]). Clearly, such individuation through the expression of inner feelings, has changed from the Romantic vision, even to the point where it is regarded as somewhat self-indulgent, but only to take on other forms.

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[8] At the same time, a configuration of the audience of the arts emerged that is one of indifference. In politics, the audience is included through contributions, like voting and in the economy through buying and selling. The arts are different. In the arts, the audience's contribution is not to contribute, or rather, the audience's (non)contribution is its indifference, which endows the artist with unfettered freedom. That does not mean that every work of art will be appreciated, but that the artist is at liberty to choose the work of art to be produced or performed. Even the commissioning of a work of art means that the buyer must be indifferent and has to accept the freedom of the artist. Any interference in the process, such as a political or commercial intervention, undoes the affective element and turns it into a political act or commercial acquisition. This is, of course, very different from the commissions of former times when the client determined the work. For instance, in the case of painting, contractual arrangements would specify the nature of the painting, motifs, size, deadlines and even how much blue or gold paint was to be used. The painter was a mere executor (Baxandall 1972).

[9] That argument agrees very much with the early Pierre Bourdieu and his discovery of practice as a corporal quality, as incorporation or habit. However, whereas Bourdieu regarded practice as a theoretical category that exists for all people, in this context practice is much more a modern invention, a transactional category, that may play out very differently in other social contexts. Incorporation, reference to the body as practice, is stressed in the arts, religion, advertising and intimate relationships, but less so in economics and science.

[10] However, this paper does not align with these two authors when they go so far as to make feelings an ontological condition for the definition of art.

Artworks and the artist are inseparable. The minimalist attempt to delegate the production of work to others have not disqualified their works as works of art. Discovered objects and works from long ago or far away by unknown artists require one to imagine an inventor, like the master of X.[11] Natalie Heinich (1991). Others (Beebe 1964, Kris and Kurz 1981, Kampmann 2006) have researched more recent developments that have added new layers and narratives to that singularisation of artistic practice. These may include national or ethnic connotations symbolised in exhibition titles, like contemporary Cuban art or Korean music. The latest trend is to reformulate the notion of affective freedom under the narrative of artistic research and discovery (see Borgdorff 2016). However, the discovery that results from that research is tied to the artist, to personhood, unlike those of the scientist whose truths must be validated independently of any person. Even more so, research is grounded on freedom that the person of the artist, its biography and experienced incorporation enables a research that can imagine and act out alternative forms of research that go beyond the established scientific canon. 'What Picasso discovered was what he called the right to the arbitrary and the right to freedom' (Malraux 1980: 15).

It is important to mention at this point that the singularisation of works of art is not an essentialist property of those very objects but derives from their 'connections with each other' (Sober 1980: 350). Luhmann makes a similar statement in his analysis of the individual, which is not an elementary causal category that has impact through itself. 'Moreover, the individual is only individual in his or her difference to others, which means: micro-diversity' (Luhmann 1997: 30). This singularisation, its diversity as freedom, develops within a framework of self-organising processes and is not an essentialist quality of the object.[12]

Micro-Diversity and Self-Organisation: Events, Cities and Networks

Interestingly, while the uniqueness of the works of art come to the fore in the 19th century, so is the self-organisation of art – *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake). While that phrase may have served to translate Kant's thinking on aesthetics to earlier readers, it took on a different form in mid-19th century Paris where it signalled the freedom of art, its independence, where art defines its own course (Wilcox 1953, Bürger 1984, Bell-Villada 1996, Bourdieu 1996). The independence of art is declared virtually at the same time as works of art are singularised. This trend may seem paradoxical, but, as argued in this paper, self-organisation is actually facilitated by such diverse perturbations (singularities) because through these, the arts can explore and test a variety of meaningful states. Self-organisation intercepts diversity, it absorbs it into a fixed and at the same time unstable unification.[13]

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[11] It is perhaps for that reason that works of art are strongly associated with the notion of intention, that they have a communicative quality, and therefore they seek our interpretation (Schaeffer 1996).

[12] It therefore does not matter if the artist willingly constructed the work as unfinished or with a greater degree of freedom (see Eco 1989).

[13] In contrast to older order-from-noise approaches, such a macro-state is not to be seen as regularity, but as 'novelty, or creativity' (Morin 1999:107). It is therefore perhaps not surprising that the formulation of

Further research in this area might show that such developments can be triggered by the random fluctuations that are amplified by positive feedback (Arthur 1994). It is perhaps for that reason that artistic activities flourished in the 19th century in relatively small peripheral environments, like the urban milieux in some cities (Casanova 2007) and early art colonies (Lübbren 2001). These developments remained quite fragile, and it was not until the 19th century that three principle devices emerged that would mediate the micro-diversity of artworks – events, cities and networks. The following discussion will propose describing that the mediation that these structural devices perform as 'collectioning'.

The idea of a collection is to select and bring things together, to compare and contrast, in short, to give a structure to the selection through selection (Simmel 1991). Andre Malraux (1953, p. 14) writes that the collectioning "not only isolates the work of art from its context but assembles it with rival or even hostile works." The inflection of collection using the suffix -ing stresses the active but also the narrativised build-up of such ties (Herrero 2002). The logic of collectioning is therefore not be seen as motivated by external criteria but requires an examination from the inside (Groys 1993). Collectioning positions works of art in contrast to other works of art; they are assembled and located in a dialogue. This proximity, but also the contrast arising from their separation, stresses their unique quality; it also emphasises their commonalities. It positions older in relation to new works, identifying trends and reformulates routine readings of established works. Thus, avant-garde art was not simply the result of a new artistic freedom but developed in contrast to the imposition of the collection. What is new depends on the meaning-making logic internal to the collection and not on a natural historical development or progress. Meaning-making has here a non-temporal quality, making innovation possible. Thus, works from long ago may appear to be new in the collectioning. "The boundaries of the collection are constantly fluctuating and open to different times and places. Individual innovations that entail being included … have an impact on the entire state of the collection and change the logic of other innovations." (Groys 1993, p. 78). As a consequence, the macro-state that results from the collectioning is an unstable state. Collectioning is transformed by the integration of singularities, but through this he pool of micro-diversities and what may be seen as unique objects are also changed. Three devices mediate that collectioning: events, cities and networks.

Events

The first major art exhibitions, music and theatre festivals and literary writing conferences emerged at the end of the 19th century. They were consolidated after World War II, and are now considered key players in the global art world. These international events assemble a great number of works – music, writing, paintings, performances, films – in a limited space and in close proximity to each other. The

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narratives, the collecting and comparing of works of art, their curation, is nowadays seen itself as an artistic endeavour.

works presented at these events are drawn from a worldwide range of possible alternatives. Their selection presents global contexts in which local preferences are embedded, so forming a perspective that directs the art world (Morgner 2017). These presentations do not reduce the micro-diversity of artistic works, but it seems that their unifying structure creates a continuous production of meaning-making from homogenous and heterogeneous artistic tendencies. In other words, these events serve as platforms of selection and linking, comparing and contrasting, thereby engaging in meaning-making, constructing a knot or mélange of dense but artistically diverse practices and meanings (Papastergiadis and Meredith 2011) that embeds intense and compact data in a web of other events. Furthermore, these events extend the global pool of artistic activities (including the production and consumption of art) to many places and times.

This pool of resources appears to be almost without coherent organization – fluid, ever changing, and without order. All of these artistic micro-activities appear and disappear constantly in vast numbers. In a variegated setting, observers may have difficulty detecting what is going on and, more importantly, the outcome – that is, the future course of these artistic activities. Such art events can be seen as catalysts, fostering a diverse range of artistic variations across a range of nations, regions, ethnicities, geographies and media. Many works of art may not themselves attract public attention but must rely on catalytic devices to attract attention through reactions and connections between these events, just as businesses can form joint ventures, art works can rely on events.

The catalytic function of such events derives from their ability to assemble and concentrate in one place a great number of works of art for a short time, creating a diverse cosmos in that place. This notion of meaning-making can be further elaborated by describing art events as a world public sphere. In contrast to museum studies and theories of cultural consumption or mass communication, public spheres do not envisage audiences as receivers. Rather, they entail a much more active notion, such as that developed by Habermas (1989). In Habermas's terms, a public sphere comprises three aspects that are of relevance here: as a medium for public bodies, discussions and opinions. A public sphere develops from gatherings where a public articulates its perspective regarding the wider society (Habermas 1989:176). First, an act of assembly takes place – an art fair, or a music or theatre or film festival, summoning artistic works. However, Habermas's concept of 'the public' is more than just a crowd or a large number of people assembled in one place; connections have to be forged between these actors, and they must share their perspectives through the medium of public dialogue to form a public opinion. In addition to the lectures, workshops, seminars and publications that surround them, exhibitions and festivals and also connect a diverse range of art works, brought into contact to engage and encounter each other (Enwezor 2002:46) under one roof. This linking or framing amplifies the direction of these practices, forming a 'public body' in which the broader art world is affirmed or challenged.

However, no confirmation lasts forever. In each edition, events bring together many new artists from diverse cultural contexts, so requiring the installation of new frames to fit each edition. The creation of these frames (see Goffman 1986) is based on a certain density or compactness, in which observations occur and are related to each other – in other words, identifications arise out of a process of social comparison. These observations are marked by well-timed interlocking within an orientation toward other observations.

According to White (1992) and Latour (2013), this form of connection and interlinking can be defined as a network: "Identities come to perceive the likelihood of impacts to other identities in some string of ties and stories. The social result is called a network" (White 1992, p. 65). Latour (2013, p. 42), who distanced himself from earlier notions of the network, argued in similar fashion that 'net-sense' results from passing "through surprising associations", adding meaning to the quality of that activity. Relatively heterogeneous elements of networks – in this case, the works of art presented at exhibitions and festivals – engage in meaning-making, within which the identities of single elements (XY's work of art) are defined according to how they directly or indirectly enable other elements to control themselves, firmly or non-firmly. According to White (1992, p. 62), "The triggering of one identity activates control searches by other identities with their own impetuses toward control of any and all exigencies, including each other's". Likewise, Latour (2013, p. 62; emphasis in original removed) writes: "In order to exist, a being must not only pass by way of another […] but also in another manner […], by exploring other ways, as it were, of altering itself". Such mutually interlinking adjustive reactions provide direction and may lead to the stabilisation of certain artistic trends and values. In the present context, it could be said that the creation of value and meaning for deviance and innovation depends on the possibility of interlinking such artistic creations (Peterson 1997, Beckert and Rössel 2013). In this way, these events can be seen as both producing and absorbing uncertainty at the same time (Morgner 2014).

Cities

Perhaps, the first and most popular example of an art capital is 19th century Paris, but since then other art capitals have emerged and disappeared. These cities are perhaps best described by amassing and concentrating micro-diversity of artistic activities, whether in the creation of art, in the number of exhibitions, shows and plays or the number of relevant spaces dedicated to artistic endeavours. 'Numerous emerging and established artists choose to visit or live in these cities, as do many organisations operating in the art world (Montgomery & Robinson 1991). A study by John O'Hagan and Christiane Hellmanzik (2008) demonstrated that 70 per cent of the top 200 artists of late 19th and early/mid 20th centuries lived in Paris or New York City (see also Hellmanzik, 2009; 2010; such data can also be found in field of art music and literature, see O'Hagan and Borowiecki 2010, Pradeau and

Samoyault 2005). Studies of successful visual artists of the last 40 years based on the *Kunstkompass*[14] reveal that more than 50 per cent of the artists born outside Western Europe or Northern-America lived in New York for more than five years (Bucholz 2006).

These cities also have the highest concentration of art institutions and attract visitors from all parts of the world (cf. Rosett 1991:132–133). In addition, the agents and other organisations that represent artists, actors, dance groups and foreign artists from abroad are present in these cities. These institutions dominate the great festivals and exhibitions; for example, more than 20 per cent of the galleries attending the *Art Basel* art fair are based in New York (and the majority of these are in a single neighbourhood: Chelsea; cf. Halle & Tiso 2007). The majority of artists or art groups who are successful worldwide, like the Young British Artists or artists from China, are also related to these cities. These cities are invaluable sources of artistic trends in the art world (cf. Crane 1987, While 2003, Currier 2008). It can be argued that these cities stimulate and transform micro-diversity from afar. Examples include the copying of infrastructure (e.g., warehouse studios and art schools) and the adaption of styles. Their trends and knowledge are likely to be transmitted across the globe, and their authoritative status makes them sources of stimulation (the use of new styles or techniques) or rejection (works of art become expressions of the past). The art activities of these cities receive more attention in the leading art journals. These cities also house the universities and networks through which parts of the art world are connected (in the case of Paris, see Joyeux-Prunel 2009 and Pradeau & Samoyault 2005).

They frame the micro-diversity of artistic possibilities as an open horizon that is cut loose and with every attempt to grasp it, the horizon moves. Thus, artistic activities constantly observe what has been seen but not looked at. It is here that a semantic of the unique, outstanding, current and contemporary is fostered, where the influx and outflow receive a dominant representation within the art world (cf. Burton 1972:4, Lechner & Boli 2005:85). It seems that the clustering of artistic activities or formation of art districts is of crucial relevance. Art milieux can be found in different parts of different cities, such as Bushwick in New York City, East London (Shoreditch, Victoria Park), District 798 in Beijing, Santa Teresa in Rio de Janeiro, Melville in Johannesburg (South Africa), District 4 in Zurich or the Village des Arts in Dakar, and not all of them appear on the world stage.

The internal milieu of such places seems to require a specific differentiation and simultaneous mutual interlinking. Consequently, a milieu may develop in which a creative, stimulating, motivating but also competitive and crictical atmosphere becomes possible, thus unlocking a great dynamic. Although such a structure is an important potential, other structures to reinforce it had to develop accordingly, for instance, galleries and music or theatre districts, which enable the integration of works or art into a

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[14] The Kunstkompass is a ranking of the art market's most sought-after artists, published annually by the German business magazine *Bilanz*.

wider social context by stabilising these selections through a mutual confirmation. An open horizon seems to develop when a great micro-diversity of artistic interactions can be interlinked and unfold an unprecedented dynamic, and when these variations are integrated into a larger context of reinforcing structures which select only a few of them, confirming their standing, and thereby remodelling the pool of what is possible. The interlinking of both aspects shapes the landscape of the art capital. It has broadened into a totality of artistic production as if "no important product is missing, and though much of the material and samples have been brought together from the whole world, they have attained a conclusive form and become a single whole" (Simmel 1991, p. 120).

Networks

In this part, three different forms of artistic networks will be considered: art movements and groups, narratives and canons, and art about art.

Art movements and groups.

> "It's a popular ideal that the artists' work in isolation, which is literally true, but actually it is very much a community activity. You paint with the knowledge of what everyone else has done [...] The more I paint and learn, the more I realize art is not a very individualized enterprise. It has to do with what other people are doing" (an artist, quoted in Crane 1987, p. 25).

Rudolf Stichweh (2000) explained this phenomenon by his 'and-so-on' hypothesis. What this hypothesis exemplifies is that an interaction of artists occurs in the presence of an 'and-so-on' of other interactions of artists which happen at the same time. This establishes the possibility of a virtual connectedness that becomes relevant to the individual interaction itself, which then has to reckon with its own selectivity among a diversity of other artistic activities. It therefore intervenes and influences the process of artistic creation, or rather, production. It will be argued that art group and art movements are the front-line structures that deal with the ever changing and challenging pool of artistic micro-diversity.

The stimulation of aesthetic variations beyond a single shot has to overcome two difficulties: the creation of deviance in contrast to an established and well-known context, and the furthering of that variation. These requirements are absorbed within artistic groups where artists can share their ideas with equals (Thurn 1997). In other words, around such issues a group of dense and intense interactions emerges (Müller-Jentsch 2005). Artists seek other people who value their deviant behaviour.[15] This leads them to encounter situations similar to their own. It enables constant interaction and concentrates interactions within a shared work situation (artists renting a studio or living in some art residence together), perhaps by pooling their resources to organise group

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[15] It seems that universities or other higher education institutions play a crucial in this.

exhibitions, slam-readings or off-theatre performances. Such art groups and movements are not formal associations; they are often just based on condensed interactions and weak links. They are loose alliances with a sense of belonging; they do not regulate how the members contribute to it and for how long. These art groups and movements seem to have their origin in mutual support for similar efforts involving innovative programmatic decisions that thus do not appear as merely idiosyncratic acts of a single artist (cf. Luhmann 2000:167). On this basis of shared commitment to artistic expression and mutual support, new artistic goals develop (cf. Ridgeway 1989). These tentative negotiations of shared norms and values are followed by shared production and mutual support for the creation of art and the formation of the artists' identities as artists (cf. Farrell 1982).

The formation of identity is crucial, particularly at the beginning of an artist's career. It provides self-confidence and professionalism, so that one can be assured that one's activities have artistic value while operating in an ocean of diverse artistic possibilities. Mutual affirmation by other similarly-oriented peers leads to a productive working atmosphere that increases the output of artworks (cf. Israeli 1952, Thurn 1983:294). Artists who are members of such groups and movements have more solo exhibitions, publications and performances than artists working alone (Thurn 1985:85). Groups simultaneously foster both consistency and diversity. The consistency is a result of certain norms, themes, or other elaborate self-descriptions that develop and lead the communication of such groups and movements. They also enhance the artistic interactions, even when its members are not together. "When a group member returns to his or her studio or desk after being with the group, he or she is still acting as a member or part of the group." (Farrell 1982, p. 452) These self-descriptions receive the status of higher values that inform the group and movement. With the establishment of such norms, it becomes easier within the group and movement to monitor other artistic movements and activities outside of it, whether they are ignored as not being relevant to it, dismissed as being in contrast to the group's or movement's approach or acknowledged as sympathetic to, or supportive of, it. Aesthetic subjects can be tested against virtually everything else, including other styles, media and themes. Thus, important ideas and variations can emerge and be nurtured. Earlier work and approaches can be extended, particularly after the group or movements dissolves or becomes the basis of an individual career.

This important effect of consistency and inner stability of the group does not, however, result in the creation of sameness; by contrast, it facilitates the creation of diversity. "The collective of artists as a band of brothers [..] generate[s] individuality" (Rosenberg and Fliegel 1979, p. 36). These multiple and well-tested singularities occur at a greater pace, making them more likely to stimulate further variations and thereby transform the pool of micro-diversity.

Narratives and canons. Narrative networks are another form of collectioning singularities and thereby engaging in a mode of selective organisation (Bal 1994). While narratives of artistic or stylistic progress are a very popular form, one can find a type of collectioning that assembles exemplary

singularities; the best works (songs, plays, paintings, novels) or the best artists (writers, musicians, painters). They often take a canonical form. Artistic narratives select and link works of art through a chronological listing of the dates of important works that have defined the course of art history (Bremond 1964). However, they do not create order simply through such a chronological ordering, but more through grouping them into different stylistic periods, such as the art of classical antiquity or Renaissance art.[16] The selection is typically driven by innovations in technique and technology (linear perspective, woodwind instruments) and new subjects (male nude, hidden love) and can be framed by a specific social context (see Schapiro 1953, Gombrich 1968, Ackerman 1978, Elkins 1996, Sohm 2001, Hartwig 2015). Selectivity is based on identifying how artists and their works are inspired by the art that came before them and by contemporaneous events. Such a historisation is quite a new phenomenon and had become a common narrative not before Johann Joachim Winckelmann[17] (Potts 1982).

In earlier times, the diversity of 'works of art' was largely seen negatively as displaying the world's manifest inconsistencies and imperfections. Decadence was noted and initially stigmatised with labels such as gothic or baroque (see Tsien 2012). It was only in the 19th century that appreciation of the singularity of a work of art replaced long held traditional concepts of the unity and harmony of beauty and goodness, and truth through perfection. This allowed the narrativisation of works of art through timelines to provide an intellectual framework by which the singular work gained meaning and weight beyond itself (Simmel 1998). It is linked and compared to other works, but also framed within an encompassing chronology (Richardson 2000). Historical development is not measured through transcendental aesthetic categories of perfection, but the transition was now deeply embedded in the work of art and thereby gained distance from previous works; it excluded what already exists and thereby opened new possibilities. Narratives in this sense intercept diversity but open up new possibilities.

The general understanding of a canon (anthologies, top-100 lists, classics) could be seen simply as a list of exemplary works (masterpieces) and can be applied to creative works of all kinds and traditions, for example the Western canon, the Chinese classics or the Vedas. While the word 'canon', or its Latin, Greek and originally Arabic forms, has existed for millennia, applying it to the canonisation of other than ecclesiastical works is a phenomenon that emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries (Halbertsma 2007). The early canons seemed to suggest a kind of naturalness or obviousness, which is why some works were included in these canons and others were not. However,

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16 This internal differentiation and its effect upon cultural consumption and reputation have been well-researched by Pierre Bourdieu (1984).

[17] Winckelmann was a German art historian and is well-known for his *History of the Art of Antiquity* published in 1764.

their selective structure, their contestation and occasional updating is now all very apparent (Ross 1998, Morrissey 2005, Crowther 2007, Gorak 2013).

What remains unclear is why the arts may have a need for such a canonisation.[18] Franco Moretti (1996, p. 4 and p. 39) helped to complicate this question when he remarked that the defining quality of such masterpieces (in his case - great novels) was that they were "virtually unread" and only "irony .. seems the ideal strategy for keeping it alive". In other words, these canons seemed to have little direct effect on guiding either aesthetic consumption or artistic production. We may assume that if these canons do not actually affect artistic activities, their function is on a more representational level. The raises the question of what canons do, in fact, represent for the arts (Guillory 1993).

It can be said that canonised works combine singularity with a universal claim. They are outstanding works, and while they are highly individual, their individuality extends beyond them, that is, they speak for something more than themselves. Arguably, they formulate a universal standard of the outstanding; Their singularity occupies an inviolate level (Mukherjee 2013:8). They are like a final judgment - at least for a certain time. This universal singularity of canonised works suggests that all other contemporaneous works can be subsumed under their umbrella. Not everything needs to be known, as a selective sample speaks for the majority. At the same time, their inviolate quality serves as a kind of unofficial law that formulates what cannot be repeated because its singularity is already acknowledged. In this sense, the canon and its law of non-repetition reinforces the need for constant diversity. Every formulation and reformulation of the canon which occurs as new artists are included and others fade into history, changes the pool of micro-diversity, because what counts as singularity has to work on the basis of its inviolate quality.

Art about art. The final type of narrative network to be considered concerns what could be called art about art. Academic approaches have mainly come from literary studies and have used the term 'intertextuality' to investigate this form of networking (Kristeva 1986). Broadly speaking, intertextuality refers to a process of meaning-making, where the meaning of one text is shaped by that of another. Research has focused on a variety of textual devices that produce such a relationship, for instance, allusion, quotation and parody. That approach has been subsequently applied to other art forms, like, intermusicality, interpictorality, intermediality and interdiscursivity (Fairclough 2003, Klein 2005, Isekenmeier 2013). Although the prefix 'inter' stresses the in-between nature of that approach, the main focus is on the meaning *within* a work in the context of another work and does not pay attention to the meaning of the ties or the meaning of the in-between. Harrison C. White (1992) made some interesting remarks on the nature of such ties. White (1992, p. 65) noted that 'identities', which White defined identities as temporally stable meanings, "come to perceive the likelihood of impacts on other identities in some string of ties and stories." Ties are therefore not to be seen as a

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[18] There is no doubt that canons could have monetary, educative or scientific relevance.

mere connection, like lines in an Euclidean space, but become bound up with a story, with a narrative of their relatedness forming this a link. White (1992:71) argued that through such stories (ties), a more encompassing narrative (a plot) may emerge that results "in complex overlappings among networks of meanings" (White 1993, p. 66).

At core, the story of art about art is one of repetition. Some element of one work is repeated in another. However, as Jacques Derrida (2001) convincingly argued, repetition does not mean a repetition of sameness, but has an iterative quality. Each repetition adds some new quality to the network. Thus, the repetition does not simply change the meaning within the work, but also changes the meaning of the overall relationship *between* works by creating a story of their corporality, a narrative corpus that embeds a notion of singularity across these works and iconises that singularity, giving it relevance beyond its singular outlook (Rees 1983, Guigou 2001, de Nooy 2001). Another way to describe these narrative networks could invoke the idea of re-circulation. A meaning is circulated from one artwork to another, and this circulation changes the meaning of the relationship between them. This principle may lead to the creation of vast global networks of works that evolve from the iteration of narrative. Research in this area has mainly focused on such connections in the oeuvre of a single artist or a small group of artists. However, in the case of visual art, the art historian Donald Sassoon (2001, 2006) used a different approach by not simply focusing on how the meaning of one artwork is influence by previous works, but by focusing on a visual motif – the Mona Lisa – and its traces in narrating art. Sassoon showed that before the 20th century, the Mona Lisa was not the global icon that it is today. It was a work of art among others. However, with the integration of that motif into an ever-expanding network of other works, a new narrative was created. For instance, narratives of parody and distortion emerged, narratives of the rejection of high-art and masterpieces, including famous artists like Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dali, Andy Warhol and Robert Filliou. More work is required in tracing such narrative networks and how they wrestle with notions of singularity.

The Formation of Art: Micro-Diversity and Self-Organisation

Early connections between system theory and art were inspired by ideas of self-production and reproduction to the extent that the artist could virtually disappear. Interest in this approach to system theory in the art world faded in the late 1960s. Niklas Luhmann is one of the few contemporary system thinkers who engaged with art. As we have seen, the system of art, the process of artistic meaning-making, is differentiated from other systems through a communication code. Through such generalised codes, a situation can be pre-structured; for instance, the code between beautiful/ugly is employed to orient actions and experiences in a given situation. Despite the theoretical elegance of that idea, it did not prove to be very popular. However, as mentioned earlier the theoretical shift occurred in Luhmann's later work that reconceptualised processes of meaning-making. The formation

of art, which is still a self-formation, is no longer driven by a predefined code that confirms what belongs or does not belong to the system. Rather, it is driven by a self-animated process that both enables and stimulates the shaping of self-definitions, but also changes how it can be animated. The formation of art, artistic meaning-making, is thus based on the autogenous production of conforming non-conformity and non-conforming conformity. That means that the question of 'What is art?' is an empirical question that is temporarily stabilised and thereby enables further challenges.

This notion is difficult to capture with the term 'art', which suggests a kind of independent or unchanging ontological meaning. Likewise, the common focus on the artwork only captures one element in that meaning-making and does not acknowledge that the artwork is not a completion or beginning but part of a becoming, best captured through the term 'arting' (*kunsten* in German and *arter* in French). This notion of art would enable us to overcome the common division between art history and the sociology of art. Despite both disciplines having emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when there was much contact and exchange between them, they have since the mid-20th century by and large occupied opposite ends of the academic spectrum. Mid-20th century art history and cultural and literary studies became fascinated with the great or exemplary artists. Some important publications included Harold Schonberg's *The Lives of Great Composers*, Nikolaus Pevsner's *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*, Chastel Andre's *Botichelli*, Alfred J. Barr's *Matisse*, Rudolf & Margot Wittkower's *The Divine Michelangelo* and Caroline Spurgeon's *Shakespeare's Imagery*. At the forefront of the analysis is the selected oeuvre, the major works of an esteemed artist. The meaning of the work is explored through a biographical approach that relates the work to the experience of its maker. It could be said that in this line of thought, art is defined by the great artist. Few people would question whether Michelangelo, Bach or Shakespeare could ever be considered as different from what they are reputed to be, and fewer people could even conceive of the question.

After World War II, the sociology of art (in particular) grew suspicious of the emphasis on great individuals. They only represented a small sample of artistic producers. The newly emergent quantitative methodologies supported a different approach. The sociology of art developed at that time as an abstract, (quantitative) survey-driven sub-discipline. In Germany, this trend was represented through the works of Alphons Silbermann and Hans Peter Thurn, while in the UK, Arnold Hauser's large survey was published. In France, Pierre Bourdieu and his quantitative interest in the arts was beginning to shape the field, and in the US, Vytautas Kavolis reconstructed the historical development of art using an abstract, Parsonian inspired framework. For these writers, art was largely determined by broad socio-cultural structures and economic conditions. The heyday of the sociology of art occurred between 1975 and the millennium. The sociologists of that generation still had a strong interest in a quantitative approach, but rather than engaging with highly abstract theoretical concepts they explained quantitative changes within an institutional framework. This shift gave some attention to the people involved in the art world by acknowledging their selective integration into and

contribution to broader institutional norms and values. The defining publications of that period include Paul DiMaggio's *Managers of the Arts*, Howard S. Becker's *Art Worlds*, Diana Crane's *The Transformation of the Avant-Garde* and Vera L. Zollberg's *Constructing a Sociology of the Arts*. The focus of this research was on how art is selected, consecrated and defined by a network of elite institutional gatekeepers, mainly from the visual arts, namely museums and galleries.

These developments led to a near complete division of labour. Art history was in charge of the interpretation of works of art and the life of artists, while the sociology of art looked after the institutions of the art world. However, the last 20 years have seen a renewed interest by both disciplines in working across these boundaries and integrating the neglected subjects that fell between them. Exhibition and curatorial practices have been extensively studied. There is an increasing critical art historical literature about festivals, blockbusters and biennials, and a growing concern about the writing and narrative practices of art history in a global age. The sociology of art also shows a renewed interest in artists and works of art and the material and immediate conditions of artworks and engages in a more ethnographic approach. The sociology of art is not simply a sociological study of the arts as a particular case. More than this, the arts, with their notions of collaborative production and creativity, their focus on meaning-making and their working conditions, are seen as an exemplary study that might define much broader societal developments (Witkin 1997, DeNora 2000, Hennion 2007). The sociology of art is changing into art sociology (De la Fuente 2007).

Despite this renewed interest, it is still noticeable that micro-structures (artists, works of art, audience experiences) are presented by macro-structures (museums, galleries, theatres, festivals, publishers) and that there is a growing unease with that distinction (see Becker, Faulkner & Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006, Eyerman & McCormick 2006). This division is still present in research that privileges one side or the other, for instance, research explaining institutional changes through new artistic practices or explaining the meaning of works through institutional contexts. The distinction between micro-diversity and self-organisation offers the advantage that, unlike that between micro- and macro-phenomena, it does not imply a preference for either side. Self-organisation is possible only on the basis of micro-diversity, and a specific area of micro-diversity can only be identified if it stimulates the emergence of self-organisation. The micro-diversity of artworks leads to the self-organisation of collectioning macro-structures and vice versa.[19] The distinction between micro-diversity and self-organisation is highly dynamic and constantly reconfigures itself. Works of art cannot self-generate their own singularity. This comes only from their interaction with other artworks. Only through the differences between artworks can they assert their singularity. They impact one another through their micro-diversity, and this movement results in the self-organization by which meaning is constituted and temporality is stabilised. These considerations open up new areas of research, three of which

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[19] More empirical research is required through which this dynamic can gain more conceptual clarity and so to avoid that the distinction micro-diversity/self-organisation is not applied too generously.

deserve further work: studying works of art, the role of self-presentations, and the practices of collecting.

Studying works of art. Research on works of art should not focus solely on the interpretation of particular works or artists but should ask how their singular status is shaped and maintained over time. To do this, works of art need to be studied in their actual setting. Hence, the study of pictures in an exhibition should take account of their placement in relation to adjacent works and within the context of the ordering of the exhibition. Considering how this fixates meaning enables a comparative and contrasting interpretation of works in the context of other works and an understanding of how their ordering and presentation change the meaning of the singular quality of a work. It means asking how its singularity is made relevant by its environment. This research could be linked to developments in workplace studies and science and technology studies, which emphasise an interactive approach and use a range of qualitative methods (Pinch & Bijsterveld 2004). In particular, video analysis could capture such meaningful engagements (Vom Lehn, Heath & Hindmarsh 2001). Furthermore, this approach would also align with recent quantitative methodologies (see Moretti 2005, Cannam et al. 2010, Ford 2012, Bollen 2016) that have emerged to study networks of meaning across time and space.

The role of self-presentations. The notion of diversity, seen as the difference between the identities of different works, shifts attention to the forms of presentation and the narratives that accompany the notion of singularity. This area pays attention to affective freedom and its transformation over time. It also encompasses the self-presentation of artists, the changing nature of their intentions and emotions, and artistic experiments with notions such as the attempt to remove the artist in minimalism, automated music and dream writing. Attention needs to be paid not only to what works of art are being selected but also how they are being presented. This includes if and how the significance of some works in the context of others is changing over time and how the singularity of works is narrated and presented in contrast to others.

The practices of collecting. Another possible area of research would address changing practices of collecting. How has the gathering and linking of works changed, for instance, with the impact of globalisation? Has this led a rethinking of the diversity of works collected and how they are displayed in relation to one another? Going further than this, it could also be asked how these changes have impacted artistic practices including the praxis of artists and the changing working patterns of selection, presentation and singularisation.

Summary. In his late writings, Niklas Luhmann made a range of interesting and stimulating remarks about meaning-making in the arts as being driven by a highly dynamic and non-ontological mode of thinking. The idea of micro-diversity and self-organisation enables us to understand the emergence of singular and unique artworks and the differentiation of self-defined arts in the 18th and 19th century.

These developments are, in fact, mutually interdependent. The distinction between micro-diversity and self-organisation provides a framework integrating a range of empirical phenomena that support these ideas, for instance, the rise of emotions, intentions, expression and practices, but also the development of art events (festivals, fairs, exhibitions), art capitals (from 19th century Paris to contemporary Berlin) and art networks (movements, narratives and art about art). Finally, these theoretical considerations enable us to overcome the unhelpful distinction of micro- versus macro structures by accepting the circular process of meaning-making based on micro-diversity and self-organisation.

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