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### PROJECT

## Creative Work and its Uncertain Completion: Contribution to a Socio-Analytical Theory of the Process of Artistic Creation

Mon projet prend son point de départ dans l'étude de l'incertitude intrinsèque du processus de création artistique, et trouve son terrain d'application dans l'examen de la question de l'achèvement et de l'inachèvement de l'œuvre d'art.

Poètes, plasticiens, compositeurs, musiciens, romanciers, cinéastes ont été nombreux à contribuer, au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, à l'élaboration d'une poétique de l'agir créateur. Deux des arguments essentiels de cette poétique sont, à première vue, contradictoires : faire droit au hasard ou à l'imprévisible et faire apparaître en pleine lumière le travail de création, dans ses aspects les plus sinueux, les plus laborieux, les plus incertains. Dès lors, le travail de création n'a plus lieu d'être relégué dans les opérations invisibles, préalables, de l'atelier ou de la chambre secrète de l'artiste : la valeur de l'engagement créateur ne se mesure plus à la perfection ou à l'imperfection de l'œuvre, mais aussi à la densité du tâtonnement de l'invention : essais, erreurs, corrections, remords, recommencements, bifurcations, forment, on le sait bien, le quotidien sinueux du travail de l'artiste,

et c'est à les avouer, à les enregistrer, à les exhiber que l'artiste peut s'attacher, non pas simplement pour inventer une forme supérieure d'héroïsation narcissique du geste créateur (en sa double figure, celle du labeur, lié à la douleur de

l'engendrement, et celle du triomphe sur soi, du ressaisissement), mais parce que la documentation du travail créateur est, pour l'artiste, l'appui réflexif indispensable d'une activité gouvernée par l'incertitude du résultat.

Mon approche sera systématique par son propos, en ce qu'elle procédera à des analyses de cas à partir d'un ensemble de motifs récurrents qui devraient converger vers une socio-analyse de cette espèce particulière d'acte de travail qu'est la création artistique. La construction théorique à réaliser empruntera ses matériaux à la sociologie du travail et de l'art, à la philosophie (ontologique et sémantique des mondes possibles et des systèmes de causalité), à la théorie esthétique, à la psychologie de la créativité, à la théorie économique des choix en horizon incertain.

### Lecture recommandée

Menger, Pierre-Michel. " Les temps, les causes et les raisons de l'action. " In Le modèle et le récit, édité par J.-Y. Grenier, C. Grignon et P.-M. Menger. Paris : Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2001.

-. Les intermittents du spectacle. Sociologie d'une exception. Paris : Editions de l'EHESS, 2005.

-. Portrait de l'artiste en travailleur. Paris : Editions du Seuil, 2003 (traduit en allemand sous le titre Kunst und Brot : Die Metamorphosen des Arbeitnehmers. Konstanz : UVK Verlagsgesellschaft, 2006).

# How to Complete a Work: The Creative Working Process in the Arts

My aim is to lay some analytical foundations on which to build an investigation devoted to the creative working process and its completion and non-completion.

Sociology has little to offer for as the interpretation of specific works of art. In the academic division of labor, the study of specific works of art is a matter of highly specialized knowledge.

On the other hand, sociology has much to offer with regard to work, employment, careers, occupations in the arts, and the social processes linking up several kinds of professionals who cooperate to make art producible, collectible, available.

One issue that has ceaselessly puzzled me is that of the completion process in the arts. It seems to me that in studying it we might better understand what kind of work an art work actually conceals. So, one possible avenue to an individual artistic work is to see it as the outcome of a process. Not only to document the different stages of its production, but also to detect how high variability is a built-in characteristic of that process, and how choosing and decisionmaking takes place in that uncertain course of action.

Variability is mostly studied downstream from the completed process. Indeed, a work of art is usually conceived as a finished, lasting reality, complete, and unchanging – a candidate for material and cultural eternity. What happens to it later is separate. Contrasting viewpoints, readings and incompatible interpretations give it multiple meanings. Different formats of exhibition, "publishing" and diffusion create new connections, putting the work into changeable contexts where its meanings will be seen from new perspectives. Its reproduction, in media which may not transmit all its original characteristics, and its restoration will subject it to an unforeseeable flow of uses and manipulations. The work is what, in this Heraclitean flux, remains the same, unchanging, with its name, its title, its inventoried characteristics, down to the list of its physical movements and transfers between owners.

My aim is to track variability not only at this post-completion stage in the life course of a work of art. The mechanism of choice that runs the creative process, and the interactions and negotiations between the artist, his working partners and the different members of the art worlds generate variability inside the working process : this variable course of action is what makes a truly inventive project possible, yet uneasy to devise.

I also propose to view the completion issue from the reverse side, by leaving off the end result, and looking at unfinished works, to see why artists and members of the artworld have become increasingly obsessed with incompleteness and with the innumerable ways to play with the completion process.

One could ask: why should we bother about incompleteness, failure, and various states and outcomes of the working process when art worlds are mainly concerned with finished, marketable, collectible pieces of human creativity? Complete, entirely worked out pieces of art are countless and production of works has been recurrently seen as the flow and stock of pieces in excess supply – a leitmotiv that has been with us at least since the 17th century.<sup>1</sup> Yet at the same time, markets, dealers, public lament that there are too few (in statistical terms) true talents or supertalents (or geniuses) and masterpieces, and too many short-lived productions and undertakings. Our regret is all the more with the early death, suicide or exhaustion and giving up of those who eventually came to be highly regarded or who were rediscovered. Regret is at its greatest with such legendary artists as Van Gogh. Is it not possible and highly desirable to overcome the scarcity of geniuses, and in that case, pressure it to unearthing and present every bit of their production?

After all, some of the most famous artists are renowned for major unfinished pieces of art, and sometimes for incomplete works that are considered their major achievements – sculptures by Michelangelo or Rodin, canvases by Leonardo de Vinci, Turner or Picasso, symphonies by Schubert, Bruckner or Mahler, operas by Berg or Debussy, novels by Kafka, James or Musil, philosophical works by Pascal or Nietzsche, and such poetic embodiments of Balzac's *Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* as Mallarmé's *Livre*. Such works are puzzling when we know little about the course of their creation. Their authors may have told themselves they couldn't be completed, because they had been begun a hundred times and abandoned a hundred times. They may have been put away, then rediscovered by the artist or by posterity and put into circulation, with or without the explicit assent of the artist (Kafka was, happily for us, betrayed by his friend and executor Max Brod). Or their making may have been suddenly interrupted by the death of the artist.

Other possible forms of the unfinished include the fragmentation or re-elaboration of the work presented previously or elsewhere as complete, the sudden accident that is accepted and preserved as the intervention of

chance in the course of the activity, as well as the various intentional positions on not finishing (the product of a decision, a negotiation or a constraint, the ratification of a situation by the artist, or by others with or without his agreement, etc.). From these forms may emerge the multiple lines of creative practice, grasped in their uncertain course, and shaped by ceaseless interactions with other people.

These pieces and cases have received attention and study likely out of proportion to their importance.

On the other hand, have not artists played more and more with the finishedness/incompleteness issue since the 19th century, so as to abandon the classical canon of formal perfection and closeness of the work? In modern times, the process of completion came to be celebrated as being at least as important as the end result. Varieties of deliberate incompleteness came to proliferate : open-ended work, work in progress, unending series, and so on. Therefore, the completion issue may emerge as a challenging puzzle.

I'll give an overview of the theoretical framework and a glimpse of the relevant questions at stake when we move to specific artistic problems, forms and works.

I'll make use of two main analytical tools :

- an analytical approach toward behavior under uncertainty;
- appropriate causal and probabilistic reasoning: counterfactual reasoning could be of great help here. By mentioning counterfactuals, I have in mind the following simple questioning : what would the end result have been if the creative paths and branchings had been different? I'll proceed in the following way :

Firstly, I'll delineate my view of artistic work, at least the one I'll be applying here.

Secondly, I'll take a look at the creative process as a mechanism of choice.

Thirdly, I'll show how incompleteness has been redefined for several uses : the schema of artistic invention, the business of all but the smallest bits of work of geniuses, the moving testimony of dedication to the demanding and sometimes exhausting activity of creation, the turn towards a modernist aesthetic that departs from the ideal of perfection to celebrate imperfection and open-endedness as core values of art.

Finally, I will address methodological considerations.

<sup>1</sup> Excess supply is easy to explain in a few words: since "nobody knows", too many contestants are induced to enter the recognition (or success) race and to try to make a living in these highly attractive and risky artistic occupations. And overproduction of new items is also a rational organizational response to uncertainty on the demand side.

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