

[Theories in Practices]

Socio-technical agencements, Performativity and Economization Between Artistic Practices and Social Research

Abstract: Social research has often seen the artistic practices as a symptom of social phenomena and not as an object of study in itself. With the development of new paradigms of social action, as the idea of socio-technical agencements, performativity and economization, we are forming a search field with converging research perspectives between the two disciplines. Artistic practices and social research withdraw from the idea of individual agency, linked to the intentionality of the subject, turning to a diffused agency with limited rationality. From the idea of social performance of a stable rational identity, placed in the backstage of interaction, we switch to an idea of performativity of the theory and of the artwork. Economic theories are a powerful engine of social production, which allow to move from the study of the economy to the study of economization. Some contemporary artists are experimenting forms of economic behavior not related only with the idea of individual utility, but coming from hybrid forms, containing also the idea of shared responsibility.

Keywords: Socio-technical Agencements, Performativity, Economization, Contemporary Art.

Introduction

For social research, the artistic sphere has historically presented fewer investigation opportunities than other social fields. For sociological research, artistic practices have often been seen as a symptom of the social dynamics lying beneath an artist's action (e.g. culture and socialization), or artworks have been read as effects of structural conditioning (e.g. income distribution, education models, work regulations), and have rarely been seen as social phenomena in themselves which require, or are able to produce, their own sociological explanation.

Historically, this may have been conditioned by dealings with such a consolidated discipline as history of art, which, from the outset, has sought to read the work of art in itself, as the bearer of its own autonomous truth, independent from the context. This approach was made possible by history of art's work to glean and select which aspects of the work could be recurrent and comparable: first of all, formal, iconographic and iconological analysis (Holly 1993).

The limits of this type of pseudo-scientific analysis became most evident with twentieth-century art, as it left behind consolidated spheres and themes, as well as frames and pedestals, and went on to deal with the most varied spheres of social life (from poverty to migration, from finance to education), finding a place in thus far unimaginable sites and situations outside museums and white cubes.

This trend was not without its risks: on one hand of making superficial analyses and interventions in what could be complex contexts; on the other it produced a constant need for re-legitimation and a new construction of forms of artistic action.

This loss of formal and substantive stability has made the artistic sphere a test ground open to know-how and practices from different traditions (from politics to philosophy and civic-participation) which have found the sphere of art, less conditioned by consolidated social norms, to be fertile ground for experimentation (Esche, Bradley 2007, eds).

For the artistic sphere, these types of experimentation and transit have now become part of the constant need for novelty, self-regeneration and external legitimation. Having already lost a stable and recognized sphere of artistic action with the advent of photography at the end of the nineteenth century, spurious interaction

with other social spheres was found to be a new engine of constant innovation and possible legitimation. This interaction has also produced innovative experiments, unthinkable in other social fields (Rosler 1991).

The research seeks to show how sociological research tools can bear fruit in questioning the artefacts of the art system and, on the other hand, how the best of these artefacts can enable the conceptualization of forms of innovative social agency that can be stimulating for sociological analysis.

The text explores the proximity between some topics and problems tackled by both artistic and social research in their recent history. The line of argument sets out to highlight how aesthetics and sociology have tackled similar problems, also coming to converging solutions.

It is underlined how social research categories can profitably interpret artistic practices and how they can find useful examples for new conceptualizations within experimented artistic practices.

The second section makes a parallel reflection between the way in which artists historically acted out the relationship between intentionality and artistic agency and the different possibilities of thinking social agency. Some reference models of this relationship are developed using examples taken from the history of art, up to the most recent experiments by the artist Justin Randolph Thompson and the idea of 'socio-technical agencement'.

The third section sets out the consequences of this form of agency in the passage from the idea of performance to that of performativity.

The fourth section takes this way of thinking social agency to the economic sphere. Some ways of understanding economic agency are described - from classic utilitarianism to hybrid forms that contain non-monocausal economic theories - using examples from works by Santiago Sierra and Thompson himself, and from Michel Callon's research on economization (Caliskan, Callon 2009; 2010).

Social construction: from Romantic genius to socio-technical agencement

From Romanticism onwards, the history of art has been one populated by genius artists. Not only from that period onwards, but also artists from previous eras would be considered ingenious creators even though, especially until the Renaissance period, their work was likened to that of other guilds or artisans. From that moment of history on, works of art would no longer be thought of as being on a par with other forms of craftsmanship, however refined and intellectually engaging they may be, but would become the epiphenomenon of the ethos of a genius. The best artworks would never be able to stay in the places that had hosted them until then, but they would have to be housed and safeguarded in museums or collections (Bann 1995).

Self-portraits in the artist's studio would become the hallmark image for that period (Fig. 1). Later self-portraits by Van Gogh would act as a pop vehicle of the creative myth, to recently become so much as a popular icon (Pollock 1980).

Fig. 1: Tommaso Minardi, Autoritratto nello studio, 1803, Galleria degli Uffizi, Firenze.



In the twentieth century, with his technique of dripping from the paintbrush onto the canvas, in his studio Jackson Pollock (1912-1956, USA) would conceptually retrace the myth of the Romantic artist. In these works, the artist's attention to the work's formal outcome would be minimal, to instead concentrate on his 'gesture' towards the work. It is the artist's emotive, emotional and bodily relationship with the materials which can mediate his creative genius towards the spectator better than anything else. All rational contents disappear from the mediation between artist and spectator: the work is 'only' a trace of the artist's genius. In the history of art textbooks, it is frequently more common to find a photo of Pollock in his studio, stepping into the work, than a photo of the work itself (Fig. 2). A higher order of know-how, however apparently unfathomable it may be, is contained in the artist's action/gesture. The gesture of creative genius transcends the everyday horizon: it is the apex of Romantic idealism.

Fig. 2: Jackson Pollock nel suo studio.



Between creative genius and everyday life. With the work *Rock Chariot in the Middle of the Air* (2015), Justin Randolph Thompson (1979, USA) seeks to reassert the horizontal and contextual nature of everyday creative gestures. The work is a wooden chariot following the model of the chariots used by the ancient Romans (fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Justin Randolph Thompson, Rock Chariot in the Middle of the Air, 2015, ph. Francesca Catastini.



The chariot was devised by the artist and co-designed along with the “Il Laboratorio” joiner’s workshop (Fig. 4). The work is a means of transport for wooden cylindrical containers, made following the artist’s drawing by the Peruzzi turnery and Michelacci joiners. The containers transport biscuits on the chariot to sell to the public like a travelling salesman. The biscuits are produced by the Biscottificio Fratelli Lunardi biscuit producers and are a revamp of the traditional *cantucci di Prato*. The chariot has a sound system (Fig. 5). The wheels are covered with traditional Afro-American quilts (Fig. 6).

Fig. 4: Justin Randolph Thompson, Rock Chariot in the Middle of the Air, in costruzione presso la falegnameria Il Laboratorio, 2015.

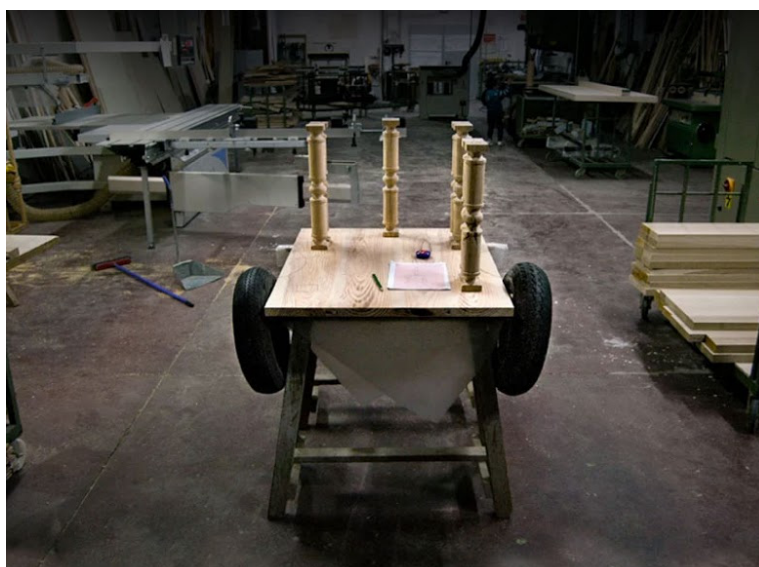


Fig. 5: Justin Randolph Thompson, *Rock Chariot in the Middle of the Air*, 2015, particolare, ph. Francesca Catastini.



Fig. 6: Justin Randolph Thompson, *Rock Chariot in the Middle of the Air*, 2015, particolare, ph. Francesca Catastini.



In its Romantic interpretation, the work of art/object is the effect of the artist's creative genius. While not necessarily the fruit of his or her programmatic and rational intentionality, as in the case of Pollock's dripping, in which the final form can only be controlled in part, it is at least a product of the artist's direct empathetic relationship with the materials, practices and ideas. Thompson's work too, indirectly at least, is the result of his intentions, but, by thematizing them, it seeks to play on the direct correspondence and transparency between author and work, conceptual intension and operative extension, subject and object of the action.

It is not a new topic, either in the history of art or in the philosophical tradition. Already at the beginning of the twentieth century, Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968, France) placed a bottle rack on show as if it were a work of art (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7: Marchel Duchamp, Scolabottiglie, 1914, Philadelphia Museum of Art.



The work not only displayed the socially constructed fiction of art, but it cancelled out and made the metaphysical distance between observer and observed unattainable. The bottle rack stood before the artist and spectator, unfazed and unfathomable, recognizable and unreachable, a bit like what happens in every cellar. In the work, what was brought to the attention was both the construction of the work of art and the everyday use of the bottle rack: the shift of an object from cellar to museum enabled the expressed and expressible ties and connections between the two spheres to be grasped. Duchamp's action of suspending its meaning and use had absolute value and it could have been done to any object, almost as if to perform philosophical research on ways of being. The work was an attempt to reconnect the separation between subject and object, not distant from those made a few years earlier in other disciplines by authors such as Nietzsche, Marx and Freud (Leiter 2004), with similar impacts on their respective fields.

In more recent years, other artists have attempted similarly radical intellectual projects. One example is Rirkrit

Tiravanija (1961, Argentina) when he reproduced his New York apartment inside 303 Gallery in 1992 (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8: Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled (Free)*, exhibition at 303 Gallery, New York 1992.



The operation oscillates between maximum manifestation and maximum retreat of the artist's ego. During the exhibition, the artist lived in those rooms, talking to, cooking for, or ignoring the visitors. Nothing more elevated happened than the everyday life that the artist carried on, day in day out, in his apartment. The work was perhaps the most radical example of an artist hesitating before his or her agency.

Justin Randolph Thompson's socio-technical agencement. Thompson seeks to reframe the epistemological picture linked to his know-how, not starting from absolute propositions like in the previous cases, but to build a version of it in a limited and approximate manner. The chariot is not ready made, but neither is it just the upshot of the subject's rational and intentional agency. The work is the result of rational agency – albeit with a limited degree of rationality – which, when enacted, manages to programmatically account for the interactive and situated dimension of the action (Goffman 1983). The work was co-planned by the artist and the joiners, with the intention not to make an object with a full technical correspondence to the author's mental image, but to build an object together that had sense and meaning for the craftsman and the cooperating enterprises too. The parts that the object is made out of were discussed with the enterprises to reach an agreed form of the final work. The artist could have chosen to have the work produced entirely by a single company, but instead he decided to break up the elements and production phases among various firms to make the most of the specific skills possessed and generate a new form of collaboration.

As a result, the relational dimension of individual action is extended to complex interactions in which the actor's limited rational agency tries to contain and make the necessarily reticular dimension of the social action visible.

After the relationship between author and executor has been recomposed into its non-Romantic biunivocal flow, the former tries to extend this enactment, and at the same time suspension, of relationships in a wider picture of interactions.

Distributing and making the author's agency visible is nothing new, the bottle rack already did that. Thompson shifts the operation from a conceptual type of speculation, such as that of Duchamp, and brings it into the horizon of everyday life. The social action created is situated within contextual social relations and tries to intervene on them.

The social networks are recomposed inside the work: there is no externality or spectators other than the actors on stage. The artist seeks countless roles, functions and horizons of legitimacy within the activated device. The work is an exemplary occasion to see in action - because it is made explicitly visible - a device that seems to follow the form of agency described by Michel Callon as 'socio-technical agencements'.

In Callon's analysis, a social actor cannot be reduced to an individual nor, even less so, to his intentionality. For Callon, an actor is 'made up of human bodies but also of prostheses, tools, equipment, technical devices, algorithms,

etc'. In other words, he or she is constituted by an 'agencement' (Callon 2005: 4). The concept of 'agencement' is taken from Deleuze (Deleuze, Guattari 2015), and it is an intentional play on words (Hardie, MacKenzie 2007). In French, 'agencer' corresponds to the idea of getting organized to act collectively: an 'agencement' is, therefore, an assembly, order, configuration or layout; a meticulous assembly of different elements.

The other side of the term 'agencement' is 'agence', in English 'agency'. The term is commonly used in French because its translation would lead to the concept of assembly, which would acquire a static connotation, losing what is instead its characteristic dimension of agency (Caliskan, Callon 2010: 9).

As Caliskan and Callon underline: in this configuration of social agency the subjects present lose the possibility of having their own ontological characteristics from which to deduce set forms of intentionality and planning and, with these, determined possibilities of agency. The chariot is not *only* made by the author, but it cannot be determined without the author either. Agency thus reacquires its own rightful dimension: it lives in a middle earth that does not reduce it to the subject's intentionality or, at the same time, dilute it into the social, or into structures separate from the actual subject. The social action is made in the multidirectional and always biunivocal transition that links the subject to other human and non-human actors (things, plans, ideas, etc.). Collectively, socio-technical agencement lays out a direction of the action and, potentially, an oriented sense of the action too.

Thompson's work fully accepts this change of perspective in the individual action and, in the Romantic realm of art and creative genius, adopts a form of collective action (socio-technical agencement) in which the configuration described by Callon is not an ex post sociographic reconstruction, as the one made by sociology could be, but is instead a form of action that manages, in itself, to consciously operate in the reticular and biunivocal dimension of action, beyond mere individual intentionality.

Performing: from performance to performativity

At the opening of the exhibition presenting the work *Rock Chariot in the Middle of the Air* (2015),¹ the artist staged a performance, a usual situation during the inauguration of his works.² He crossed through the old Medici villa (Fig. 9) wearing details of clothing made from fabrics sewed together like traditional Afro-American quilts and singing a song inspired by Afro-American liberation songs, until he reached the chariot parked in the entrance to the villa's vat cellars.

Fig. 9: Justin Randolph Thompson, *Rock Chariot in the Middle of the Air*, 2015, performance, ph. Filippo Basetti.



1 See *Masse Mancanti - Oltrecittà*, Villa La Magia, Quarrata (PT), 31 October 2015.

2 For more information, see <http://www.justinrandolphthompson.com/>

Here the performance continued with the collaboration of a DJ. Together they put on a music show, transforming the chariot into an on-the-road DJ set. The two protagonists wore aprons and baker's hats produced by the local linen producers Creazioni Divina (Fig. 10).

Fig. 10: Justin Randolph Thompson, Rock Chariot in the Middle of the Air, 2015, ph. Filippo Basetti.



The musical performance, mixing jazz and various contemporary styles, concluded with the artist selling the biscuits produced by the Fratelli Lunardi company. The chariot issued sounds through an amplifier inside it and at the same time acted as a musical instrument as it was played by the two performers using various techniques and tools (Fig. 11).

Fig. 11: Justin Randolph Thompson, Rock Chariot in the Middle of the Air, 2015, performance, ph. Filippo Basetti.



Performances have a similar old tradition in the aesthetic field to theatre and it was brought into the visual arts as an autonomous form of expression with the historical avant-garde movements. Futurism and Dadaism were the first artistic movements that organized genuine happenings in which visual work and theatrical performances newly came together (Cioli 2007). The backdrops were based on the topics of chaos and progress. The performative action was mainly a way of expanding and divulging contents that had already developed and matured in the artists' pictorial works.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the performance would become more autonomous as an artistic language, so much so that it became the preferred and sometimes exclusive means of expression of many artists. This research has gone in many directions. However, in this case too, there are at least two consolidated lines of individual development, with strong bonds with what has been done with other means of expression: one neo-Romantic and one instead an analytical-speculative line (Menna, 1972).

Performance between individual agency and social norms: Marina Abramovic and Roman Ondak. The neo-Romantic line in performance retains strong faith in the cathartic and auratic capacity of the artist's individual gesture. As if even now, two centuries after Romanticism, the faith in the redeeming and remissive action of the artist's agency is able to transcend the banality of collective existence.

Marina Abramovic (1946, Serbia), who has defined herself the 'Grandmother of Performance Art', has been tracing a clear line of development for the means of expression since the 1960s, earning the Leone d'oro at the Venice Biennale for the performance *Balkan Baroque* (1997). In this, six hours a day for four days, Abramovic stayed in the basement of the Montenegro pavilion at the Venice Biennale tearing strips of meat from a mountain of cow bones (Fig. 12).

'When I did *Balkan Baroque* I wasn't only thinking of Yugoslavia, the image was true for all wars and all countries', the artist would say. The gesture of care, bidding farewell and redemption was repeated identically and endlessly for the whole duration of the performance. The faith in the capacity of art to transcend existence is in line with the Romantic idea. The artist acts on a set and cogent programme of action, the social action descends from its predetermined conceptualization, and the elements at play try to conform with this.

Fig. 12: Marina Abramovic, *Balkan Baroque*, 1997, Biennale di Venezia.



Instead, performative research would go in the opposite direction, following an analytical set-up. Just as the bottle rack does not talk, instead of affirming new contents these works would try to deconstruct the possibilities and constitutive elements of day-to-day social action.

With the work *Good Feelings in Good Times* (2003), Roman Ondak (1966, Slovakia) set up a queue of people outside the Kölischer Kunstverein in Cologne, Germany; this work would then be reproduced and bought by the Tate Modern in London (Fig. 13). The people involved are volunteers or museum staff, dressed normally, who, at regular intervals during the day, perform the queue in plausible positions, for example in front of a door, at the entrance to a room, etc.. The performers have the task of forming a queue, as happens in public places, in the most 'natural' possible way, for a set length of time, while not informing the visitors of their real intentions. The performance tends towards nineteenth-century realism but, in the artist's words:

I became interested in the phenomenon of the queue because it is very unstable, but on the other hand it shows a very strong sense of participation. [...] There is no description of the queue – it is about feelings, about desire and your decision to be in it, and I like this ambiguity of the queue in our society. Also, on your own you think about your time - what I call 'real time' - which has its own value; but when you go in the queue, you slow down and the time is different. (Baniotopoulou 2009)

Fig. 13: Roman Ondak, *Good Feelings in Good Times*, 2003, Tate Modern, London.



Social norms are reproduced 'artificially', thereby generating and frustrating expectations and possible relations in the unknowing visitor. The queue is often added to by unconscious and innocent performers, making the strength of persuasion of social norms visible. The roles of actor and spectator are mixed up. By staging norms of behaviour, they are perpetuated, regardless of any individual or collective horizon of sense that it should refer to: the queue gets longer even though no one knows what they are waiting for. The queue is only formed thanks to the positioning of people in space and their hypothetical waiting behaviour; there is no underlying intentional sense moving the collectivity. It is the positioning in space that makes the passer-by read the situation as if he or she were a unit of participation focused separately on the same thing. Instead, in effect, the common focus is lacking because no one really knows what they are waiting for, except for time to pass. The social grammar is suspended, a word is taken out of its syntax, thus making its structure visible and allowing its internal bonds to be read.

However abstract and impersonal it may be, the performance maintains a very determined, rigid layout. With *Measuring the Universe* (2007), instead, Ondak tests a greater degree of indeterminacy in visualizing the invariants of the social grammar. Here all the work does is trace the visitors' passage through the exhibition space. The exhibition space is empty. The assistants mark the visitors' height on the walls and note the date and their name (Fig. 14). Very soon the wall fills up with thousands of words and marks, like in a secular assembly of ex-votos. The artist's intention to order the world disappears, while seeking to perform one of the possible categories of order. The complexity of the social sphere is not summed up or brought to an intelligible perspective: a variable is chosen – height – to trace similarities and differences, without this enabling consequent expected behaviours to be inferred. Of course a 'normal' case distribution could be identified: indeed, there is a much darker band in a strip at a certain height of the wall, but that still does not enable explanations to be built through connections between variables.

The material performance of the chosen conceptual variable presents its universalizing as well as its descriptive capacity: the writing on the walls contains all the people who passed through the exhibition but, at the same time, it is not possible to associate them with any real individual whom can be experienced. The visitor's performance manages to say much more about the grammar of performing than about the visitors themselves. In line with analytical-speculative traditions (Coliva 2007, ed.), the language emerges as the privileged field of analysis and speculation on reality.

Fig. 14: Roman Ondak, *Measuring the Universe*, 2007, Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich.



Performance and performativity of the Rock Chariot in the Middle of the Air. Thompson's performance uses both of these expressive registers: it is analytical in suspending and making its expressive language visible, and it is also semantically assertive in configuring a determined horizon of sense. The elements making up the work are scattered about the scene: details of decorations made with the traditional quilt covers are hung from the ceiling (fig. 15); the performers get dressed up and progressively acquire the clothes of travelling biscuit sellers; the musical performance progressively appropriates itself of the chariot object to the point of 'playing' it; the descent to the lower floors of the villa transforms the artist-guide into the artist-liberation song, and then into the artist-biscuit seller; the chariot-object leaves visible and recognizable signs of the different people who made it.

Fig. 15: Justin Randolph Thompson, Rock Chariot in the Middle of the Air, 2015, particolare, ph. Francesca Catastini.



While the syntax of the work refers to an analytical approach, its semantics strives to generate a single sense of direction, even though it cannot be fully decoded. By citing the everyday life of Afro-Americans' gestures of freedom in the song and the objects, the operation is given a complete horizon of sense. This must then be seen in the process prompting collaboration between the firms in the town and in the collaboration between the performer-artists; and also in the descent, during the performance, from the *piano nobile* of the Medici villa to the courtyard giving onto the vat cellars. The performance then concludes with the passage from the role of artist to biscuit seller, so that the chariot performs the everyday use it was designed for.

So far we are totally within the performance paradigm. No matter how uncertain or allusive it may be, there is a horizon of sense to the action that goes beyond the actor who, by undertaking it, performs it. However unique and singular it may be, the action refers to some semantic and relational points of reference that characterize and constitute it. It was planned, at least in part, and the spectator's gaze tries to rebuild the intentionality and its effects. It has limits in space and time and apparently clear and stable norms of behaviour.

At the end of the inauguration, Thompson's work was placed and put on display with the other works. The chariot was parked in the exhibition space and some of the objects used for the performance were left out on top of it.

The innovative aspect of the artist's operations compared to the standard frames in this type of context comes into play at the end of the exhibition. The chariot was not transferred to a deposit or a collection, but put on display in the furniture exhibition at the joiner's workshop where it was made. Since then it has been moving around the companies that helped to create it as well as other public spaces in the town. In the object's movements between different places and situations in the town, another determining level of analysis is added to the operation carried out. The object on display as a work of art returns to the sphere of everyday life but does not do so in an analytical manner, as could be the case with taking the bottle rack back to the cellar (or to the store room as the museum cleaner did after exhibition closing time), but by adding itself to the everyday horizon that embraced it before becoming art, it is given a more complex structure of social action in the local horizon.

The chariot partially abandons its aura of *objet d'art* to become a piece of furniture among others and also to

become an everyday object outside the museum. To its endless pilgrimage around the town it brings a story made of partnerships between enterprises from different sectors, an experimental model of economic agency and distant, hyperspecialized disciplinary know-how seeking a new terrain for dialogue. This form of agency is not a statement written in the script that the object wants to communicate but is the actual way in which the object-chariot was made up and performs what makes these connections visible.

The way in which these connections are made visible is not normative or prescriptive, but performative. The chariot parked in the window of the biscuit manufacturers thematizes the horizon of sense that it makes up by putting it into practice. To get to this point, firms had to work together in a previously unthinkable way and this form of collaboration is the story that it narrates and makes it possible for all of the visitors and citizens that go there every day to buy furniture or bread. It brings doubts to the town on the networks and common forms of economic agency and opens new possibilities of action in everyday life: through its travels and the necessary cooperation that this requires, as well as the debate this prompts among the citizens who come across it and the collective action that its exceptional state generates.

This way of understanding social action, and the relationship between intentionality and action, analytical theories and social practices, consciously implements a programme of action that is similar to what has been described with the term 'performativity'. The way in which the work meant as socio-technical agencement acts—from the opening performance to its travels around the town—marks the conceptual passage between performance and performativity.

There is nothing beyond the roles acted by identities as masks, Mol (2002) would affirm in the wake of the research by Goffman and Judith Butler; there is no backstage to investigate or behind to discover, and not even a projected intentionality, an actor in the classic sense of the word as the centre issuing agency. "There need not be a "doer behind the deed" but... the "doer is variably constructed in and through the deed" (Mol 2002: 37). The identities described by Butler are not pre-existent or stable with respect to the way in which they are performed but, even if they were not to fully correspond, their enactment has significant effects on the way in which they can be understood. They activate a dynamic circular motion in which the two poles of essence and appearance go to determine each other.

This way of understanding socially oriented action has important consequences on the way of conceiving the relationship between social theory and empirical observation. Michel Callon has theorized the idea of 'performativity' in the social sciences, paving the way to numerous empirical studies on the relationship between economic theories (economics) and economies (MacKenzie *et alii* 2007, eds).

From this point of view, the social sphere is thought to be absolutely immanent with respect to the theories that can be built on or can be deduced from it. In this, there is a notable distance from the paradigms of the classical theories of social action. The latter, even in their differences, nevertheless thematized a leap between the theoretical elaboration of action and its empirical revelation. The positivist and the functionalist paradigms give shape to a *sui generis* social sphere, which standardize one through the concept of 'law', and the other through functional patterns. With different logics, methodological individualism on one hand spurns notions formulated beforehand and general theories, but, on the other hand - by making sense-filled intentionality the pivot of social action - it assumes the latter to be necessarily anchored to a notion of planning and free will, excluding other possibilities of agency a priori. In different ways and forms in the different sociological traditions, reality can be observed and thought with the distance allowed to observers by the theory on society that they adopt. However little he knew about what he was observing, the anthropologist in the midst of the Aborigines was able to observe them thanks to constantly applying the theoretical construction of the other (Kilani 1994). Callon's idea about the performativity of economic theories in producing particular forms of economies (Callon 2005) instead does not place the theoretical dimension of empirical research beyond the social sphere, in the position of an observational frame, but within the complex dynamics of agency described by socio-technical agencements. As such, the economy is not a product of society or of an anthropological idea of the human being but it is *also* a performative effect of the models of reading the social sphere that are placed on the economy.

During the performance in the courtyard in front of the cellar, Thompson was creating an ontology of the social sphere still potentially distant from the acting subject: conceptually, the event could be enclosed in the

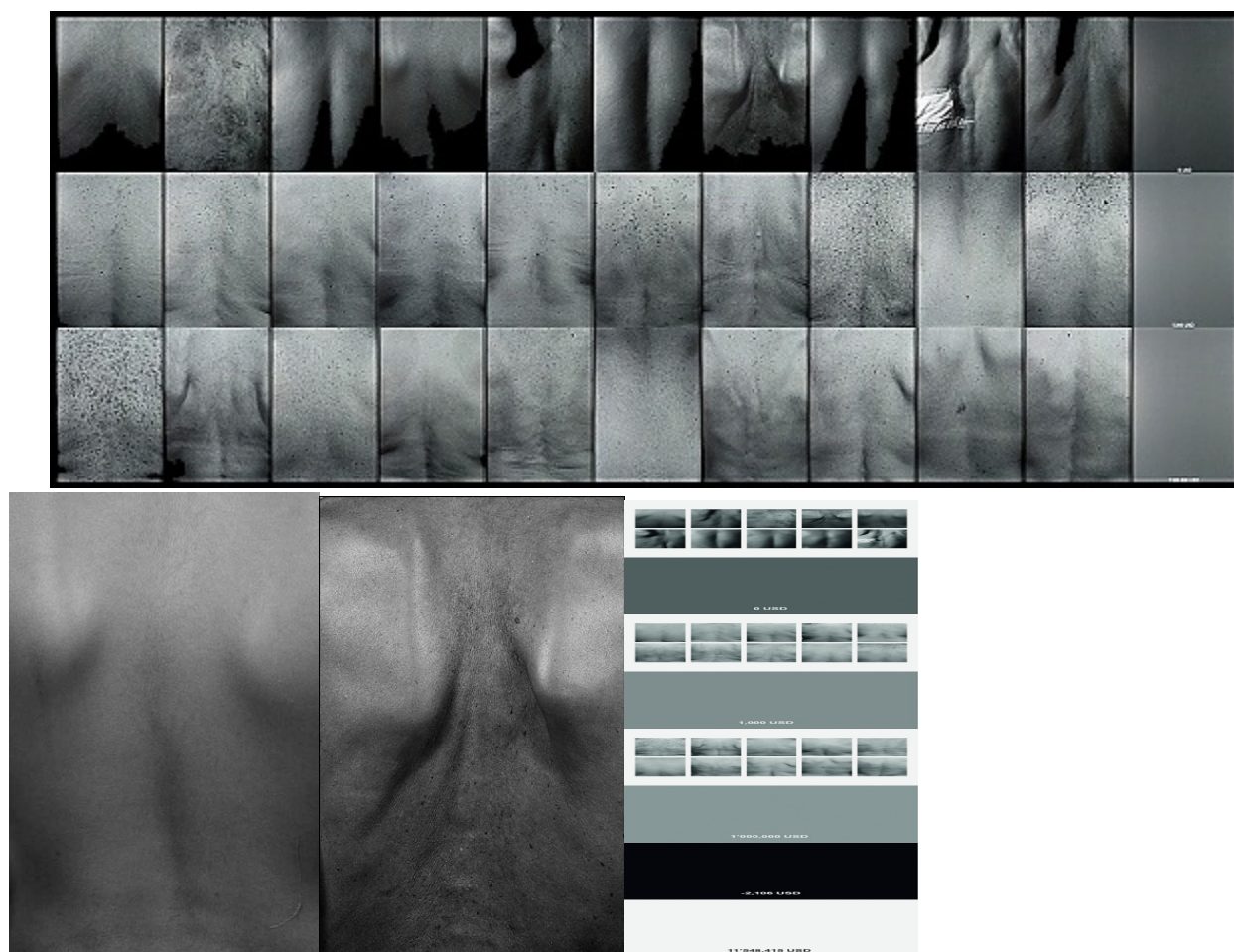
semantic and syntactically oriented dimension of an intentional event. Then, after the exhibition, by letting the artistic object travel in a local meso-level horizon under limited control, the author came to renounce the distance of the subject-artist and the work itself from its object, whether this is seen as the spectator or the environmental context. In this view, the work is thought of as an object that cannot help but already be part – and the acting subject – of the context in which it is realized.

Latency: utilitarianism and economization

With the work *Economical Study on the Skin of Caracans* (2006) (Fig. 16), the artist Santiago Sierra (1966, Spain) photographed the skin of the backs of ten people from Caracas who declared that they owned zero dollars. He carried on with ten people who declared that they had one thousand dollars and, finally, ten people who declared they possessed one million dollars.

From each of the three series of ten photos he obtained the average grey tone corresponding to the average skin colour of the ten people. The three tones turned out to be more and more white, in line with the results of sociological investigations into the distribution of wealth linked to skin colour (Keith, Herring 1991). From these values of grey corresponding to zero, one thousand and one million dollars, the artist then deduced the value in dollars of the white colours and the colourblack. By imagining a continual distribution of the sample, we could trace a *continuum* which would have a subject with totally white skin possessing almost twelve million dollars at one extreme, and one with totally black skin with debts of two thousand dollars at the other.

Fig. 16: Santiago Sierra, *Economical Study on the Skin of Caracans*, 2006, Venezuela.



All of this is obviously absurd and unreal: both because people with pure white or black-coloured skin do not exist, and because, from an epistemological point of view, while it is possible to statistically identify an average income value in a group, it is instead very difficult to make a statistical average into a tool forecasting the behaviours, life stories, incomes, etc. of a third person possessing one of the variables at stake.

Despite the absurdity of the proposition, what the work impetuously puts at stake is the possibility of translating individuals into a monetary scale, by reducing their subjectivity to the quantity of money possessed. The work generates a deterministic reification of the individual, similar to a monocausal reading of social dynamics. An observed variable generates a descriptive model on which, improperly, an explanatory model with a predictive value is built.

The descriptive model, deriving from the marginalist economic approach (Birken 1988), postulates individual agency with a constant rationality, oriented towards the maximization of individual utility. In this view, society is studied as an endless series of individual choices aimed at maximizing personal utility (Hirschmann 1970: 17). Given this orientation of agency, individual behaviours can easily be grouped, quantified and modelled. This type of instrumental rationality can easily be generalized and applied to different cases and situations, from the micro to the macro level. The limits of the approach are well-known and widely studied, both from an institutionalist perspective (Dale 2010), and from a more strictly sociological perspective (Granovetter, Swedberg 2001, eds). While it can be effective in explaining the actors' behaviours in a price market, the model instead tends to undervalue institutional types of conditioning of economic agency and the social embedding of the same utilitarianism (Adaman *et alii* 2003). Nevertheless, the model has and continues to have broad success both in the academic sphere and in public discourse (Samuels 2013, ed.). This success may be due to various factors: i) the possibility that the model offers of enormously simplifying social agency and studies on it; ii) the fact that, in particular contextual conditions, it turns out to be an effective model in explaining everyday forms of social action; iii) the efficacy in postulating behavioural constants that, once described and modelled, can be reproduced recursively and encouraged by enacting the performative agency described previously.

National governments and international organizations have played and continue to play a central role in choosing and promoting specific forms of economy. Recently economists have been playing a determining role as economic policy advisors (Babb 2001; Mitchell 2002; Valdes 1995).

The Quarrata-Masse Mancanti network. Thompson's work was devised as part of the Masse Mancanti³ project that I was able to follow throughout 2015. The project sought to create collaboration between artists, social theorists and citizens in different local contexts in Tuscany. Taking part in the project were three towns with their respective councils (municipalities of Monsummano Terme, Quarrata and Serravalle Pistoiese), two cultural foundations (Jorio Vivarelli and Giovanni Michelucci), a cultural association (Uscita Pistoia) and the University of Florence Department of Political and Social Science. The project had the collaboration and support of the Regione Toscana through Museo Pecci and Fondazione Caript. Masse Mancanti consisted of a series of local workshops built around various citizen targets: each activity put together involved artists, theorists and citizens in *ad hoc* projects which saw the support of numerous public and private entities. The activities put into practice tried to develop new forms of civic participation by rethinking the traditional social roles attributed to artists, theorists and citizens, both in artistic creations and in civic participation itself.

Thompson's work was realized as part of the project put together in the town of Quarrata. The Quarrata project involved fifteen artists, six social scientists from the University of Florence Department of Political and Social Science and twenty-one local businesses. The project did not embrace a specific theme, but rather adopted a method linked to a conditionality: the artists, theorists and businesses were obviously free to pursue their own aims, linked to their own specific discipline or their own interests, but they were requested to do so in collaboration with the other subjects involved. Subjectivities and individual aptitudes were neither denied nor imposed. However, they could be consciously acted out in the collective form given by the context of action.

³ For more information see www.massemancanti.it

The project came into being in a specific local socio-economic situation. Quarrata is a town of 25,000 inhabitants situated in the province of Pistoia. It grew up after the Second World War with the blossoming of furniture production and trade. In particular it made a name for itself as a manufacturing district for upholstered furniture, reaching significant levels of production and exportation. Its economic development followed a similar model to that of other Italian manufacturing districts (Triglia 2007). The furniture production was to a large extent parcelled out to suppliers hyper-specialized in specific steps of the production process. The industry was organized in such a way that there were only a few big exporting companies and a great many tiny, family-run production units. A blooming furniture sales business also developed, which in the 1980s and 1990s saw tens of furniture showrooms along the main access road into the town, with buyers coming in from all over the region.

During the years of expansion, the industrial activity's growth was mainly based on reducing product costs. With the appearance of emerging economies on the market, the strategy was no longer a winning one, and at the same time no resources were available to reposition the products on other markets. In the 2000s, this sparked a great economic crisis in the district, with the consequent closure of factories and increase in unemployment. In this situation of economic difficulty, moreover common to many Italian production districts, some of the town's businesses managed to reposition their products on national or international markets with a high added value,⁴ while others, tied to the old production model, are still operational, but struggling.

In such a difficult situation, local politics tried out new routes to foster economic innovation and leave behind the economic crisis.⁵ In these circumstances, the Councillor for Production Activities saw the Masse Mancanti project as a new possibility for rethinking local socio-economic dynamics. The municipal council thus put its offices and the concerns that already had contacts with local businesses for promotional activities at the disposal of the project. The town's socio-economic situation and the municipal council's willingness to actively take part in the project proved to be an excellent opportunity to try out the new forms of agency and civic participation that the Masse Mancanti project wanted to promote.

Starting from the set of businesses provided by the municipal council, and expanding it by way of network sampling, a survey was made of their willingness to take part in the experiment. Having initially gathered consent by telephone, each week on-site surveys were then organized at the businesses with the artists and university social scientists. During the meetings, the entrepreneurs or their delegates presented the company activity: their products, networks, manufacturing, etc.. Then the discussion, prompted by the guests, extended towards the company history, often closely connected family events, present difficulties, expectations for the future and also expectations for the Masse Mancanti project. During the discussions, the artists, entrepreneurs and theorists could freely show their reciprocal interest in the possible collaboration: together it was sought to build a horizon of sense and reciprocal roles in order to build a form of agency that would lead to the activation of all the subjects involved, within a wider horizon of sense of collective local action.

The visits to the companies were alternated with further seminars at the University of Florence Department of Political and Social Science. During the seminars, the aim of the collective discussion was to bring together the fragments of micro-stories recounted during the visits as far as possible into a single vision of the social change underway in the town. The artists also brought their project ideas which were discussed together, not as epiphenomena of creative genius, but as potential devices of socio-technical agencement. Their agency as well as the potential direct and indirect effects that they could produce was talked about from the different points of view and disciplines of the actors involved.⁶

The research path, discussion and project drafting went on for six months and led to numerous works being drawn up thanks to the collaboration between the subjects involved. Upon an initial stimulus usually provided

4 This is the case of the Fratelli Lunardi biscuit producers that made the biscuits for Thompson's work. The company was established in the 1960s and still works as a baker's for the local market. With the arrival of the founder's children in the business, it now manages to sell a type of local biscuits ('di Prato') produced by the company in gourmet food shops of international fame, such as Harrods of London.

5 Under the guidance of councillor Stefano Lomi there have been many experimental initiatives that have tried to combine social and production policies in a new and effective manner. For more information, see: <http://www.comunequarrata.it/>

6 These conditions also gave rise to significant examples of reciprocal empowerment and the evening out of traditional social roles of reflexivity and agency (biunivocally connected works and theories). However, owing to space restrictions I cannot go into them here.

by an artist, artists, theorists and businesses worked together to think, plan and make the works. From an initial dimension of collective action, we passed to operational subgroups, following all the operational phases according to the single projects. The companies often provided the materials and technical skills to make the projects, and also usually contributed to the ideational stage.

The projects were presented in some exhibitions, two in Milan on occasion of Expo 2015 and one in Quarrata.

The project was built on an underlying idea linked to the possibility of developing new forms of social agency in which economic action could contain a collective dimension and responsibility often neglected in the public debate, of which it is instead a constitutional part. The experiment looked into the possibility of thematizing this collective dimension within the economic action while analysing the effect that it could have on the actors involved.

With the advent of the crisis, as emerges from the tales of those who have lived through it first-hand, the town's economic prosperity probably also suffered owing to the habit of cost-cutting among local companies, in a sort of widespread reciprocal diffidence which led to difficulties in collaborating in new forms. Making an analogy with the famous essay by Bruno Latour (1992), the missing masses⁷ are indeed also those social bonds that economic agency continually reproduces but that it often tends to remove in favour of simplified and individualized forms of agency.⁸

Economization devices. At the beginning of the volume *Do economists make markets?* On the performativity of economics, MacKenzie et alii (2007, eds: 1) describe the experience of young Harvard economist, Jeffrey Sachs, sent to La Paz in January 1986 by the International Monetary Fund to advise the central Bolivian institutions on how to manage the problem of hyperinflation. Some years later, Sachs would acknowledge that the morphology of Bolivia, which he saw from the aeroplane while landing in La Paz, plays a central role in determining its economic situation and chronic poverty. Sachs states that his scarce knowledge of the context nevertheless did not lead him to break off his consultancy work. Hyperinflation was tamed, luckily: 'Monetary theory, thank goodness, [was] still working at thirteen thousand feet' (ibid.).

What emerges from the economist's story is the capacity of economic theory to perform the results expected of it. In spite of the analytical incapacity admitted in understanding the real contextual factors that generated the observed economic reality (hyperinflation), the prescriptive actions enacted nevertheless achieved the desired results. At a more general level of reflection, an analogy with the described situation can be hypothesized that postulates how, even though individual and collective agency is not necessarily utilitarian, by creating the conditions so that it can be acted out and encouraging it, the conditions can be created so that the form of action is actually realized.

This performative vision of the social sphere does not use the theoretical approach as a frame within which to read the social dynamics but makes economic theory one of the nodes and actors able to constitute a specific form of socio-technical agencement. Caliskan and Callon (2009) would describe this approach as an alternative in studying the economy to the formalist, substantivist, anthropological and socio-economic approaches. This would be theorized as 'the necessity of going beyond the notion of economy and towards the study of economization' (ivi: 393). In this view, the conceptualizations of the economy made by previous economic theories are not abandoned but are accepted as nodes in the network of widespread agency, thereby weakening their normative and prescriptive character in favour of their performative dimension.

'On the surface there may seem to be little in common between the prescriptive and interventionist will of

⁷ As used in the name of the project *Masse Mancanti*.

⁸ «According to some physicists, there is not enough mass in the universe to balance the accounts that cosmologists make of it. They are looking everywhere for the "missing mass" that could add up to the nice expected total. It is the same with sociologists. They are constantly looking, somewhat desperately, for social links sturdy enough to tie all of us together or for moral laws that would be inflexible enough to make us behave properly. When adding up social ties, all does not balance. Soft humans and weak moralities are all sociologists can get. The society they try to recompose with bodies and norms constantly crumbles. Something is missing, something that should be strongly social and highly moral. Where can they find it?» (Latour 1992: 226)

economics in the economy, the sociology of economy's stubborn desire to embed the economy in society (and consequently economics in sociology) and anthropology's interest in the process of valuation through which the circulation-transformation of things and persons is achieved' (ivi: 391). This can permit the theorization of more complex economic agency and grasp the performative dimension that the theory can produce.

To relativize this theory is not only to go in the direction of de-substantivizing the postmodern, relativist and antiscientific social sphere, but it also allows spaces to be opened up to sociological research which before were unthinkable. The possibility of thinking different forms of economic agency not linked to a reductionist anthropological vision (e.g. utilitarianism), or dependent on a cultural externality (e.g. anthropology) or some embeddedness, can allow models of social action to be inferred that are theorized by analysing the enactment realized by the actors at stake. Therefore, it is particularly significant that the different theoretical approaches towards the economy hinted at above, 'in combination, can provide us with a strong vantage point for studying processes of economization, and especially marketization' (ibid.).

The perspective of economization has paved the way to countless studies in the socio-economic and socio-material sphere able to describe the role played by economic theories and socio-material actors in enacting specific forms of economy and markets (marketization) (MacKenzie 2008, ed.).

Given socio-technical agencement's performative possibility of enacting different ways of economic agency, analysis of its actual enactment acquires a determining role in configuring the forms of possible social action. Analysis carried out on the different approaches to a work of art can be useful to identify analytical models of reference. While Sierra moves in the neo-Romantic paradigm of the work as containing truth and provocatively explores a possible result of utilitarianism, Thompson seems to configure a different form of economic agency.

Among the many works produced during the Masse Mancanti project that come up with innovative forms of economic agency, that of Thompson was chosen because it thematizes and enables the three topics emphasized in this essay to be read with sufficient clarity and distinction to exemplify some of the current convergences between artistic practices and social research: socio-technical agencement, performativity and economization.

Thompson connects very different stories and economic prospects found in the town's businesses. Unlike others, the artist quickly identified the interlocutors who could collaborate on the idea of the chariot, and with them he refined the idea for the project as well as the operational and factual details.

The collaboration in realizing the work was based on the idea of cooperation in view of a common goal. The work created was not successively summed up in an absolute economic value or exclusive ownership. It remains in the middle ground where the artist's ownership is still evident but it is co-present with the necessity to travel and the co-responsibility of the actors-citizens towards the object. It is private property but this ownership is not realized through the object's full availability to its holder. Instead, it is a type of property that contains the idea of a common co-responsibility towards the object itself.

Co-built through this process, the work in part loses an object's autonomy and the possibility of its commodification, and creates bonds with the local subjects. The work is such only in presence of and thanks to activating these ties.

By travelling among the companies and citizens, the chariot leads to the constitution of a socio-technical collective that thematizes and performs a horizon of community in the town which was difficult to imagine and implement before. The device acts as a socio-technical agencement able to produce and multiply ties and connections between apparently individual perspectives. This is realized not through a prescriptive norm which subjects should conform to, but through a socio-material device that contains inscribed programmes that condition the agency of the subjects it mobilizes. The economization produced by socio-technical agencements contains a dimension of economic agency that goes beyond sole individual utility and contains the activation of collective responsibility in the face of common action.

Conclusions

The route tried to show how sociological research and artistic practices move on common ground that can use converging keys to interpret reality.

In the first paragraph it was seen how twentieth-century art and sociology made a common shift in the way in which they think the relationship between author, work and user, and the relationship between the acting subject's intentionality and the construction of the social collective. In both perspectives the distance between the thinking subject and the objectivity of reality was shortened to foster practices of co-building social action. From a neo-Romantic type approach to the work of art, linked to the intentionality of creative genius a form of network agency has progressively been created that considers individual intentionality as one of the actors constituting a collective agency, which can be defined around the idea of socio-technical agencement.

In the second paragraph two ways were presented of conceiving performances in art in the second half of the twentieth century: one again of a neo-Romantic sort, linked to the messianic and redemptive function of the artist's gestures, with the performances of Marina Abramovic; the other instead an analytical-speculative approach that uses the lexicon and grammar of social norms in order to suspend them and take the opportunity to analyse the ways in which the social sphere is constituted. Thanks to shift in the work by Justin Randolph Thompson *Rock Chariot in the Middle of the Air* (2015) from the opening performance acted out by the artist to the widespread agency acquired by the work after the exhibition period, the gap can be grasped between the idea of performance as a work of art and the idea of the performativity of artistic, as well as social action. Performance as linked to models of twentieth-century work, and agency as conceptualized by the classic models of social positivism and in a different form of methodological individualism, places agency first of all beyond and outside interaction, in both the intra- and inter-individual directions. The itinerant and necessarily collaborative dimension of Thompson's post-exhibition work stresses socio-technical agencement's capacities in determining social praxes and specific forms of agency only through its own enactment. In this case, the author's intentionality plays a role in determining a range of possible connections between the actors at play, by initiating a practice that contains a need for collaboration and appropriation by other subjects, only fully realized, however, when it is enacted. In the performativity of the work of art and its acting user there is no backstage that moves the single actors on the scene, nor an ultimate horizon of intentioned sense through which the individual action can be read: the immanence of the interaction constantly mobilizes contextual perspectives and actors by inscribing the oriented sense of the action within an enactment that constantly transcends itself.

The performative paradigm makes the capacity to build the reality of economic theory visible. By distinguishing between the economy as a field of the social sphere (economy) and as economic theory (economics), it is possible to recognize the performative capacity of the latter in enacting particular forms of economy. Far from being a detection tool, they often prove to be a powerful engine producing specific modes of economic agency (MacKenzie 2008, ed.). The utilitarian, substantivist, anthropological and socioeconomic conceptions are useful points of view from which to read economization processes (Caliskan, Callon 2009).

With his work thought out in relation to the socio-economic dynamics of the town of Quarrata, and made in collaboration with the same company-actors, Thompson experiments a type of economization that goes beyond the traditional definitions. In addition to the radical utilitarianism of Santiago Sierra's *Economical Study on the Skin of Caracans* (2006), Thompson's work brings a necessary form of cooperation to economic agency that is not present in classical utilitarianism. The authorship of the work and the possible commodification of the object are put at stake in a non-normative way, together with the other dimensions that go to make up economic agency. The dimension of common life surrounding the individual is not negligible with respect to social action or agency, nor is it a substantive part of it, as the work cannot be realized without the necessary collaboration and co-responsibility that it can activate in the actors it mobilizes. The collective dimension of economic agency is not the background against which individual utility is activated but the condition making it possible for individual action to become economic agency.

Therefore, wide areas for possible investigation appear in the dialogue between artistic practices and social research. I have tried to show how the most engaged artistic practices can be a good way of producing social ideas

if investigated from a sociological slant. In the same way, artistic practices can find fertile ground for comparison in social research in order to capture current and scientifically drafted points of view, while avoiding the risk of making superficial assumptions.

In their quantity and variety of forms, contemporary artistic practices can offer a field of experimentation with uncertain boundaries which are easy even for social research to cross. Indeed, some time ago contemporary art had already crossed boundaries that had been laid, making a whole host of phenomenal manifestations ‘acceptable’ and firmly repressing all normative theoretical positions. In this constant self-delegitimation and parallel re-legitimation, contemporary artistic practices can be a field of experimentation with such faint boundaries that they can easily be crossed, occupied or hybridized by different disciplinary positions.⁹

In this field, the performative approach to studying the social sphere, and in particular economization, can find useful ground for reflection and the experimentation of new complex and non-monocausal forms of economic agency.

⁹ As examples of already active research projects see the activities of the University of Paris SciencesPo ‘Experimentation in Arts and Politics (SPEAP)’ research centre.

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