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STS ON ART AND THE ART OF STS: AN INTRODUCTION¹

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The laboratory life of TRF (thyrotropin-releasing factor), Pasteur's microbes, scallops in St Brieuc Bay, bicycles, surgical procedures, amateurs and professionals in Berkeley's museum of vertebrate zoology, Gino, case studies....² This somewhat arbitrary list of some of the things that Science and Technology Studies (STS)³ scholars have studied over the years gives a good indication of what might yet be studied: the sky is the limit!

So why then is Damien Hirst's diamond inlaid skull not on this list? Or Picasso's *Guernica*, or Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*? I exaggerate, of course. Although *For the Love of God* has not, as far as I know, been scrutinized by an STS-researcher, the world of art has not been completely unexamined from an STS perspective. Often, however, art has been studied as an extension of questions about science, for instance, its history and shared roots, the role of artists in creating the visual apparatus used by scientists, or science and its imagined future in film and fiction. This special issue aims to sketch the area in which independent STS research – particularly Actor Network Theory inspired STS research – of the arts might move, as well as naming some possible effects on STS of studying artistic objects. Besides showing that the arts can be investigated with STS questions and approaches, this introduction also aims to identify some of the innovations STS will have to make in order to continue doing so fruitfully. I will start by indicating three reasons why STS might be interested in studying the arts, after which I will turn to some of the challenges such

a study would face, meanwhile indicating thematically the body of research that has already made my makeshift list.

STS has always tended to focus on worlds that have strong ideological claims – truth, progress, health – as well as societal clout. A quick and dirty history of STS would say that in the early days, scholars with an interest in, as well as a societal concern about, science started breaking open the ivory towers of science. They showed how science was like any other kind of work and how technology does not work by itself, and in doing so, aimed at analysing the content of these practices as much as their procedures. As the topic list above shows, gradually, they turned to other objects of study, each with its own brand of self-grandifying narrative deserving to be laid bare. More specifically, STS has three areas of interest that make the arts a relevant object of study: (1) STS research into subjectivity and the senses, (2) STS interest in technology and materiality, and (3) STS interest in boundaries between science and other societal realms, such as the arts.

First of all, the focus on subjectivity and the senses. While in the beginning, STS focussed on what might be considered the 'hardest' cases – the natural sciences and on technologies that you can actually touch – gradually, researchers began to study *social* and more *applied* sciences and technologies. Medicine in particular became well-researched. The objects of study here were maybe less tangible, but their societal import no less real. Not only things turned out to be heterogeneously constructed, but subjects too. With this interest in the construction of the subject came a new focus (and an old Foucaultian one) on techniques of the subject. The question shifted from how patients, women, men, artists became defined – heterogeneously, and in practice – as particular entities with their own characteristics, habits and inclinations, to how over time the maintenance of such subjects was done. Ways of tasting, of childbearing, of listening were described as ongoing, mundane and mutual processes of attunement of objects and subjects, no longer distinguishable in that process. Crucial to understand these processes of attunement were the classic intermediaries: the senses. Research on what those senses sense focused on the expertise of everyday experiences, but gradually came to include more 'elite' areas as well, such as tasting wine and listening to music. After all, from a

perspective that starts from users' everyday expertise, anything users spend time doing became a possible object of study, resulting in a democratization of attention for both the commercial products of popular culture as well as of the non-commercial products traditionally associated with the arts.

Secondly, STS research into materiality and technology also suggest the arts as an interesting object of study. From a focus on the production of technology, via an interest in users' input in production, STS has increasingly begun to focus on practices of usage – especially as they are shown to be inextricably wound up with methods of production. Notably, interest in sound and the technological practices involved in the making of and listening (or trying to refrain from listening) to it has resulted in the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of sound studies, bringing together approaches from STS, cultural studies, and the history of the senses. In this field, music – from its most mundane appearance as ringtone or pop on the radio, to the highbrow culture of experimental music – is one of the sonic objects studied. More broadly, STS interest in material and technological practices of use suggest why we do not find studies of *Guernica* or *For the Love of God*, or if we do, why they are not immediately recognizable as such. For as STS scholars do elsewhere, their studies of the arts focus mainly on backstage, practical and preparatory activities constituting works of art or people's engagement with these works.

Finally, the arts come into focus from the STS interest in boundaries, boundary crossing and interdisciplinarity. STS scholars increasingly focus their attention on the boundaries between art and science: Both from a sense that the arts and sciences should not be so far apart as they now often seem to be, as from the observation that amalgams are emerging that cannot meaningfully be described either as art or science. The movement from the side of the arts is particularly striking. Artists can be seen to engage in science and technology in a variety of ways: as parasite, critic, participant observer, co-researcher, employee, customer, etc. Their engagement with the very objects STS researchers commonly study is interesting given the mutual interest STS and the arts have in intervention. What seems to be developing is a hotchpotch of STS scholars as well as artists studying and intervening in science and technology, as STS

scholars at the same time begin to study the interweaving of the arts and sciences. What might practices of intervention by STS scholars in the arts look like, given the artists own politics of intervention? And what does this concern with (politics of) intervention within the arts mean for STS and its own concerns about intervention? And in particular, how should STS deal with artists' growing interest in art as a public arena for political debate?

These last questions draw attention to the issue of how the study of the arts might affect STS itself. As STS research of science has continually needed to contend with scientists' counterarguments against its constructivist claims, as well as developing a reflexive discourse and methodology to try and develop further its own empiricist style of research, and its inferred truth-claims, the question is what the study of the arts will engender in STS itself. A couple of issues readily suggest themselves. First of all, STS will have to elaborate how its approach and findings might relate to existing research of the arts (aesthetics, art history, psychology & sociology of art, phenomenology of art, etc). Such domains have much more to say about how art is experienced, how to situate artistic works in relation to their art historical tradition, as well as matter- of- factly providing criteria to aesthetically evaluate and differentiate artistic products and artistic creativity. How will STS contribute to appraising the value of the arts from its common habit of insisting on ordinariness, heterogeneous ensembles and trivial work? Or how will it change how such appraisals are supposed to be made? Secondly, and related to this, STS scholars are not alone in starting to analyze the arts, art scholars as well as artists themselves are starting to use STS concepts and approaches as well as cooperating with STS scholars (think for instance of the presentations and discussions between artists, curators, art critics and historians and STS scholar Bruno Latour on current notions of 'producing knowledge' in contemporary artistic practices organized at BAK in Utrecht, the Netherlands in 2006⁴). How should STS take account of this increasing interweaving of object and method of approach? Particularly since, thirdly, the arts is an area that often shares some of the debunking, deconstructing and wake-up-calling habits belonging to STS. Do ways of theorizing and methods of research that STS scholars have developed over the years work for the arts as well, or are innovations (or modesty) necessary? Can STS learn from

the way in which contemporary artists interfere – for example from highly controversial interventionist work by Martijn Engelbrecht who incited heated debate by sending out official looking forms inviting people in Amsterdam to report any illegal immigrants they might know. ‘The main aim of the project was to discover how people would react. “It’s art in the form of a research,” says Engelbrecht.¹⁵ – or are artists’ interventions too asymmetrical for STS?

Tentative answers? An STS approach to the arts would resist a categorical evaluation of artistic effort and consequently insist on analyzing specific cases and the vocabularies associated with them in order to suggest ways in which the artworld (cf. Becker 1982) itself defines, differentiates and evaluates ‘art.’ Moreover, rather than applying set analytical tools, an STS approach would try to gain theoretical inspiration from the artworlds examined to understand not what is said about these worlds, but what is done to create and sustain them. And lastly, an STS approach would pay as much or maybe more attention to the constitutive role of moments, places and people that often are considered beside the point in understandings of art: so where the paint is made, when the composition is being rehearsed, who does the lighting, and who hums along on her daily jog. Together, these moves would allow for the articulation of questions that situate ‘art’ in scattered, various and sometimes unexpected locations and moments.

The issue starts with a contribution from Peter Peters introducing us to the specialist world of organ restoration. By analyzing two different styles of trying to recreate an old organ sound, he shows that what counts as an authentic sound depends on the material argument the reconstructed/ing organ makes. These arguments, at once scientific (related to the expertise of the restoration) and artistic (related to aesthetic expertise), belong to different traditions and thus enable different ways of reaching an aesthetic judgement. In the article he combines the third strand of STS attention for heterogeneous practices of science and art with the STS struggle to create normative standpoints from empirical descriptions.

Like Peter Peters’ focus on the organ restorers’ not-naïve attempts to retain or reclaim the authentic organ sound, Vivian van Saaze also analyzes

how works of art achieve permanency through specific practices of conservation that bear their mark on the work involved. Her PhD research, from which she has drawn this article, looks at current conservation practices of contemporary art. Contemporary art, more than the cliché traditional notion we have of art as paintings and sculptures, challenges conservation because of its conceptual nature and often fleeting materiality. In her article, van Saaze analyzes how the active and influential conservation of *No Ghost Just a Shell*, a seminal art project initiated by French artists Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe, co-determines its nature. To understand and appreciate art today, she argues, necessitates the taking into account of such practices. In its attention for the background, mutual and ongoing work necessary to constitute a work of art, her article belongs to the second strand of STS interest in the arts, that of technology and materiality, as does my own article.

My article uses STS research of scientific experiments to try and understand how in practice current sound artistic productions can be thought of as experimental. I argue that sound artists themselves use a loose notion of experimentation deriving from the genre of experimental music. In this view, sound art should engender, and be appreciated by, a free, experimental listener. During the article, I develop an understanding of several sound art productions of the Maastricht sound and music studio *Intro / in situ* as attempts to interest listeners in ways that should be conceived as lying between the very oppositions of freedom and coercion experimental music uses to formulate its ideal listener.

Matthijs Versteegh takes us to what we (immediately) associate with true art as well as classic STS: he focuses on two (supposed) Rembrandts and analyzes the experts’ debate on the issue. He uses the classic STS ‘controversy study’ to great effect, particularly for art historians maybe not so used to this perspective, showing how the Rembrandts (or not) are an effect of the experts’ debate.

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¹ This special issue arose out of the session *STS on Art and the Art of STS* organized by Vivian van Saaze, Peter Peters and myself during the 2008 4S/EASST conference in Rotterdam, see the program on: <http://www.4sonline.org/meeting08.htm>.

² These objects studied by STS scholars are taken from Latour & Woolgar 1979; Latour 1988; Callon 1986; Bijker 1995; Hirschauer 1991; Star & Griesemer 1989; Callon & Rabeharisoa 2004; Beaulieu, Scharnhorst & Wouters 2007. To encourage readability, in the remainder of this introduction, I will refrain from referring to specific literature.

³ Science and Technology Studies is the name of a field of research that used to be described as interdisciplinary, but might nowadays be tentatively described as a young discipline of its own. STS researchers study the interrelations between society, science and technology from a more (Actor Network Theory, for instance) or less radical constructivist, pragmatist and empiricist perspective. STS researchers increasingly apply their tool-kit to objects and areas which only at first glance may appear completely unspoiled by science and technology, such as food, toys, and art. On the history and definition of STS, see, for instance, the handbooks by Hackett, Amsterdamska, Lynch & Wajcman 2008; Jasanoff, Markle, Peterson & Pinch 1995; Spiegel-Rösing & de Solla Price 1977.

⁴ See [http://www.bak-utrecht.nl/?&click\[id_projekt\]=38](http://www.bak-utrecht.nl/?&click[id_projekt]=38)

⁵ See www.artslant.com/global/artists/show/21460-martijn-engelbregt