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Varying access and a myriad of experiences for audience members, toward a reconfiguration of “cultural” practices

par [Madeleine Planeix-Crocker](#) · Publié 27 avril 2016 · Mis à jour 25 avril 2017

by **Sylvia Girel**, Lecturer at Aix-Marseille University

In order to understand the significance of artistic products, we must forget about them for a while, we must turn away from them and take recourse to the ordinary forces and conditions of the experiences that are generally considered unaesthetic. – John Dewey, “Art as experience”

Professor Girel defends the importance of studying the establishment of the Ministry of Culture in France in 1959 as well as the institutions evolution to this day. This transformation is marked by increased accessibility to works of art at once considered reserved to an elite. Such an evolution is inscribed in the greater scheme of contemporary societal transformations, especially with regard to the ways in which key players relate to cultural objects, which in turn never cease to evolve. However, Girel notes that this transformation is not only seen in a positive light; indeed, certain researchers observe a regression, a lack of accessibility in certain cultural sectors. As such, cultural democratization as a whole has been unsuccessful.

Girel notes the discrepancy between a contemporary sociological understanding of culture, and that of André Malraux, based on equal access to arts and culture, the diversification of audience members, the augmentation of attendees at cultural events, the increase in opportunities to access art, the heightened participation of audience members generally held at a distance from “high art”, the intensification of elite cultural practices by all, etc. Finally, to this conception of democratization, we must add the social and civic missions of art and culture.

Furthermore, Girel contends that this conception of democratization contains the underlying notion of accession, of a “successful experience” that often refers to an idea type of understanding by the viewer (cultured audience member). Consequentially, there would be an ideal manner of viewing and listening. There are implicit expectations as to how an audience should react to a work of art, so much so that they have been interiorized by cultured audiences and non-cultured audiences alike.

In addition, democratization has been founded on certain categories of art as well as the conception that these categories should be made accessible to populations that are generally distanced from culture. As such, a hierarchy amongst art forms is established, and rarely is the question asked if “cultured” audiences should receive access to mass culture. Finally, Girel observes that this traditional conception of democratization is being revisited and questioned by contemporary researchers, rendering it difficult to find a harmonized definition of the concept. She proposes to examine two examples of cultural events that embody the contradictions and paradoxes held within this divergent conception of democratization: the establishment of the maison de la Culture in Le Havre (Normandy) in 1961, and the creation of the Nuit Blanche in 2002, a nocturnal celebration of the arts. These two events exemplify the evolution of creation, diffusion and reception of the arts in France. Cultural democratization is an informal process, a reflection of socio-cultural dynamics that exhibit varying forms of participation and appropriation of cultural practices and practitioners: the artistic experience is multifarious and multiform, which makes it impossible to take into account solely the traditional conception of democratization.

Girel makes the case for an attentive study of the population generally considered “non-audiences”, separated from the high-cultured elites. Indeed, this population often adheres to the original and complex offerings of contemporary art. History shows that several efforts to render contemporary art accessible

to all have been made: maisons de la culture in the 1960s, the Pompidou Center in the 1970s, the FRAC in the 1980s, squats in the 1990s, and public art spaces in the early 2000s. Cultural events such as the Ruée vers l'art (month dedicated to museums and the visual arts) in 1985, and the 10 days of contemporary art in 1997, are other manifestations of this initiative. Decentralized events also occurred in Rouen, Marseille for example.

The Nuit Blanche is yet another example of these cultural events geared towards all. This event, which takes place for one evening every fall, is a celebration of contemporary art, and attracts a diverse audience. This event shows that some progress has been made with regard to the democratization of contemporary culture, leaving aside an elitist understanding of art. The question remains however as to the transformation of the esthetic experience, a notion that escapes all quantitative analyses and surveys of audience members.

Indeed, these surveys do not take into account audience members who attend cultural events or exhibits in alternative or regional art centers (FRAC), and do not have the same social experiences as "cultured viewers". Girel notes that these methodological inconsistencies in cultural research explain the non-nuanced understanding of democratization we have to this day. A punctual study of these populations leads to a skewed understanding of their involvement in cultural practices: on paper, it would appear that such underrepresented audience members attend only festive cultural events, deemed "low culture". How can we qualify their cultural experience that exceeds a mere "social experience", yet is not necessarily a "cultural practice"?

Girel concludes that it is important to observe that the diversification of audience members in France is not automatically a sign of democratization in contemporary artistic practices. However, that is not to say that festive cultural events are not exempt of artistic excellence and are capable of soliciting an esthetic response from the viewer. As such, the term "cultural practice" needs to be redefined, in order to emphasize the esthetic dimension of the artistic experience. Girel proposes a qualitative and ethnographic study of these practices, which are diverse. Today, artists and audience members meet outside the boundaries of cultural institutions, and communicate in new ways than the traditional experience would have it. Sociologists must take into account these new circumstances, which are the basis of a new theoretical understanding of culture and society.