

## **Becomings: Narrative Entanglements and Microsociology**

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**Abstract:** In this article, I look back in an art/research experiment of convening an exhibition of women artists and inviting them to a round-table discussion in the context of a sociological conference. The artists who took part in this event had been previously interviewed for a feminist research project, entitled "In the Fold Between Life and Art, a Genealogy of Women Artists". The conference exhibition gave the artists the opportunity to appear to an academic audience and present their work while the round-table discussion created a forum for a narrative event where all women were invited to recount stories of becoming an artist. In looking at this event I want to explore questions around the possibilities and limitations of narratives in microsociological inquiries. In following trails of ARENDT's theorisation of stories, I explore connections and tensions between social, political and cultural entanglements in narrative research.

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### **1. Entanglements and Diffractions: Ethics, Aesthetics and Politics**

In his later work, Michel FOUCAULT raised the question of whether it would be possible to make our life a work of art, reinvent ourselves and become other of what we already are: "But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?" (1986, p.351) FOUCAULT's urge for the need of bringing together ethics, aesthetics and politics has initiated my project of writing a genealogy of women in art (see TAMBOUKOU, 2010). But what does it mean to make one's life "a work of art"? Following FOUCAULT, the question of whether it is possible, desirable and politically sustainable to make aesthetic interventions in life is embedded in a sensibility towards the world, a sort of aesthetic rationality within the web of human relations. This sensibility is not limited to the private sphere, but extends to the public: what is out there that one cannot stand. Art in my analysis is therefore conceptualised as a socio-cultural milieu within which we can re-imagine and reinvent ourselves through acting and thinking.<sup>1</sup> [1]

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<sup>1</sup> Art as an aesthetic milieu is bracketed in the discussion of this article, as it goes beyond its scope and limitations.

In considering relations between acting and thinking I have followed Hannah ARENDT's suggestion for a need to reconceptualise thinking not as an abstract process away from the world but as an embodied and embedded practice in the quest for meaning, central in her notion of *vita contemplativa*, which runs in parallel with *vita activa*. In the realm of *vita contemplativa* judging—alongside thinking and willing—is a faculty in "the life of the mind" that ARENDT elaborated in her late unfinished and posthumously published work (1978). Here she drew on KANT's "Critique of Judgement", which in her view "contains perhaps the greatest and most original aspect of Kant's political philosophy [taking] its starting point from the phenomenon of taste, understood as an active relationship to what is beautiful" (ARENDT, 2006 [1961], p.216). What I have found particularly relevant in my conceptualisation of the relationship between aesthetics and politics is the way ARENDT discusses KANT's notion of "enlarged mentality" as "the power of judgement [which] rests on a potential agreement with others [...] such judgement must liberate itself from the "subjective private conditions [...] and this enlarged way of thinking [...] needs the presence of others" (ARENDT, 2006 [1961], p.217). [2]

In tracing these connections I have worked for several years in the archives, reading autobiographies, biographies, memoirs and mostly letters of women artists at the turn of the 19th century (TAMBOUKOU, 2010). After doing that, I went on experimenting with ideas that emerged from the depths of grey documents with life history interviews. By further following genealogical lines between life narratives and paintings, I wanted to see whether and how women artists' lives could be perceived as experiments in living, actualised moments of future becomings.<sup>2</sup> This is how I decided to invite the women that I had interviewed in the course of the project, to present their work and share their stories of becoming an artist in the context of a sociological conference in London in the spring of 2007. There were overall eighteen women interviewed for this project and although they were all invited, eleven accepted to take part in the exhibition but only eight came to the round-table discussion. One declined as she did not like the idea and the other two had prior commitments. As this was an exploratory life-history project the only criteria for selection were that the artists should not be celebrities and they should be part of some artistic group or community as a way of self-organization and support. The assemblage of an exhibition and a round-table discussion was thus "an event", which attempted to challenge binarisms between acting and thinking, writing and making, theory and praxis, the academic and the artistic, the sociological, the cultural, the aesthetic and the political, very much in the context of what Nirmal PUWAR and Sanjay SHARMA (2012) have recently discussed as "curating sociology". Such an approach also follows current trends in performative social sciences that have been previously presented and discussed in this journal (see e.g. GUINEY YALLOP, DE VALLEJO & WRIGHT, 2008). [3]

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2 For an overview of the project, see: <https://sites.google.com/site/mariatamboukou/research-projects/in-the-fold-between-life-and-art-a-genealogy-of-women-artists> [Accessed: December 12, 2014].

But what is an "event"? The concept of the event in my analysis should not be conflated with its common sense meaning: something that has simply happened, an occurrence. It rather refers to the potential of the event to open up the future and make things happen<sup>3</sup>: indeed the exhibition attempted to make things happen in a sociological conference, crossing boundaries between matter and meaning. It is in this context that I have raised the question of how sociologists can study temporal and singular events in a continuous process of being modified. ARENDT (1972) has bitterly criticised the ability of the dominant paradigm of the social sciences to predict. As David LUBAN has noted:

"on the one hand it is notorious that most predictions which emerge from social science research are derivable from simple common sense; on the other the truly important political events of our century (such as the workers' uprisings) come as a surprise to everyone" (1994, p.86). [4]

In this context, a crucial theme that has come up in the process of my research is the problem of how we can account for contingencies and becomings: how to unsettle linear analyses about "social facts and social orders", which have been the traditional objects of sociology (see RUSTIN, 2010), but also how to include in the sociological analysis possibilities that have not been actualised but can be considered within a plane of radical futurity. [5]

Gilles DELEUZE and Felix GUATTARI (1988 [1980], p.216) have suggested that societies should not be defined by their order, but by what escapes their order; in this line of thought, sociologists should become more sensitive to the untimely, the inventive possibilities of life and its power to open up the future to the unpredictable, the unforeseen, a world yet to come. And the question rises: could there be a social analytics of becomings and if yes, what would it be like? Moreover how is the political linked to such a conceptualisation of sociological inquiry? The exhibition and the round-table discussion were thus conceptualised as research events in response to the quest for different ways of "doing sociology" and of making sense of the social and the political. [6]

Clearly the role of stories is crucial in this quest. Following ARENDT's philosophy, Adriana CAVARERO (2000) has argued that the act of narration is immanently political, relational and embodied, while Julia KRISTEVA has particularly commented on ARENDT's understanding of the political as public appearance:

"to act and speak, to leave one's safe shelter and expose one's self to others and, with them, 'be ready to risk disclosure'. This would be the first political condition for revelation: demonstrating *who* I am, and not *what* I am" (KRISTEVA, 2001, p.16). [7]

To the Arendtian line that human beings as unique existents live together and are constitutively exposed to each other through the bodily senses, CAVARERO (2000) adds the *narratability* of the self, its constitution by the desire of listening to his or her story being narrated. In this light, narration is perceived as a

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3 For a discussion of the philosophies of the event see TAMBOUKOU (2010).

discursive milieu within which the crucial question of *who* one is gets registered and deployed in unforeseen directions. In highlighting the question of "who one is", CAVARERO has drawn on ARENDT's conceptualisation of narration as the medium through which the uniqueness of existence enters the social and the order of discourse: "With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance" (1998 [1958], p.176). [8]

Narration then is a process of responding to the world and connecting with it. It is important to remember here, Julia KRISTEVA notes, that given that stories keep on unfolding, the revealed *who* is subsequently dismantled, "dispersed into 'strangenesses' within the infinity of narrations" (2001, p.27). Thus, the "unique existent", the revealed *who* in ARENDT's and CAVARERO's philosophical thought has nothing to do with the individual of the dominant philosophical discourse who should come out as homogeneous, universal and equal or equivalent. (KOTTMAN, 2000, p.ix) Within the act of narration, CAVARERO suggests, the self emerges as *narratable*; this narrative constitution however does not end up in pinning down the self within prescribed spaces, places, roles and identities. It does not produce an essence neither does it require one. Simply put, the *narratable* self can never be reducible to the content of his or her story. [9]

Conceptualised as a reciprocal narrative scene, the round-table discussion created conditions of possibility for storytelling and opened up paths for revealing the meaning of the "who" without necessarily defining it.<sup>4</sup> Following ARENDT, it was the question of "who are you" that I was trying to follow. Indeed what has come up in my research is the emergence of a wide variety of paths constituting cartographies of becoming an artist. Following Rosi BRAIDOTTI's (1994) influential theorisation of female subjectivities in transition and move, I have called them "nomadic paths" since they do not seem to follow predefined trails or carefully designed schedules. It is not easy to locate their point of departure and even more difficult to pin down their final destination. These paths seem to start and end in the middle, the intermezzo and what is interesting about them is the journey itself rather than its starting and/or ending points. It is therefore some of these nomadic passages that I will further chart, but before doing that, some thoughts around the diffractive mode of my analysis. [10]

There is a strong tendency in social sciences research in general and in narrative research in particular, for self-reflexivity.<sup>5</sup> As researchers we are expected to reflect on our methods and situate ourselves in the research process by thinking about the effects of our methodologies and theories upon the "research findings". While positing the epistemological project of "situated knowledges", Donna HARAWAY (1997) has criticised reflexivity, putting forward "diffraction" as an alternative tool of meaning making:

4 Here I paraphrase ARENDT who has written: "storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it" (1995 [1955], p.105).

5 An interesting debate around self-reflexivity and subjectivity has actually been presented and discussed in this journal (see BREUER, MRUCK & ROTH, 2002; MRUCK & BREUER, 2003).

"Reflexivity has been recommended as a critical practice, but my suspicion is that reflexivity, like reflection, only displaces the same elsewhere, setting up worries about copy and original and the search for the authentic and really real ... Diffraction is an optical metaphor for the effort to make a difference in the world ... Diffraction patterns record the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference. Diffraction is about heterogeneous history, not about originals ... Diffraction is a narrative, graphic, psychological, spiritual and political technology for making consequential meanings" (p.16). [11]

The optical metaphor of diffraction that HARAWAY has proposed as a pattern of mapping the effects of difference has been taken up by Karen BARAD "as a methodological approach ... of reading insights through one another in attending to and responding to the details and specificities of relations of difference and how they matter" (2007, p.71) Being a physicist as well as a feminist theorist, BARAD has considered diffraction as an optical phenomenon in classical physics but also in quantum physics. As a quantum way of knowing according to BARAD, diffraction apparatuses not only "measure the effects of difference [but] even more profoundly, they highlight, exhibit, and make evident the entangled structure of the changing and contingent ontology of the world, including the ontology of knowing" (p.73) [12]

In thus mapping the effects that difference makes, how can we make sense of the different paths that emerged in the context of this research event? As I have already noted the idea of the exhibition and the round-table discussion was to bring together a group of contemporary women artists who had participated in a research project of collecting and analysing narratives of becoming an artist. Thus from the beginning there were a number of spatial, embodied and conceptual couplets creating conditions of possibility for the research event but also imposing limitations and constraints upon its realisation: woman and artist, artist and student, woman and student, researcher and artist, researcher and student, the art and the academy, the gallery and the university. Within a diffractive mode of analysis however, rather than being taken as oppositions or disjunctions, these couplets were initially considered as conjunctions, rich and potentially fertile multiplicities without pre-defined properties or functions. What a diffractive methodology further offers is the possibility of reading stories and theoretical insights through one another and thus configuring new ways of understanding socio-political and cultural entanglements in women artists' lives. [13]

In light of the above the article further unfolds in three parts. Section 2 looks at the artists' stories as written in their statements, told in their interviews and retold during the round table discussion. In drawing on life-stories through different media—the statement, the interview, the round table discussion—I consider the porous boundaries between the public and the private and their effect upon the telling and writing of stories. Section 3 discusses the role of narratives in the project of microsociology through a diffractive reading of Hannah ARENDT's take on narrative and Gabriel TARDE's theorisation of the social. This leads to Section 4, where I problematise the dichotomy between the social and the political in ARENDT's work by considering the questions that arose during the conference

exhibition and the round table discussion. Here the material limitations of ARENDT's conceptualisation of the political are particularly considered through Karen BARAD's (2007) discussion of space/time/matter entanglements. [14]

## 2. Statements and Stories: Diffractions, Multiple Beginnings, Events

In setting the exhibition/round-table discussion, my first move was to ask the artists to send me a list of their work and a short statement that would be included in the exhibition catalogue as well as the webpage I had created about the event. In writing their statements the artists followed specific genres and conventions, acknowledging their education, tracing their influences and configuring "the conceptual core" of their aesthetic practices. As Linda SANDINO (2010) has pointed out, the narrative constitution of the artist's statement is an interesting area that needs further investigation in narrative research. Moira McNAIR's<sup>6</sup> statement below is an artful composition of space/time/matter entanglements in presenting herself and her work:<sup>7</sup>

"My roots are in Scotland, having been born and bred there, but my life and future are now firmly planted in Sussex. My work is influenced both by where I grew up and where I now choose to live. It is underpinned by the strong Scottish tradition and emphasis on drawing and observation, and after my training and subsequent graduation from Brighton University with a Fine Art degree, it is open to and influenced by experimentation in both subject matter and execution. At various times I have used instillation, photography, painting and drawing to express my ideas, and at the moment am mainly using 2D methods to visually represent my current themes. In my present work I use plants, both as inspiration and as metaphor, but also as part of the material and medium itself" (2007, exhibition catalogue, p.4) [15]

Clearly there were also significant differences in how the artists presented themselves and their work both in the form and the content of their statements. Irene RUNAYKER's<sup>8</sup> statement below takes a more political stance in charting herself and her work:

"I do not place my work in any 'movement' with confidence. I could list my 'family' (my aesthetic ancestors) as:—European, Post WWII, Lyrical Abstraction, Arte Povera, Situationism, Automatic writing. Yet all of these I wish to strip of the sophistication of the male voice: that which has assumed ownership of the discourse. I strip it back— at times raw, yang, punk, challenging culturally assumed laws, against methodology even my own. At one with my warrior self. At other times the work is even excessively 'female':—yin, dark, secretive, alluring. Apple eater down to the core, no sharing. At

6 For an overview of McNAIR's work, see <http://moiramcnair.com/> [Accessed: November 10, 2014].

7 For an overall presentation of the artists' statements, see the exhibition catalogue at <https://drive.google.com/viewerng/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=ZGVmYXVsdGRvbWFpbntYXJpYXRhbWJvdWtdXxneDozNmJiNDZhYTBhMjhhYmRm> [Accessed: November 10, 2014]. The artists have asked for their real names to be used.

8 For an overview of RUNAYKER's work, see <http://www.linchpingallery.co.uk/artists/runayker> [Accessed: November 10, 2014].

one with my love self. Somewhere between Battle and Desire I negotiate an uncomfortable freedom" (2007, exhibition catalogue, p.6). [16]

Differences notwithstanding, what the artists' statements presented, is what GUARALDO (2001, p.27) has called "the whatness of being": they refer to indexical qualities, including geographies and histories of origin, educational trajectories, art movements and political attitudes. What evades them however, is the "whoness of the doer" (ibid.), in her unrepeatability singularity. As already noted, it was this quest for the "whoness" that the round-table discussion was about and in this light, McNAIR's story of becoming an artist unfolded as a memory journey into a young girl's decision not to follow art as a career:

"As far back as I can remember I have always been drawing or painting [...] I took art as a major subject at school and I fully intended to take it on to further education. However I was persuaded that the future of an artist was a very risky proposition and that to train as a primary teacher would be a much better option [...] when I look back, I realise and I can see it that it didn't take much persuading; I don't think I was ready then to devote enough of my life to art [...] when my own children were old enough I knew that the time had come [...] suddenly maybe I had realised how much I now wanted to develop my artistic ideas to their maximum potential" (2007, round-table). [17]

McNAIR's memory journey in tracing her path of becoming an artist is a classic tale of gendered restrictions upon women's professional opportunities in the art world. Indeed, NOCHLIN's (1971) famous essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" has initiated a genealogy of critical feminist interventions in the history and sociology of art and it is in this context that McNAIR's "persuasion" becomes intelligible. What was not included in McNAIR's story at the research event, was the fact that before "being persuaded" not to follow art as a career, she did try unsuccessfully to study art:

"I was very keen on art and I did try for an art college when I was about 17, I tried at Edinburgh and Dundee I think and I didn't get in to either of them, so I went to a teaching training college and became a primary teacher" (interview, April, 2006). [18]

The long interview I had with McNAIR, just a year before the conference exhibition, gave her time and space to give more details about her educational trajectory as an artist and brought forward the close interrelation between education and art that became a central theme in the analysis of the fold between life and art (see TAMBOUKOU 2010). [19]

While women's exclusion from the milieu of art has been carefully documented, analysed and explained, how *is* McNAIR's return to art to be understood? Is it just a problem of social mobility that can be attributed to different forms of capital be it social, cultural or emotional and the flows in between them in a Bourdieusian conceptualisation of social analytics (BOURDIEU, 1984)? Not that it is wrong to talk about McNAIR's cultural, social, emotional, or even corporeal capital as many strands in feminist theory have already suggested (see amongst others, ADKINS & SKEGGS, 2004). What I argue however, is that although useful in explaining

social reproduction, Pierre BOURDIEU's concepts are not particularly effective in unravelling the microphysics of power and desire intertwined in McNAIR's becoming. The latter rather unfolds as a continuous process, a line of genealogical events not necessarily linked to a series of causalities or sequential orders. As Maurizio LAZZARATO has commented, the dominant discourse in the social sciences have given a wide range of analyses on how disciplinary societies function and reproduce themselves but they have almost nothing to say on becomings:

"The social sciences which legitimated the constitution and action of these [disciplinary] institutions function by equilibrium (political economy), integration (Durkheim), reproduction (Bourdieu, contradiction (Marxism), struggle for survival (Darwinism) or competition, but know nothing of becoming [...] The time of the event, the time of invention, the time of the creation of possibles must be curtailed and fenced in within rigorously established procedures and deadlines [...] For his part Tarde had already shown why economic and social sciences exclude any theory of invention and creation, and how they constitute themselves as theories of reproduction, as is still the case with the sociology of Bourdieu" (LAZZARATO, 2006, p.176). [20]

In raising these questions, my point is that becoming an artist is not a linear model of transformations and cannot be pinned down within a specific space/time block, or institutional structure. Irene RUNAYKER's story below equally disrupts "social class" patterns of explanation: her narrative reveals that her working class background both enabled and restricted her becoming an artist:

"I was born in Whitechapel, the East End [...] Childhood was rather interrupted by war that was going on at the time [...] because of that, there was very little [...] there weren't any toys or anything and I remember, I remember the very first time I was hooked into drawing [...] I had a piece of paper; I was about three, three and a half [...] and I had a pencil; and I looked at a circle and I knew what a circle was and I got this pencil and 'yes, I can draw it like this', and when I looked at the paper it was just a wobbling triangle and I couldn't understand why [...] why is it coming out wrong [...] and I think that was when I was [...] I became an artist that day!" (2007, round-table). [21]

Having nothing to play with as a working class child in the East End of London, a piece of paper and a pencil created the material conditions for experimenting with art and initiated the process of becoming an artist in RUNAYKER's narrative. But as her story further unfolded new beginnings and ruptures would emerge. Indeed multiple beginnings, dispersed continuities and unforeseen ruptures were amongst the many interesting themes that emerged from all women artists' narratives. [22]

In recounting the story of how they became an artist, both McNAIR and RUNAYKER felt the need to pin down a memorable beginning: for McNAIR, painting was always, already part of the self she remembered. RUNAYKER was even more precise in grasping a concrete moment in her early childhood when she was "hooked into painting". But while for McNAIR art unproblematically

became part of her early educational history, RUNAYKER's relationship to art was a struggle against her working class background:

"I got a grant and I went to Art School feeling very peculiar because [...] nobody went to Art School [...] being working class, you had to earn a living and artists don't earn a living, do they? [...] And a woman artist was almost sort of in the same way that they thought about actresses [...] that's the next step on to, you know, prostitution or something ghastly like that" (interview, March, 2006). [23]

And yet, the agonistic spirit of a talented working class girl seems to have been stronger than McNAIR's story of "being persuaded" that a career in art "was a very risky proposition" and that "training as a primary teacher would be a much better option." But as McNAIR's story unfolded, the initial "beginning" was ultimately moved to the time when her children had grown up. RUNAYKER's story also unveils multiple beginnings:

"I married young, had two sons [long pause] my husband turned out to be a gambler and I went to work as teacher and keeping backwards and forwards, [...] eventually we left and I was teaching at King's Cross, primary school teaching actually [...] I enjoyed it to the extent that I was really good at it and became a Deputy Head for five years and did [...] acting headship [...] and [...] then I said, this is not for me, I've got to get back to it" (2007, round-table). [24]

"Getting back to it" was RUNAYKER's new beginning and yet as both women's stories unfold there are always new beginnings and new ruptures that keep unsettling the coherent linearity of their becoming an artist. What the stories also unveil is that art was always entangled in their lives and careers in different forms and degrees:

"during all these years I've always kept my interest in visual arts going, I would attend night classes, visit galleries, I made visual art a major part of my class teaching [...] I was always feeling towards visually expressing myself and getting others to visually express themselves" (McNAIR, 2007, round-table). [25]

RUNAYKER's entanglements make a much more forceful entry in her narrative:

"So I started again in 1975 and that first year's painting was horrendous, I mean, I cannot tell you how bad they were, it was as if I never had any training at all, but suddenly round, round at about the end of that year, beginning of 75, 76, suddenly everything dropped, all the pennies began to drop and I started painting stuff that I know all those years before I wouldn't be able to do. It was almost as if life itself, the living of it had enabled me to express myself in paint /and I cannot understand, I couldn't sort of, I can't explain how this came about but I know that this is true, that there is something to do, this link up with life and with art, that there is something to do being involved with people and with your society or with your family whoever, but being involved in some way feeds back into the richness of what happens on your canvas and this is been this has come up time and time again that [...] both liberates

you on the canvas or in your work and, and [...] and you also find a way of expressing it" (interview, March, 2006). [26]

As RUNAYKER most aptly puts it, "starting again" is never really about making a new beginning; the new is always, already entangled in life's space/time/matter, as well as the web of human relations. Entanglements between life and art, the difficulty of discerning clear beginnings and a sense of always starting again in the middle of things emerged as a recurrent theme in the round-table discussion, as well as in the individual interviews I had with all artists. Although I could not possibly present and discuss here the artists' stories in any encompassing mode, what they reveal is the inability of overcoded generalities such as "gender", "social class" or "cultural capital" to capture the intricacies of the social, discern linear causalities and ultimately create a pattern within which women artists' lives can be situated and understood. This is what I want to explore in the next section of the article. [27]

### **3. The Quest for the Social: Narratives and Microsociology**

The artists' stories in the round-table discussion revealed "the whoness of the doer" in ways that only storytelling can do. Indeed their storytelling forcefully conveys the Arendtian narrative theme of uniqueness and plurality: different and unrepeatable storied entangled in the web of human relations. By evading the abstraction of universal principles, qualities or categories, stories throw light on a wide range of historical, socio-cultural and political structures; they ground abstractions, flesh out ideas and thus create a milieu of critical understanding:

"I have always believed that, no matter how abstract our theories may sound or how consistent our arguments appear, there are incidents and stories behind them, which, at least for ourselves, contain as in a nutshell the full meaning of whatever we have to say" (ARENDR, 1960, p.1). [28]

But stories for ARENDR are not just good for understanding. There is a strong link between the cognitive and political aspects in the act of storytelling: "thought itself [...] arises out of the actuality of incident, and incidents of living experience must remain its guideposts by which it takes its bearing if it is not to lose itself" (ibid.). Stories guide thought and give it a political orientation ARENDR argues, but in order to think politically as well as philosophically, you need a position from where to speak, you need to acknowledge your involvement in the human web of relations: you are always in-the-world-with-others. [29]

This is how we come full circle to the conference event as opening up a space for conversation and therefore creating conditions of possibility for critical positioning through storytelling practices. What all stories revealed in a forceful way is that the social is not a transcendent entity that explains, but a wider horizon that is being constituted through the plurality of the stories. What these stories also revealed was a series of new beginnings and ruptures, "events" that emerged in spite of social expectations and restriction, breaking linear causalities, going against the stream of social reproduction and opening up new possibilities in what

subjects can do and in what they can be or rather become. It is through understanding the uniqueness of each story, particularly in the way they carry traces of how individuals can always transcend what is "generally expected" or anticipated by "social rules" and "social orders" that "the social" can be differently understood not in terms of generalizations and analogical thinking (BENHABIB, 1994) but in terms of singularities or what I have extensively discussed in my work as "lines of flight" (TAMBOUKOU 2010). [30]

Following ARENDT, I have thus used storytelling as a method for sociological understanding of eruptions, contingencies and new beginnings. In making this argument about narratives and "the social" I have drawn on Gabriel TARDE's sociological analytics. Indeed, what makes TARDE's microsociology distinctive is his attention to the monad—the individual story in our case—and his assertion that the social is a consequence rather than a cause, it does not hold any explanatory power; it is actually what mostly needs to be explained. As Bruno LATOUR (2002) points out, in TARDE's thought the micro/macro distinction does not enable the analysis of how human societies emerge and function. As a matter of fact the smallest entities are always richer in difference and complexity than their aggregates:

"For since everything in the world of facts proceeds from small to great, everything in the world of ideas, which reflects it as though reversed in the mirror, naturally proceeds from great to small and in the course of its analysis comes upon the elementary facts and real explanations only at the end of its journey" (TARDE, 1899, p.111). [31]

It is TARDE's theorisation of difference as an ontological condition and his rejection of the very notion of identity that has inspired DELEUZE's philosophy of "Difference and Repetition" (2004 [1968]) and has geared his engagement with the distinctiveness of Tardean microsociology. Indeed TARDE's extract below on difference must have been mostly influential:

"To exist is to differ; difference, in one sense, is the substantial side of things, what they have most in common and what makes them most different. One has to start from this difference and to abstain from trying to explain it, especially by starting with identity, as so many persons wrongly do. Because identity is a minimum and, hence, a type of difference, and a very rare type at that, in the same way as rest is a type of movement and the circle a type of ellipse" (2006 [1895], p.355). [32]

In this light, Paul PATTON has commented that the difference between macropolitical and micropolitical levels of social analytics "is not simply a difference in scale but a difference in kind" (2006, p.30). It is an analytical path oriented towards complex and multifarious modalities of living in the interstices and ruptures of dominant social entities and amongst the minutiae of socio-cultural and affective relations, the micro-spaces where power and desire meet in producing realities and indeed the subject. The conference storytelling event thus emerges as a case for microsociological analytics mapped on TARDE's project,

which according to DELEUZE and GUATTARI has interrogated what Durkheimian sociology has taken for granted:

"Durkheim's preferred objects of study were the great collective representations, which are generally binary, resonant and overcoded. Tarde countered that collective representations presuppose exactly what needs explaining, namely 'the similarity of millions of people'. That is why Tarde was interested in the world of detail, or of the infinitesimal: the little imitations, oppositions and inventions constituting an entire realm of subrepresentative matter" (1988 [1980], pp.218-219). [33]

The microsociological analytics looks closer into the effects of differentiation and scrutinises the heterogeneity and meshwork of social relations, institutions, formations and subjects themselves. In this light, stories lend themselves to the microsociological project carrying traces of "the infinitesimal, the little imitations, opposition and inventions" that TARDE proposes as units of analysis par excellence. But stories do more than that: it is not just "the social" that they illuminate, but also the political and the way they are inextricably interrelated. What I want to do in the following section is to rethink TARDE's conceptualisation of the social in conjunction with ARENDT's take of storytelling within the political. [34]

#### **4. Uniqueness and Plurality: The Social and the Political Reconsidered**

Stories in ARENDT's thought evade theoretical abstractions and contribute to the search of meaning by revealing multiple perspectives and remaining open and attentive to the unexpected. It is precisely in their openness that their epistemological validity lies: knowledge emerges through new beginnings and unexpected connections in the web of contingent relations that constitute reality. As GUARALDO has aptly put it: "the comprehension of reality cannot exclude the plurality of its constitution" (2001, p.135). But here also lies the inextricable connection between knowledge, ethics and the political, since in the Arendtian horizon "the need for understanding is political" (ibid.). Seen in this light, the conference "experiment" was set up as an event in the quest for meaning: what is the present of women artists' lives today? How have they become what they are and what are the possibilities of becoming other? As already discussed above, this quest for meaning was conceptualised as "an art event"—the artists' exhibition—and as a "narrative experiment", a collective story-telling event. [35]

By bringing together the artists' work and stories my intention was to create archives for historical and sociological understanding and in doing so I positioned myself as "a visitor" in women artists' worlds. Visiting as a metaphor in ARENDT's thought is a good way of holding involvement and distance together, a mode of "situated impartiality" (DISH, 1994) in sociological research. As Lisa DISH comments "the visiting metaphor depicts the activity of judging as a withdrawal to a space in the mind which you have imaginatively arrayed several viewpoints that bear on a particular situation" (p.165) In my case, visiting women artists' world meant amongst other research strategies interviewing them, visiting their studios, curating an exhibition of their work within the spaces of an academic conference

and convening a collective story-telling event. Acting, thinking and judging were inextricably intertwined in these moves as I have already discussed. But what was particularly unique in the conference event was the staging of plurality. Publicity, the act of appearing to others through action and speech is at the heart of ARENDT's conceptualisation of the political; although acknowledging the importance of withdrawal in the faculty of judgement, it is "publicity that guarantees impartiality" (DISH, 1994, p.165) and not withdrawal to an Archimedean point of view. But this is where "the social" becomes so important in the constitution of "the political", not as a Durkheimian transcendence but as a Tardean inherence. Indeed, what women artists' stories revealed is that there is an urgent need to map the effects of class and gender differences amongst others, not as overcoded generalities but as entanglements of components and their relations. [36]

What the conference event further exemplified is that "the social" and "the political" is a false dichotomy particularly in relation to how ARENDT defined the political in terms of action and speech. In her often cited essay "Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative", Sheila BENHABIB has carefully mapped Arendtian public spaces not in terms of physical locations and boundaries but rather in terms of their creating conditions of possibility for human beings to come together, reveal "the whoness of the doer" through speech and act in concert. In this light the round-table discussion was a public event saturated by social and political elements, forces and sources. "For the moderns", BENHABIB (1994, p.130) writes, "the public space is essentially porous: the distinction between the social and the political makes no sense [...] the struggle to make something public is a struggle for justice". It is around this "struggle for justice" highlighted in BENHABIB's essay that the conference event was about: the struggle for women artists' narratives to be included in the ways knowledge is produced in the academy, lending validity to policies, discourses and practices that will have an effect on women artists' future possibilities for both survival and creation. [37]

Conceptualised as a narrative scene, the round-table discussion created conditions of possibility for storytelling and opened up paths for revealing the meaning of the "who". And yet it was this quest for "meaning" that one of the artists, Gali WEISS<sup>9</sup> felt missing in the round-table discussion:

"For me, the presentation was a beginning, a supposition. I saw it as an experiment, a question: what happens when a number of women who define themselves as artists are placed together and present themselves within a limited time and place, without predetermining their presentation as a group. What do they choose to present? [...] I would have liked to hear more of why we choose to do what we do. Why we choose to create, and why we choose to deal with our materials and subjects in the way we do. In other words, about meaning. In this way, I think we could see better the connections between life and art [...] I believe that our art is not just a preference for a particular subject-matter or aesthetic. It is to do with life narratives

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9 For an overview of WEISS' work, see <http://www.galiweiss.com/> [Accessed, November 10, 2014].

feeding our art, and our art feeding our lives [...] All these thoughts, of course, are in retrospect, and would not have come about without the action of presenting ourselves" (personal communication). [38]

WEISS's succinct comments above raise important questions around the material limitations of the Arendtian public spaces. In putting forward a radical and provocative notion of the political, ARENDT has used the ancient Greek *polis* as a site of reference. Indeed she has been criticised by the historical inconsistencies of her chosen model.<sup>10</sup> But as GUARALDO has noted the Greek *polis* is just a heuristic device that ARENDT used to flesh out her take on the political which has created ruptures within the mainstream tradition of political philosophy: "Arendt did not intend to present a historically faithful image of ancient Greece. Her use of the *polis* model serves primarily as a counter-factual model against which she is able to confront the modern notion of the political" (GUARALDO, 2001, p.42). The *polis* is simply taken as a well-rehearsed spatial and conceptual frame of reference within which humans appear to each other through action and speech. What is significant however in ARENDT's configuration of the political is the recognition that the meaning of stories that capture the fleeting of moment of actions and deeds and thus enter the archives of history, is only intelligible to the storytellers and listeners and not to the protagonists: "the complete sense of an acting individual is provided by the historian or storyteller, who is external to the sphere of pure action" (GUARALDO, 2001, p.40). [39]

In light of the above, what I suggest is that the round-table discussion can be conceived as a political space within which eleven women artists appeared to each other through storytelling. Their action was indeed the practice of narration itself: within the Arendtian conceptualisation then it is no wonder that the meaning of the action evaded them. As WEISS has put it above, in actually using the very notion of "action": "All these thoughts, of course, are in retrospect, and would not have come about without the action of presenting ourselves" (personal communication). But there are other reasons for the quest of meaning to go off track. As DISH (1994, p.56) has pithily noted ARENDT's configuration of the political as appearance in the presence of others, "permits her to avoid specifying the constitutional guarantees that are necessary to make 'the given' of human plurality a meaningful part of public institutions". In considering this gap in ARENDT's argument, I will now return to BARAD's insights and the consideration of entanglements of matter and meaning. Here I will look into the concrete constitution of the conference event as a public space, by focussing on its spatial, temporal and discursive limitations. [40]

The exhibition itself lasted only for three days, which is much shorter than what exhibitions really run for, while the artwork was displayed in non-gallery conditions. It has to be noted here that there was actually an art gallery in a different building of the campus but as a convenor I deliberately chose to have the exhibition at the centre of the conference so that it remained organically

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10 For an overview of feminist critiques and discussions of ARENDT's thought, see HONIG (1995).

connected to the other events of the conference. What I had not fully realised at the time of conceiving the idea about the exhibition was the importance of the complex matter/space/time relations of the conference event. WEISS's intervention here is crucial in highlighting the importance of space not just in shaping social and knowledge relations but also in creating conditions of possibility for the work of art to appear:

"There is always an initial unease for me at seeing the empty space of an exhibition site before setting up my work [...] Before coming to the conference room selected for the exhibition I could only imagine my own work [...] Now that the space was a physical reality I was faced not only with the room itself, but with the other works, so alive and present, so different to my own conceptually and materially. How to recreate a unified space or a trajectory within the space out of seemingly unrelated artworks, whose connectedness lay in academic explorations rather than conceptual or material ones? [...] It took me a while [...] to understand that the exhibition was not about the artwork itself. Meaning was not primarily generated by the works of art or the viewer response to them, but by their connections to the artists who created them. In other words, the context for each individual's artwork was not the place of exhibition, but the space created by the two presentations—the round-table discussion and the exhibition of artworks—as one" (personal communication). [41]

What WEISS significantly suggests here is that in the context of the conference event, artistic and academic spaces cannot be perceived separately. In thus looking into spatial and discursive entanglements between the exhibition and the round-table discussion or "the art" and "the academy", I am taking up BARAD's (2007) notion of "intra-actions", a neologism she has introduced as a theoretical juxtaposition to the usual notion of interactions. In doing this, she denotes a significant difference: while interactions occur between already established and separate entities, "intra-actions" occur as relations between components. Entities—both human and non-human—actually emerge as an effect of these intra-actions, without having stable points or positions. [42]

In taking up the notion of "intra-actions" what I want to argue is that "the artistic" and "the academic" cannot be taken as separate and pre-existing milieus that interact in the event of an art exhibition organised within the spatial and discursive boundaries of an academic conference. The very idea of the exhibition but also the nuts and bolts of its concrete materialisation rather emerge through the multifarious entanglements—both material and discursive—between "the artistic" and "the academic". Within the complexity of Baradian intra-activities the conference event created conditions of possibility for rich stories to emerge, but it actually failed to create meaning for all participants. Narratives can make connections and facilitate the quest for meaning, but they can also fail to do so: the political in narratives is inextricably linked to the social and material conditions they are embedded in, the organizational milieu within which they unfold as well as the discursive limitations of their emergence. [43]

## 5. Diffractive Views

In this article I have employed a diffractive model of analysis in exploring possibilities and limitations of a narrative approach to microsociological analytics. Starting from the research question of whether it is possible, desirable and politically sustainable to create one's life as a work of art, I have looked into the experience of convening an exhibition and a round-table discussion with a group of women artists at a sociological conference. The conference event raised the question of how sociologists can explain, analyse and understand ruptures, unexpected occurrences and processes of becomings that seem to evade traditional sociological analyses of "social facts" and "social orders". More specifically the conference event focused on narratives of becoming an artist from a group of women artists that had participated in a wider research project of writing a feminist genealogy of the female self in art (TAMBOUKOU, 2010). In making connections between narrative research and microsociological analytics, I drew on TARDE's influence upon a line of thinkers, who have reconfigured the social as immanence rather than transcendence. I have further made connection between TARDE's conceptualisation of the social and narrative analysis from an Arendtian perspective. Here narratives have been theorised as discursive actions that reveal the uniqueness of the human condition in its complex interrelation within the web of human relationships. For TARDE as for ARENDT the micro/macro distinction is irrelevant in explaining and understanding the worldly character of the human condition. Moreover TARDE's understanding of the social compliments certain gaps and misconceptions that arise from ARENDT's configuration of the political and its separation from the social. Within such a plane of consistency narratives create a useful theoretical and methodological grid, which however needs to be continually problematised and challenged in terms of its socio-historical, political and material limitations. [44]

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