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# THE AUTONOMY PROJECT

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AUTONOMY IS  
A QUALITY.

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AUTONOMY IS  
AN APPROACH.

+

AUTONOMY IS A  
STRUCTURE.

+

AUTONOMY IS  
A TOOL.

+

AUTONOMY IS A  
METHOD.

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Y IS  
L.

AUTONOMY IS  
A 'LINE OF  
FLIGHT'

+

AUTONOMY IS  
TAKEN.

+

AUTONOMY IS  
A DESTINATION.

+

AUTONOMY IS  
A GROUP.

+

AUTONOMY IS  
AN INDIVIDUAL.

+

AUTONOMY IS  
SUBTLE.

+

AUTONOMY IS  
KNOWLEDGE.

+

AUTONOMY IS  
A WORD.

+

AUTONOMY IS  
INNATE.

AUTONOMY IS  
ACTION.

+ EDITORIAL INTRO AUTONOMY |  
NEWSPAPER #1 |

+ Autonomy is a quality. Autonomy is an approach. Autonomy is a structure. Autonomy is a tool. Autonomy is a method. Autonomy is innate. Autonomy is taken. Autonomy is a 'line of flight'. Autonomy is a destination. Autonomy is a group. Autonomy is an individual. Autonomy is subtle. Autonomy is radical. Autonomy is knowledge. Autonomy is action...Autonomy is a word. A word with as many synonyms as it has antonyms. And it is this vast tagging cloud of possibilities which the Autonomy Project aims to map, investigate, work out and push through.

A regional collaboration between institutions, art platforms, proto-type organisations and individual thinkers and doers, the Autonomy Project began in 2010 and will continue until...well, until it is finished. As a genuine and ongoing research project - in the sense that it has no ultimate goal - the Autonomy Project seeks cases, practices and patterns of thought happening in and around the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Germany – for this first phase at least – where autonomy, in its various constellations of interpretation, is happening, now. In today's networked, high-tech society the forms that artistic practice takes, as well as the way in which these are mediated or taught, have put additional pressure on art's always problematic, always paradoxical autonomy. This urgent situation within the infrastructure of art and modern society incites us to redress autonomy in new ways, with new (hyper) vocabularies. Not to conclusively reinstate it, but to process it, work it out and search for forms that are relevant today.

Step by step, over the next year, we will take the cases we identify and the context of this vast field of study into account via interdisciplinary channels. The first step was a meeting in March, held in Eindhoven at the Van Abbemuseum, where a number of established practitioners and researchers came together and began to discuss the foundations on which autonomy, at least in the history of Western European thought, currently stands. This newspaper edition, in a way the second step, contains some of the discussion held in that meeting, with extended papers by John Byrne and Sven Lütticken, and a series of "pithy" responses by more participants in that meeting to a set of keywords which the newspaper's editorial team regarded as significant strands running through the conversation in March.

The keywords and phrases to which the writers responded are as follows:

- Quality
- Art education
- Revelation/showing (of structures)
- Markets
- Autonomy is not given
- Public autonomy
- Implication

Hardly exhaustive, this list acts as a trigger to discussing the broader, very broad, perspectives needed in apprehending our complex autonomous terrain.

+ Concurrently, seminars have been held at partnering institutions such as the Dutch Art Institute, NL, Onderzoekschool Kunstgeschiedenis & Platform Moderne Kunst, NL, University of Hildesheim, Kunstwissenschaft, DE, and Liverpool School of Art and Design, UK. Participants in these seminars have been invited to contribute to our developing online community via the Autonomy Project NING. All in the build up towards a Summer School, also in Eindhoven, taking place from 28 June to 2 July, 2010, with a documentation exhibition of outcomes on display in the Onomatopee project space [www.onomatopee.net](http://www.onomatopee.net) until 11 July, 2010. The week-long Summer School programme will mingle dis-cursive action with workshop do-ing, as well as presentations by guest artists and speakers. The "school" aims to bring together and work with the next generation of young professionals and those currently studying in the fields of fine arts, design, art criticism, arts policy making, art theory, curating and related areas who wish to critically articulate their position and practice in relation to the possibilities of Autonomy, while operating within the complex contemporary cultural field. A second newspaper will swiftly follow as a consolidation of the Summer School sessions, mapping out the possible positions and directions for the months (and years) ahead.

+ The Autonomy Project's  
directorial and editorial team  
John Byrne (Programme Leader BA (Hons) Fine Art, Liverpool School of Art and Design, co-directeur Static), Steven ten Thije (research curator Van Abbemuseum/Universiteit Hildesheim), and project coordinator Clare Butcher (curator Your-space, Van Abbemuseum) wish to thank our collaborators and contributors to the project thus far, without you there is no "we".

Jeroen Boomgaard (Lectoraat Kunst in Publieke Ruimte), Juan Cruz (Head of Art and Architecture at Liverpool School of Art and Design), Charles Esche (director Van Abbemuseum), Annie Fletcher (curator, Van Abbemuseum), Andrew Freeney (technical and web support, Liverpool School of Art and Design), Thomas Lange (professor Kunstgeschiedenis, Universiteit Hildesheim), Freek Lomme (director Onomatopee), Sven Lütticken (lecturer and supervisor, Vrij Universiteit, Amsterdam), Gabriëlle Schleijsen (course director DAI, MFA/ArEZ), Becky Shaw (Head MA-Fine Arts Sheffield Hallam University), as well as Ulrike Erbslöh (deputy director, Van Abbemuseum) and Carina Weijma (Head of marketing, mediation and fundraising, Van Abbemuseum).

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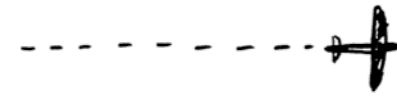
+ The we, that is this growing community, wish to expand and include many more who share our questions and hope that this first edition of the Autonomy Newspaper reflects that desire for openness, transparency, flexibility and generous radicality.

AUTONOMY IS HERE. |

<http://theautonomyproject.ning.com>



point of  
departure



1

CLAY / GAP enables art

in relation to the market



The work where when

not a thing you ARE

Through experience

CORK

"autonomy"

can't mean nothing ... how seriously do we take it?

condemned - when?

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

Academicisation

post-1989 / marketing pitch

subsidy system

"theoretical marxism"

how do we mediate this?

PARADOX IN CREATIVE CHECK.

fissures - autonomy without/within.

instrumentalism

ethical

Martyrdom?

CONTEXT

-NL -DE -UK

"autonomous kunst"

old knowledge

REVERSE PROGRESSION

CAN'T BE HAD IN THE ART WORLD ONLY

art world

art industry / academics / artists / programmers

self absorbed

"frayed edge" of the art world - do things differently.

FORMS OF RESISTANCE

responsibility POST 1989 / KANT'S AUTONOMY

Collective discussion

curators / critics

"extended childhood"

AUTONOMY meets REALITY.

younger generation.

integration / disintegration.

"American Snake oil"

GLASSBORO - CA

socially valid

how can I be self-responsible but not "check out"?

lead to set of discussions in different locations.

formalisation

took us 30 minutes to mention Ranciere.

The function of autonomy

ideas for Summer school

THE UNIVERSITY

"reason to stay in the play place" SUBSIDY SYSTEM under fire ... harmless / heavy.

AIRPORT ART / SOCIAL BATH

boundary: inside / outside

# PUBLIC AUTONOMY

Becky  
Shaw

This sounds crude, I know, but what fascinates me is how the practice of artistic autonomy splits into two: those who explore it within the existing boundaries of accepted activity (most “experimental” art practices) and those who seek to wield unacceptable independence from society; those who make, for example, racist art. Let me speculate for a moment: why do I not have the opportunity to see more racist, more sexist and more violent art? Firstly it is because most art is made visible through the mechanisms of institutions and this art represents them publicly. We are familiar with this historic critique of art’s instrumentalisation through accounts of state and church patronage and practices of Institutional Critique. Another reason why we don’t see much racist art is because most artists have passed through art school where a perpetuation of certain types of values makes racist etc views unacceptable. Most significantly, though, most racist/sexist/violent art etc is prevented from reaching a public considered too fragile or too stupid to judge difficult material.

Of course, quality is part of this complex problem. Its usual for racist/sexist/violent art to be seen as bad art, and maybe it is. However, there is something suspicious and suffocating about an automatic correlation of good morals with good quality.

I agree entirely with John Byrne’s analysis that there is no sanctuary for art outside of commercialisation, but it seems that to activate the possibilities for art’s autonomy, the wider problematic of autonomy must be grasped. John Byrne touches on this when he asks, ‘are socially engaged practices a symptom of changes in culture?’ and again when he talks about the object/subject relationship and our continued desire to rid ourselves of the historic subject.

It seems that everywhere I look, the project to finally bury the subject is alive. In the recent anthology, Materiality, the editor, Daniel Miller, ends with the desire to finally remove the subject from anthropological practice and to level the relationship between people and objects.<sup>1</sup> This egalitarian

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Miller, ed. Materiality (Politics, History, and Culture), Duke University Press, 2005.

manoeuvre, though, is surely the opposite, a surrendering of the subject, without whom we can have no belief in moving forward together. It feels like socially engaged practices crave, or seek to establish, something that is missing – a society that consists of subjects. Allan Kaprow spoke about art that activates the ‘meniscus’ between people, where the artist tries to push through a ‘skin’ that separates one person from another. It feels as though socially engaged practices recognise that this space between people has got too wide and tries to push harder than Kaprow implied.

However, it may be that the engagement deployed is an ersatz one that depicts, but has no force or mass, or a practice that objectifies further. In James Heartfield’s The Death of the Subject Explained, he tracks the historic dismantling of the notion of the subject.<sup>2</sup> He states that human ‘subjectivity persists in denial of its own existence but that it remains ‘nonetheless the single most powerful force a work in society and nature. To attain

<sup>2</sup> James Heartfield. The Death of the Subject Explained, Sheffield Hallam University Press: Sheffield, 2002.

full consciousness of its own potential would increase that potential exponentially.’

Holding onto the significance of subjectivity while comprehending its depressed perspective seems the key to understanding why autonomy might be important now.

SOCIAL  
PLACEMENT  
ACCESS  
PUBLIC  
LOOK/ART?

EDUCATION  
KNOWLEDGE

# GETTING IN BY THE EXIT-SIGN

Jeroen Boomgaard.

DISPERSION  
REFUSAL 2

One of the big mistakes in the evolution of the notion of autonomy is the conviction that the ideal is to protect your autonomy and that not-knowing, thriving on instinct and intuition, is the only way to guard this precious treasure. Looking back in history however, you can see that autonomy came into existence as a refusal to position art as a tool for the expression of ideas produced within other pillars of reigning ideology (Religion, History, Morals, Justice). This freedom of expression, in itself of course also a strong pillar of democratic capitalism, became a reciprocal combination of form and content: the essence of what Rancière calls the 'Aesthetic Regime'. Crucial in its relation to ideology and democracy is that this combination stands for a point that can never be attained. Any given idea or any given form is, seen from the ideal of autonomy, at once regarded with distrust and as something to break away from. At one and the same time self-asserting and self-denying, this system does not know a stable situation:

autonomy is a line of flight, never a point of departure.

The implication of autonomy as something that is not a given but rather a promise in the future is that its

precondition is not ignorance but knowing exactly the forms of outer and inner encapsulation. To get to the point of understanding that autonomy is always false - because it is not a choice for art but is produced by democratic capitalism as a pivotal point of ideology - and always true - because this ideology in itself always leaves open space for dissent, a possibility for redistribution of the sensible.

For art education this means making students aware of this almost schizophrenic demand to obey by disobeying. This awareness cannot be attained by teaching them to "do their own thing", but by teaching them to "do their thing" in relation to the specific ways in which art is instrumentalised at any given time and the specific ways in which it is supposed to refuse this very instrumentalisation. To find a possible non-position between these two poles can be seen as an indication of autonomy, even if it is only for a short while. This working towards autonomy can be seen as the only way art can explore and exploit the gaps given within the system of democracy, not to undermine this system, but to fulfil its promises.

We have to teach students to find the way out to get in.

INVITATION  
DEMOCRACY

John Byrne

# CRITICAL AUTONOMY: "INSIDE OUT" AND "OUTSIDE IN"

## PROVISIONAL AUTONOMOUS COMMUNITIES

The term autonomy has been twice cursed. On one hand it has been marginalised within a formalist tradition that saw art as a special and separate category, occupying a self-referential world of its own. This tradition served a range of both right and left wing radicalism alike, allowing for an essentially elitist tradition of art practice and criticism which, for various and often contending reasons, saw art as being fundamentally different to the commercialized contingency of mass produced culture. This tradition links the writing of Fry, Bell, Greenberg and Adorno. For all of these writers, Art offered a special category beyond everyday life and, in the cases of early Greenberg and late Adorno, art carried within it the possibility of emancipation from current social, political and economic conditions. On the other hand, a fundamentally left-wing tradition of critical theory has insisted upon the fundamental impossibility of any form of autonomy, artistic or otherwise, pointing to the overriding social, political and economic circumstances that condition our individual existence within a community. This tradition links discourses on the relationships of art to culture in Marxist, Structuralist and Poststructuralist schools of thought. Over the last two decades, such rejections of the fundamental possibility of

artistic autonomy have been exacerbated by accelerated forms of globalisation and the dominance of a neo-liberal economy that, despite its recent poor showing in the crash of 2007/08, shows no sign of abating. Either way, it has become increasingly difficult over the last two decades to take any discussions of artistic autonomy seriously when all forms of culture, be they political, social, economic or artistic, have become commodified to their roots.

However, rather than dismissing the term autonomy out of hand, it is worthwhile critically reconsidering it as it allows us to identify some key points in any reevaluation of social role and function of contemporary art practice. More specifically, it allows us to begin mapping out a territory within which new artistic forms of critical autonomy can meaningfully function. Far from offering a space that new forms of art practice can occupy, my argument will be that the art world now already exists primarily within a commodified and globalised media sphere. Any lingering notion that an artist can somehow effect a kind of critical distance from mediated culture, or that art can still offer some kind of autonomous sanctuary from digital exchange, can now only be sustained within an art world that flatly refuses to come to terms with its own condition. In the light of this, I will also argue that the art world's inability to rigorously adapt to its new

surroundings is threatening the critical role and function of art per se. As art now continues to re-rehears former glories and empty rhetorics of radicality it continually runs the risk of collapsing into an economically viable sub-function of the globalized tourism and leisure industry. Finally, I will argue that any form of oppositional contemporary art practice has to confront the problematic of critical autonomy within a fully mediated neo-liberal market economy and that this, in turn, has critical implications for the current understandings of the site of art, the role of the art market and the social function of contemporary practice.

### I.

In his recent article 'Self-Design and Aesthetic Responsibility',<sup>1</sup> Boris Groys's opening gambit, in fact his very first line, invokes the contemporary problematic of artistic autonomy:

These days, almost everybody seems to agree that the times in which art tried to establish its autonomy - successfully or unsuccessfully - are over.

For Groys, the unpleasant discovery that art makes when it becomes political is that politics is now already art. Art is no longer needed to fulfill its historical role of providing and substantiating the image of politicians and those in power. Mass media is now the vehicle through which discourses of image

are rehearsed. According to Groys, it follows that if art becomes political then it functions through the media - in celebrity culture the 'artist ceases to be an image producer and becomes an image himself'. For Groys this leads to a form of anxiety for the artist that is caused by her/his radical subjection to 'the gaze of the other - to the gaze of the media functioning as a super-artist'. Groys characterises this anxiety as one of 'self-design'. We are now all subject to our image circulation in and through 'You Tube' and 'Myspace' culture. This is a world in which everyone is subject to an aesthetic evaluation and has to take responsibility for his or her own aesthetic appearance.

However, Groys then states that the real purpose of self-designs is one of concealment. This manifests itself in politics as the concealment of ever changing issues behind the stability of the image. An image which, more importantly, is becoming increasingly identified with seduction and celebration. Operating as a Derridian 'supplement' the image draws attention to itself in the act of making the object appear better than it really is. This, for Groys, leads to a 'world of total suspicion', a world in which 'total design' has to build in gaps and lapses, seizures and fissures in order to create a 'sincerity' effect that props up an inevitably false world of seamlessly smooth image. In a rather traditional maneuver, Groys then claims that only 'catastrophe' and 'violent rupture' are now sufficient to allow us a glimpse of 'the reality that lies beneath' a world of 'total design' and built in sincerity clauses. He backs this up with the rather obvious example of 9/11 and, from the world of art he offers the names of Salvador Dalí, Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst as bad guy celebrities who have confirmed the suspicions of a grateful public by being:

explicitly cynical-greedy, manipulative, business-oriented, seeking only material profit, and implementing art as a machine for deceiving the audience [...] Looking at the public image of these artists we tend to think, "Oh, how awful," but at the same time "Oh, how true".

<sup>1</sup> Boris Groys, 'Self-Design and Aesthetic Responsibility', in E-flux Journal #7, 06/2009.

decision as artist = responsibility.

RESPONSIBILITY to be interesting!

I am an artist what is the artwork?



The pay back for such a 'self-sacrificial' bad boy/girl image is, of course, fame. But a more subtle approach, for Groys, is a form of artistic 'suicide'. He defines this as the artist's 'death of the author' inspired attempt to efface his/her traditionally autobiographical relationship to art production by handing over power in the production of an artwork to a participatory audience. This is especially effective, Groys claims, when political affiliation and ideological intention are also at stake and, as such, has become the norm for much contemporary practice. However, the other advantage to the 'social' approach to art production resides, for Groys, in the shifting of traditional forms of critical reception and aesthetic judgment. If an artwork is social, he argues, then audience criticism of the work becomes a form of self-criticism. In other words, although the artists relinquishment of authorship seems in favor of the audience, for Groys this 'ultimately benefits the artist by liberating his or her work from the cold eye of the uninvolved viewer's judgment.'

Groys's article is, without doubt, a skilled and convincing polemic. It is a high tempo barrage of argument and counter argument that gives substance, and a veneer of specificity, to a series of loosely related points that one cannot help finding oneself drawn into. There is, in fact,

much to agree with in this article. However his assertions, when scrutinised, tend to show us more about the current love/hate relationship between the art world and the mass media than they do about possible new spaces for autonomous artistic intervention and critique. For example, it is certainly true that Modernist avant-garde strategies do not offer the straight forward alternative to mass culture as they once did, say, for the Greenberg of 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch'.<sup>2]</sup> Unfortunately, this leaves Groys's assertion that politically engaged practice takes place on the level of artistic interventions into the realm of celebrity, where the 'artist ceases to be an image producer and becomes an image himself', looking rather thin. Groys gets this wrong because the function of the artist as celebrity, and its possible critical function and value, is now merely a contingent factor, or the simple byproduct, of art's total absorption into the media. To put this another way, the cult/status value of the artist as celebrity/enfant terrible (or the poète maudit as Groys more accurately phrases it) is the concern of an art world that no longer has the critical tools, or the political will, to adapt to its new conditions of existence within the media sphere. Rather than uncovering the 'dreadful' reality that lies beneath the veneer of total design, the artist as bad boy/bad girl is merely the desperate re-use of existing forms of media currency in order to re-direct the audiences gaze at an art world, art system and, ultimately, an art object whose critical, social and political value has long since disappeared behind its status as globalised luxury/leisure commodity. This is the cliché that the contemporary art industry now most readily shares with the advertising, film and television industries – the endless possibility of freedom offered to the individual who is willing to literally and continually buy into the vicissitudes of a dominant neoliberal economy. Because of this, and perhaps somewhat ironically, it is precisely against the myth of the artist as rugged outsider (or, indeed, against the very possibility of art occupying a special place on the outside of a neoliberal economy) that new forms of critical autonomy must operate.

## II.

Perhaps one of the most interesting challenges presented by the possibility of new forms critical autonomy is the necessity to situate/contextualise contemporary art practice within a more general set of shifts that seem to be underpinning the art industry at a fundamental level. For example, to see that many publically funded arts organisations are developing aspirations to become ideas led commissioning agencies (rather than collection or exhibitions led institutions) gives quite a lot away about developments in contemporary art practice. One argument might go something like this – are 'relational aesthetics', 'discursive practice', 'socially engaged practice' (and their more recent absorption into the curatorial strategies of major art institutions like Tate) less of a fashion and more of a symptom of deeper underlying changes within our culture. If so, these changes would include, of course, the whole issue of globalisation and the new roles and functions that culture (and by proxy art as we know it) are undergoing within a neoliberal economy of exchange. And, if this is the case, how can new forms of critical autonomy allow us to re-think and re-negotiate more traditional notions of autonomy? Would new forms of individual and group autonomy work? Could new forms of critical autonomy include any notion of art itself as an autonomous practice: as a practice that could, in an ideal world, continue to operate over and against the instrumentalised mechanisms of capital?

Such questions lead us back, immediately, to the common assumptions that we tend to share about art and autonomy – namely, that at the core of any useful debate about autonomy lies the argument concerning the possibility/impossibility of art's or the artist's separateness from a common world of everyday life.

Whilst this now seems to be a rather over dramatic schism (and equally naive from our oh so informed standpoint of the formerly postmodern), it still obviously arises from the deepest philosophical problematic of

Enlightenment thought – that of the (mainly Cartesian) subject/object split that underpinned the shift towards a secular and science based epistemology. The problem with autonomy is, then, the seemingly perpetual reoccurrence of a world view that saw "Man" as the centre of the world, capable of measuring all he purveys in "His" own image; a world view that premised ideological and technological advance on the "Truth" of "Scientific Fact" – a Scientific Fact that was, itself, underpinned by the guarantee of "Objective" observation. One could then argue that autonomy has become the fall guy (or at least the patsy) for the stubborn refusal of this problematic to go away. After all, isn't it easier to package this problematic up as an ideological sub-function of a Modernism gone by than to confront the fundamental challenges that it still presents us today? But perhaps we should look at this another way? Although the stereotypical Modernist world view has, over the last 40 years, come under sustained critical, theoretical and philosophical bombardment as being a fundamentally white, western, male and historically specific world view, it has still left us with a fundamental problem – that of the split between an observing and isolated subject and a supposedly exterior and observable object. And, if we allow ourselves to backtrack a little further, we will recall that this was

<sup>2]</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' first published in Partisan Review. 6:5 (1939) 34-49.

the very the subject/object split which drove Kant to propose the aesthetic as a kind of universalising – and autonomous – experience which was capable of resolving (or at least pointing towards/suggesting) some kind of ideal community/consensus beyond this divisive dichotomy.

So, fast forward to a post-autonomous age of instrumentalised reason which now sees its apogee as the relentless, promiscuous, disingenuous, adaptable, permeable and liquid form of the commodity. A world in which objects, whether they be sweaters, CDs, paintings or footballs, only have meaning in so far as they can function, at least temporarily, in a consumer driven kaleidoscope of shifting meaning and exchange. A world in which one longs for the comfort of an object (let's call it "art" for argument's sake) that could resolve the irresolvable. But we now know that such an object will immediately be instrumentalised by its very existence as a site of exchange – and not necessarily by the heavy hand of political interest. (I'm thinking of Žižek's critique of ideology here, or at least his critique of a post-monopoly capitalism where ideology works far below the surface of the skin of a political body which is controlled by consensus).

One argument would then be to say that there simply is no longer an inside or outside to this new form of spectacular society. This is a line followed by Baudrillard in a series of essays/talks surrounding 9/11 (published by Virago as 'The Spirit of Terrorism').<sup>3]</sup> In these essays Baudrillard saw/read the 9/11atrocities (and others like it) as forms of globalised suicide, as kinds of protest and fracture from within. He was morally and politically suspicious of the Bush administrations attempts to re-engineer a 'them and us', 'good guys and evil-doers' dichotomy which typified the so-called 'Cold War' (or World War Three as Baudrillard would have it). Whatever one thinks of Baudrillard (and I, perhaps un-trendily, have a lot of time for his thought) this poses an interesting set of questions (ones that have underpinned my thought and work for over a

decade). What if one simply accepts that there is no longer any possibility of stepping outside the world of the commodity form? What if we are all encoded to our roots by its language and discourse? What if art, as we know it, and museums and galleries, as we know them, allow no real possibility of a theoretical, political or moral "safe-haven" from which to quantify, objectify and critique the world of commodity controlled instrumentalisation? What if the real site for experience of art is what was once called its "legacy" i.e. journals, articles, images, websites etc? What if artists and art works are no longer points of contradiction to the flow of consumer society? Does this mean all is lost? Or can we accept that artists (as we know or knew them) make art works (as we know or knew them) as nodal points within a constantly shifting network of provisional choices and refusals?

This would perhaps begin to make sense of a more general shift towards the concept of art as 'knowledge production' (Sarat Maharaj via Feyerabend)<sup>4]</sup> and a world in which museums and galleries are beginning to see themselves as idealised institution (with, for example, Tate Online functioning on an equal footing with its physical manifestations). This would also still enable us to conceptualise/critique a world in which high profile artists made high profile

production' in Art&Research, Volume 2. No. 2. Spring, 2009.

<sup>3]</sup> Jean Baudrillard. 'The Spirit of Terrorism' Le Monde 2 November 2001.

<sup>4]</sup> Sarat Maharaj, 'Know-how and No-How: stopgap notes on "method" in visual art as knowledge

art objects for high prices (because, as we know, the commodity form finds no intrinsic value in objects themselves, the artists name, reputation or brand is what sells here). It would also allow us to begin imagining a continually negotiable production of art works/projects which may work in many different ways and across many different platforms (one of the problems, ironically, with Bourriaud's 'Relational Aesthetics' was its commodified collapse back into a 'one size fits all' kind of Modernist art form/commercially viable entertainment – well, everybody's doing it/showing it aren't they?)<sup>5]</sup>

Beginning to think this way – having no "inside out" or "outside in" – would allow us to start thinking of relationships, and potentially autonomous circuits/communities of relationships, in potentially different ways. It would also enable us to begin thinking about and mapping out lines of resistance in different ways and new places. For example, beginning to think this way would call into question the geographical and material insistence of Hakim Bey's 'Temporary Autonomous Zones' as sites of oppositional organisation – instead, I would like to propose the possibility of Provisional Autonomous Community as sites of fluid resistance.<sup>6]</sup> For me, the idea of autonomy as a process of continual negotiation and exchange is crucially important. As negotiation requires at least two parties then autonomy becomes about language (not necessarily the language needed to communicate in any given case – but the fundamental fact that any form of autonomy is a space negotiated with other interlocutors in order to be defined as such). This, in turn, has far reaching implications for what art could become as a continually negotiated space of critical autonomy. Or, to put it another way, I would argue that critical art practice(s) within a globalised neo-liberal economy now necessitate the continual negotiation of shifting relationships between artists, curators, critics, thinkers, radicals and audiences who come together at particular times in particular spaces (as provisional autonomous communities) in order to actively

<sup>5]</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud. Relational Aesthetics. Paris: Presses du réel, 2002.

<sup>6]</sup> Hakim Bey. 'The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism'. Autonomedia anti-copyright, 1991.

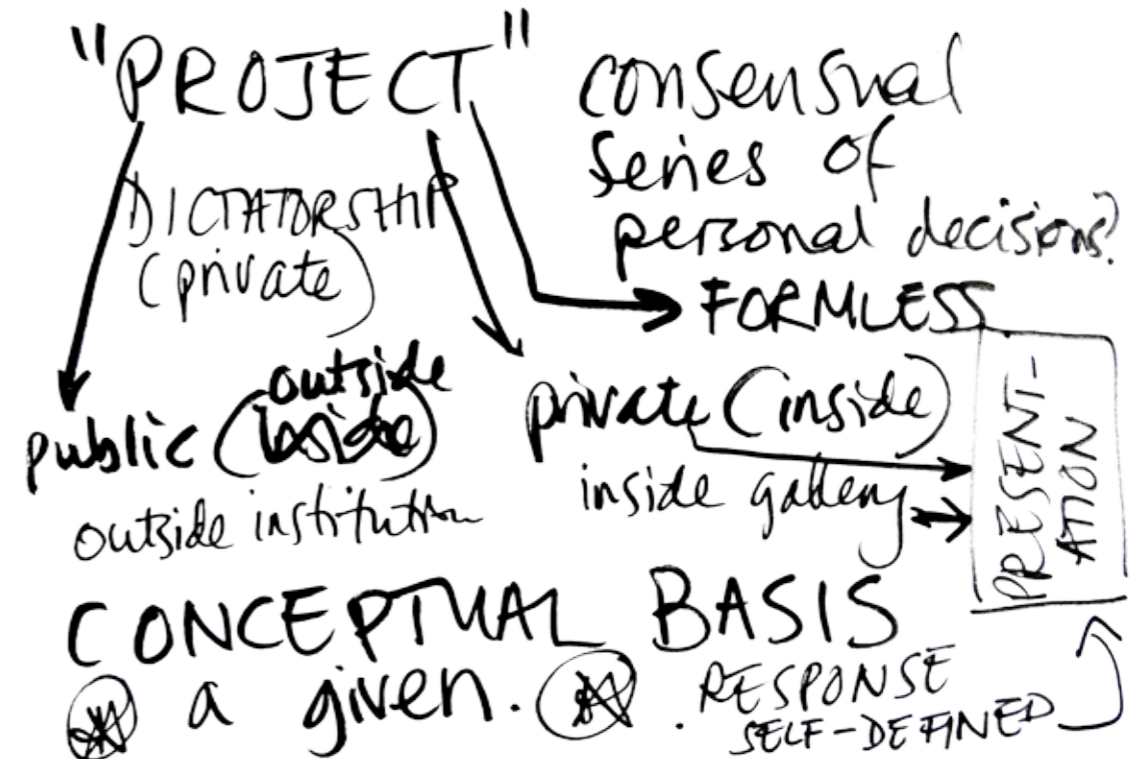
produce a culture of critical opposition and engagement.

Having no inside out or outside in would also enable us to begin thinking of a range of contributory factors, which go towards making up that thing called art, as essential to the production of possible meanings (in this way, audiences and the art market will always play a crucial role in the production and analysis of art works – their role may shift in a kind of topological kind of way, but they will always be there). Thinking this way would also allow us to decentre the role of the artist – or even individual artistic agency for that matter – without running the risk of losing a concept of autonomy (or at least of a project/possibility of a critical autonomy). Of course, as I have already argued, autonomy in this sense would have to be continually negotiated and, ipso facto, ideas would be at the centre/driving force of art production – but we would gain the possibility of re-engaging critically with the instrumentalising forces of the commodity form across and within the very fabric of its mechanisms.

Within our globalised neoliberal economy (a neoliberal economy which thrives on its ability to encourage and re-absorb acceptable levels of dissent) art and the art industry are badly in need of a "Napster

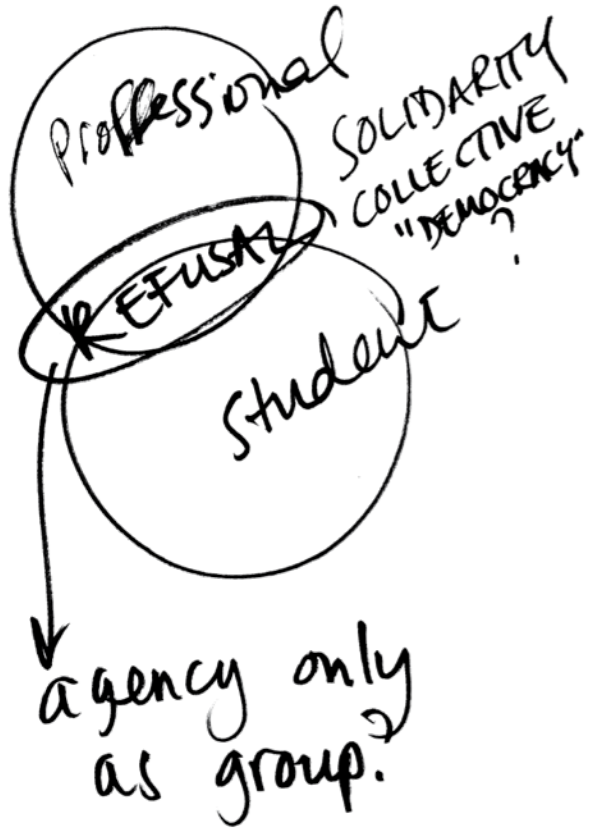
*NAPSTER MOMENT*  
*in the art world*  
*critical moment*

moment" – a way of re-thinking and re-routing the circuits through which art is produced, distributed, evaluated and consumed. And this "Napster moment" can no longer hope to somehow happen outside the confines and strictures of our current economically driven models of living – there is simply no outside left, no other place to go. Instead, and perhaps somewhat ironically, artists, critics, curators, writers, thinkers and radicals need to find new forms of autonomy within the structures of a globalised art industry, to carve out spaces which will allow us to rethink ourselves radically, imagine ourselves differently and re-configure our collective futures. This, in turn, would also necessitate a radical re-think of the art market – not as an uncomfortable appendage to the "true" nature of art, but as a continually challenging and problematic driving force in the production and distribution of critical autonomy (I'm thinking of Gorge Yúdice's The Expediency of Cutlure here, where the production of culture is seen as a necessarily extended circuit of different and often oppositional economic interests and ideological alignments).<sup>7</sup> It would also require a re-think of art's current relationship to craft (in the Richard Sennett sense of a peculiar kind of occupation with developing and deploying sets of skills, be they material or digital, for purposes other than economic necessity). Finally, it would also require a radical re-think technology itself – where an artist's use of technology would no longer be seen as a radical tool for change in itself but as a contribution to, or specific maneuver within, a contemporary milieu of high/low technology use and conflicting grass roots/ corporate interest (I'm thinking of the kind of ideas suggested by Henry Jenkins here, in his book Convergence Culture).<sup>8</sup>



<sup>7</sup> Yúdice, George. The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Jenkins. Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide. New York: New York University Press, 2006.



# TAUGHT AUTONOMY

Juan  
Cruz

At the first Autonomy meeting I attended in Eindhoven (March, 2010) we hit on a question that seemed to delight us all as much as it mystified – perhaps it delighted us because it mystified us. That question was “How do you teach autonomy?” On our return journey to Liverpool John Byrne and I continued to discuss the implications of this question for art education broadly and for our programmes at Liverpool John Moores University more specifically.

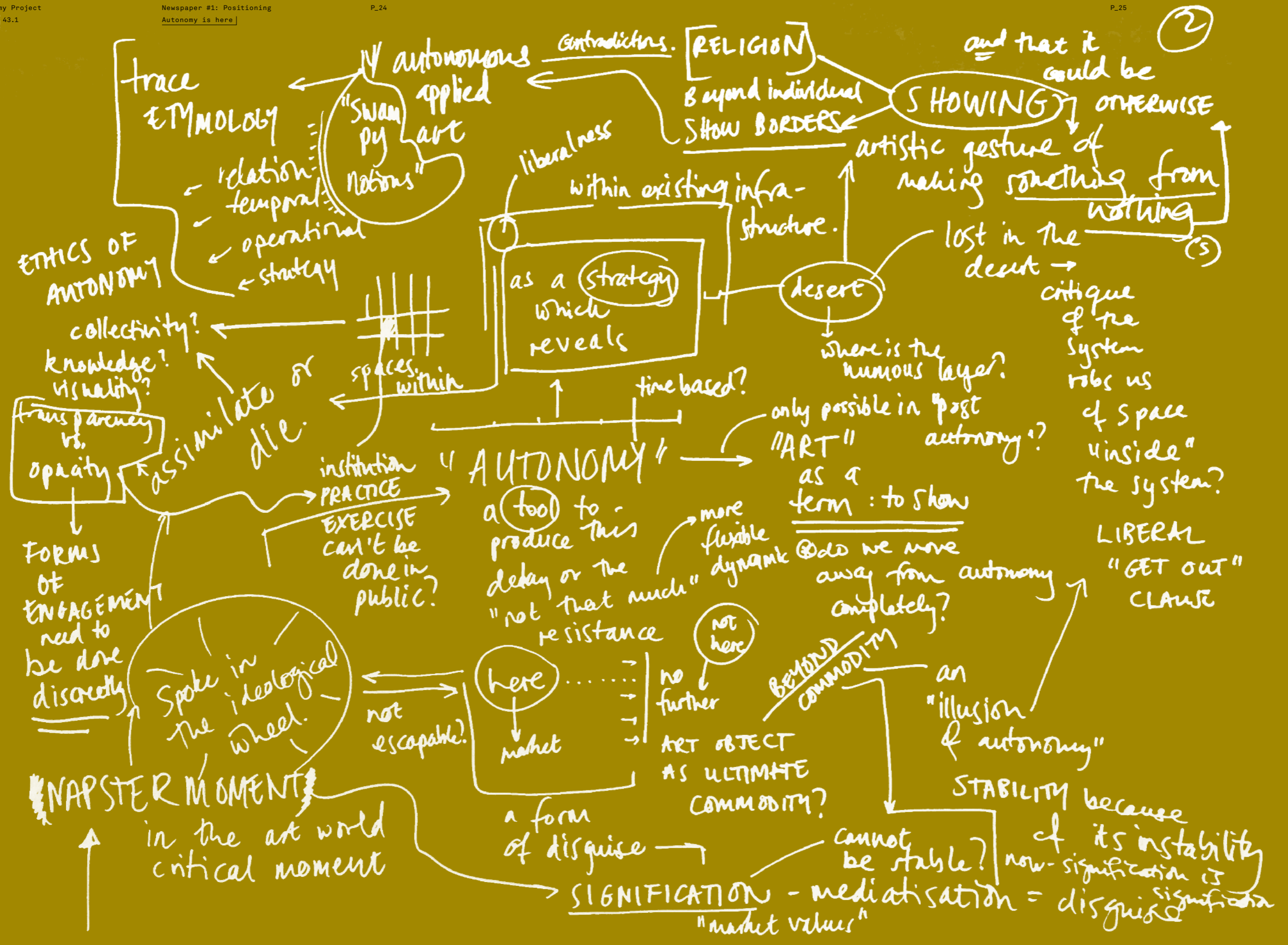
One of the things I find most interesting about teaching art is the involvement with helping students to gain some sense of their own criticality and agency; helping them to access that which they already know but which they are often reluctant to contemplate for fear that it will expose them to their limitations. One symptom of this is that art students often squint when looking at their own work. This is perhaps most noticeable when they are making overtly visual works such as paintings, where squinting enables them to see the work as a soft and

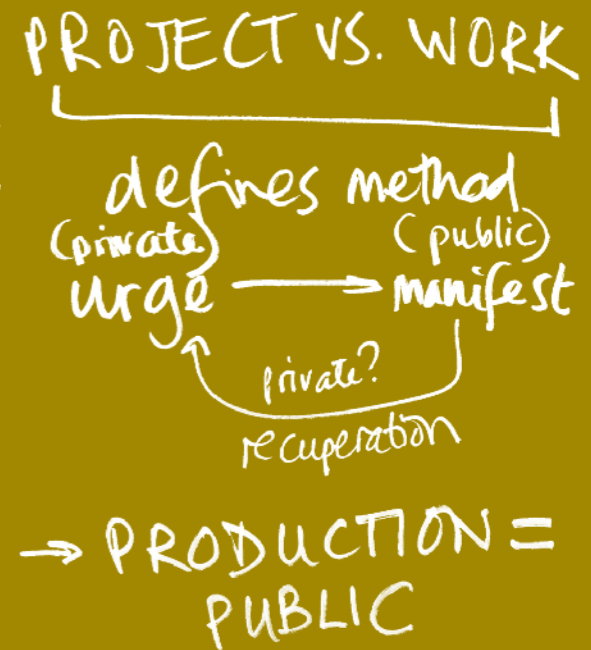
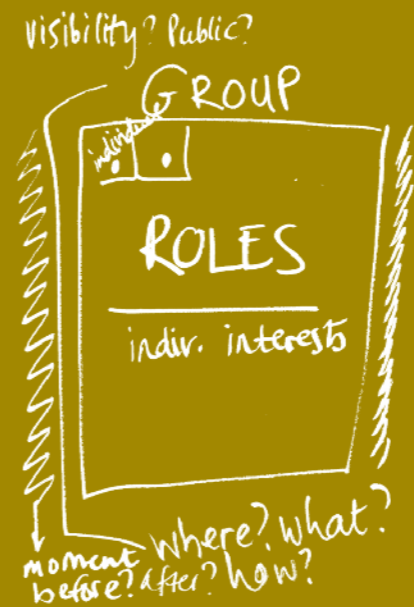
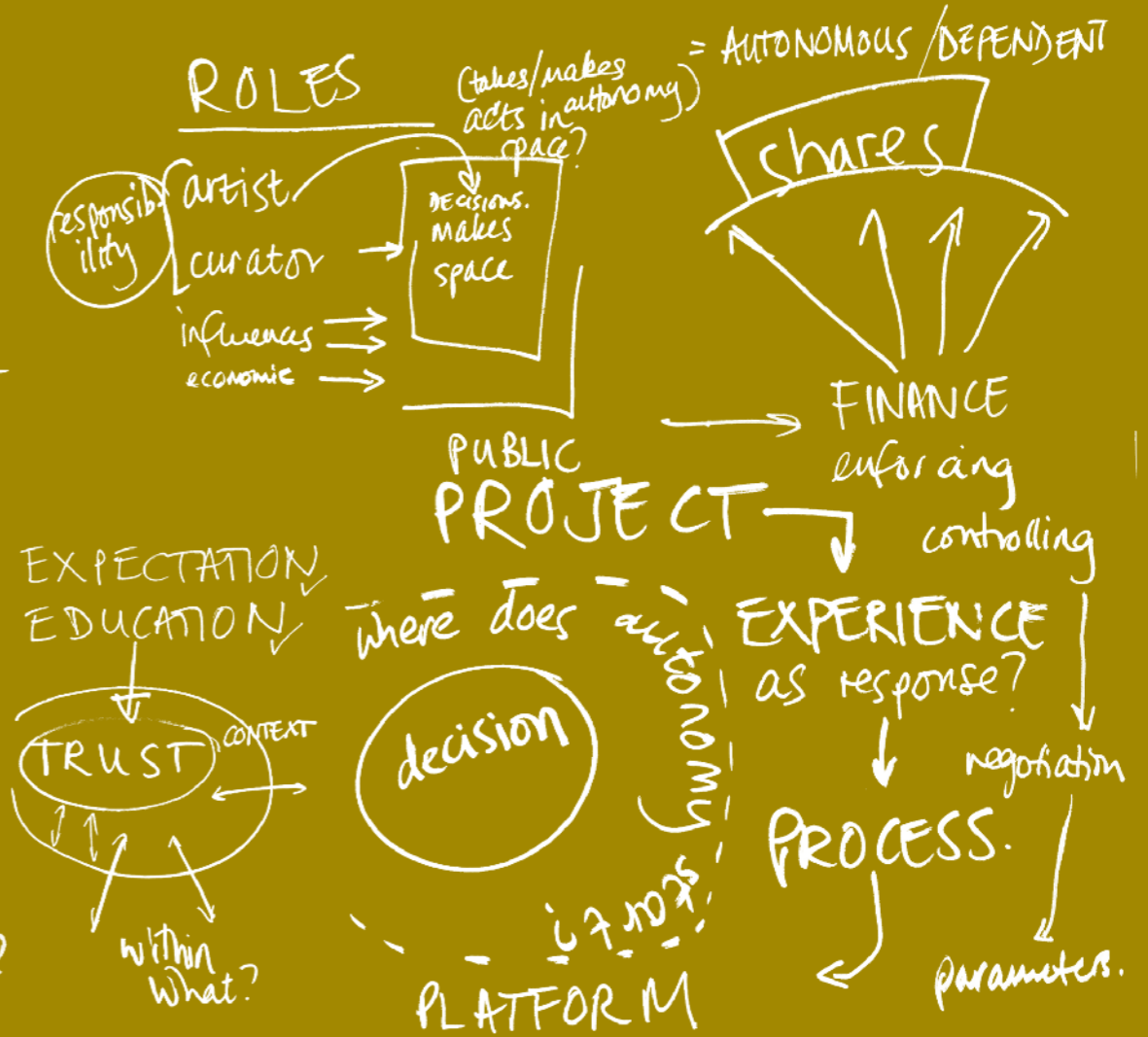
amenable convergence of tonalities and hues. Even when the work is not primarily optical, one often finds art students squinting critically or intellectually at what they have done; attempting perhaps not to notice the coarser and more awkwardly jarring conjunctions they have chosen to ignore, hoping perhaps that no-one else might notice either. (I should say that my comments about art students can also quite easily be extended to apply also to more experienced artists.)

Certainly, a significant element of art education has something to do with information, that might take the form of history, theory or contextual understanding. Art education should help students to navigate through the complex environment within which their work will operate. But it’s hard to get away from the fact that there is a point when it is impossible to continue to shelter the student from their responsibility to do something which cannot be prescribed by anybody else, and it’s easy to tell a student that the direction of their work is their choice, as easy in fact

as it would be to prescribe their next move. A far more significant approach would be to help students understand what it means to be able to choose, and to guide them through the implications of choice so that they might make the most productive use of it.

I think the point is that you can't teach autonomy, but you can help someone to deal well with their autonomy; help them to acknowledge and exploit the fact that they are cognisant beings capable of making decisions and susceptible to wondering about where that capacity comes from. That, by extension, might suggest that autonomy be considered not as a faculty that one might feel compelled to claim but a wonderful, potential-laden and problematic state of being with which we all have to reckon.





# SUBJECTIVE AUTONOMY

Clare  
Butcher  
~~#1~~

Writing about the postcolonial within the context of reflection on (western) autonomy strikes me as an attempt to 'try to say what...seems to resist being said.'<sup>1</sup> In his, *On the Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe identifies the superficial divisions made between colonial and "Western" kinds of time and place, and the ways in which the notion of autonomy has been bound almost exclusively to a Western modernist tradition of thought. Modernity, he states, is personified in the self-actualised, creative and complicated (Western?) individual who has freed him- and possibly her-self - 'from the sway of traditions and attained an autonomous capacity to conceive, in the here and now, the definition of norms and their free formulation by individual, rational wills.'<sup>2</sup> Taking our cue from the kind of subjectivity defined by L.Ferry and A.Renaut, it could be argued that the autonomous, modern subject, is able to recognise but also to refuse the norms they examine via a process of critical reflection<sup>3</sup> to say what resists being said.

What Svetlana Boym calls, 'off modernism' is useful here.<sup>4</sup> The off-modern seeks to 'revisit this unfinished critical project of modernity' with a kind of syncopated rhythm to that of any linear, teleological reading.<sup>5</sup> Boym claims that the off-modern, rather than being a simple negation of the modern itself, is an extension; an aside a counterpoint (in keeping with our musical metaphor), revealing and coexisting with the "moderns" of western Europe and the United States. Most off-modern art, Boym reflects, issues from contexts where art played a more significant social role than the purely economic, therefore, existing and operating at different levels to what was happening in western countries under institutional and galleried support. With the awareness of heterogenous times and ways of being in the world comes the ability to slow the 20th century symphony. A less reductive reading/ listening of the various forms that modernity takes reveals the subjectivities (or what composers would call free notes) arguing with, acting

INITIATIVE  
DECISION  
(autonomous moment).  
←

within those contexts. From here we can identify repeating motifs, inversions, 'affection and reflection'<sup>6</sup> which are not necessarily derivative of one or the other, but are in fact dynamic as they fraternise.<sup>7</sup>

This dense reading of historical lines and its implications on the subject was central to a project by South African art collective, Gugulective, recently presented in Eindhoven. In a simple museal display of antique South African bank notes, the group constructed an alternate narrative of the country's economic history. Using Žižek's notion of 'objective violence', they propped a vitrine display on a crutch surrounded by current, almost worthless, South African five-cent coins atop a domino formation of mousetraps.

Gugulective - who are based in a township outside of Cape Town - saw the potential of Žižek's "riff" in subjectivising the structures (and perhaps more specifically, the structural readjustment programmes of the IMF carried out all over Africa) which

effectively handicapped the institutional and commercial support system necessary for the production and circulation of contemporary art in and out of the continent.

Gugulective's approach seems to apprehend both the notions of subjective autonomy and of the off-modern. They conceive and define social, economic and infrastructural norms, in the here and now. And, from there, formalise rational wills - in this case as a collective, through their ongoing decentralisation of spaces of artistic production and access in a South African urban context. The off-kilter/off-modern element in this is surely Gugulective's reflecting on, and reposing of questions raised in another place at another time. Their revealing and universalising of colonisation - the forms it takes, how the score sounds - compels the subjects it addresses (whether from a postcolonial position or not) to skip a beat or two as the music marches on.

<sup>1</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*. University of California Press: Berkeley, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>3</sup> The full citation of L. Ferry and A. Renaut from Mbembe's text reads, 'the way in which the individual, even though he quite clearly does not have absolute

freedom to create his own norms, yet sees himself as having the sovereign right to submit them to a free examination and, as this critical examination

proceeds, asserts and thinks of himself as the ultimate foundation of the process of argument through which he legitimises or rejects them.' (from *Pourquoi nous*

ne sommes pas nietzschéens (Paris: Grasset, 1992).  
<sup>4</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Basic Books: New York, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 30. <sup>6</sup> Ibid. 30.

<sup>7</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvard University Press, 1993.

# AUTONOMY AND THE EXPERIENCE OF HISTORY

Using autonomy as marker for an art that is apolitical – separated from worldly affairs – seems to forget the political context that coincides and is necessary for autonomous art. It was a product of modern, bourgeois society. Equally misguided is the idea that autonomous art is straight-forwardly political. Art is distinct from doing politics. It seems that each time one sets out to confine autonomous art as either extreme – instrumentalised by politics or as some speculative, flee-floating experiment – it slips between categories, and gravitates towards the opposing pole. In the end, this restlessness circumscribes what it means for art to be autonomous; caught up in an endless slippage between the private and public, the rational and irrational, the form and the concept. Autonomy refers not to something that is – fixed and available – but to

something that exists in a continuous shifting from the possible to the impossible and back again.

The circular argument at the beginning also goes the other way. For if autonomous art is both affiliated with a distinct political practice, while simultaneously being separate from it, the political itself must be equally Janus-faced. Indeed, it seems that politics itself has no proper form apart from that of being a practice: one that continuously moves from the public into the private and from the irrational to the rational. The antagonism between these polarities is what drives democratic societies. These societies would, at least in principle, say that they have not arrived at a particular dogma, but would like ‘the possibility to enforce dogma’, to hold the potential to challenge an ongoing political game.

Steven ten Thijs.

Art and politics: two infinite, circular movements, endlessly seeking fulfilment in a final resolution that is never granted.

Historically this image is quickly compromised. The revolving spheres of democratic society and its autonomous art are instable and off-kilter, confronted with more than just rhetorical gravitational pulls. As it stands in the Western world, democratic society is only 65 years old, ready for retirement; alternately, if one starts counting from the moment when it was relieved from its intimate other: communism, this kind of politics is a meagre 20, just coming of age.

But can one measure this infinite bumping, scraping and looping of orbits in historical years? It seems that the opposite is the case, for history delivers us discontinuity – ‘finitude’ rather than infinity. If we experience historical events, we experience ruptures, incisions in the flow of time. The infinity of a working democracy, however, is not based or dependent upon historical experience, it is altered however, by its absence or presence. This altered state invokes

the nature of current Western societies.

By artificial means – public commemoration, education, films, books – we try and rejuvenate those historical experiences which formed the basis of political practice in the second part of the 20th century. But we have to face the fact that neither the substitution for a lost sense of history, nor present threats such as the war on terror, produce a momentum that perpetuates the dance of democracy.

Today we are very much on our own as we find a way to continue the revolutions, or dare I say, seek to revolutionise, both an artistic and (democratic) political practice. And without a horizon of historical experience, what constitutes this “we” is highly debatable. “We” cannot claim autonomy in the face of an historical experience that negates that autonomy, but must instead practice this autonomy internally, as it were, in an orbit of its own path and velocity. This urgency to discuss the notion of autonomy comes out of a specific situation: to practice autonomy in an age without historical experience. 1]

INVITATION  
DEMOCRACY

[1] Equally relevant in understanding the specificity of today’s situation is the omnipresence and possibilities of technology; in particular communication media via

the Internet and television and information processing systems such as database-technology. For the purposes of this short analysis I have left this field

unaddressed, but in a more expanded context one would have to take these networks into account.





# THREE AUTONOMIES AND MORE

Sven Lütticken

its practice; it consists of two mutually interdependent elements, description and enaction.

In early essays such as 'Avant-garde and Kitsch' (1939), Clement Greenberg used the term "avant-garde" to denote what he would later call modernism.<sup>3</sup> The use of this military term to denote a cultural vanguard originated in the 1820s. Although it was (and is) often used simply to refer to "progressive" art, it was more specifically associated with radical movements that sought social as well as cultural change – particularly in the case of the 'historical avant-garde' of the inter-war years. Greenberg's terminological shift suggests that he wanted to avoid any confusion between his own notion of autonomy and the transgressive projects of such avant-garde movements, which sought to negate modernist autonomy in favour of acts that would attain a greater degree of autonomy by not being purely artistic-by not being limited by the framework of modern art.

The post-autonomous state envisaged by the radical avant-garde would not be a return to the old heteronomy of guilds and patronage; nor would it be a continuation of modern art's heteronomous dependency on the art market, which has always transformed

A couple of years ago, an alternative space in Holland created an award for 'the most autonomous work of art'. Thus, "autonomous art" had become something of a joke – and one from the repertoire of Fozzie Bear rather than that of Lenny Bruce. The butt of the joke was the modernist idea and ideal of autonomous modern art, of an art that could lay claim to a significant degree of autonomy because of the process of self-criticism to which it subjected itself after its old social functions has atrophied.

Decried by reactionaries as a Verlust der Mitte, this transformation of art into an autonomous sphere of its own was famously analysed by Max Weber as part of his sociology of modernity.<sup>1</sup> For Weber, modernity was marked – in Jürgen Habermas's paraphrase – by a 'separation of the substantive reason expressed in religion and metaphysics into three autonomous spheres. They are: science, morality, and art.'<sup>2</sup> As Clement Greenberg never tired of repeating, autonomous art is work in progress – it is nothing if not historical. However, for the foreseeable future art history was supposed to continue to evolve within the social structures that enable autonomy (structures that resulting from the historical upheavals that formed modernity); modernist autonomy is thus a structural form of autonomy rather than that of individual artistic acts. Still, the artist is expected to make work that responds to historical circumstances and helps history (the history of autonomous art) progress. The structural existence of modernist autonomy is predicated on movement; if art's development were to grind to a halt, art would no longer have historical significance, and thus lose its autonomy and become craft, a posh hobby. Thus modernist autonomy encompasses both a theoretical conception of autonomy and

<sup>1</sup> Hans Sedlmayr, Verlust der Mitte, published in 1948.

<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity – An Incomplete

Project', in: The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1998), 9.

<sup>3</sup> The classic text is obviously 'Modernist Painting' (1960).

this seemingly autonomous art into a reluctant fait social. Rather, the post-autonomous state would be both the abolition of autonomy and its dialectical realisation on a higher plane. Usually, the rhetoric of the avant-garde focuses on the former, on the fight against one form of autonomy; because the term itself is seen as tainted, the positive aims of various movements are not usually characterised in terms of autonomy, but one should not be fooled by such reticence. Avant-garde autonomy is an autonomy that dare not speak its name.

From De Stijl to the Surrealists and from Fluxus to the Situationist International, the twentieth-century avant-garde tried to negate the sham that is modernist autonomy. To shatter this dismal condition would be an act of genuine autonomy, an enacted autonomy that both enables and results from the transgression of the status quo. For some, this negation would have to entail a complete social and political revolution: this was the position of Guy Debord and his Situationist International during the 1960s and early 1970s (a position Debord would never abandon). In 1971, Allan Kaprow made a more apolitical proposal: the artist should 'change jobs' and become 'an account executive, an ecologist, a stunt rider, a politician, a beach bum.'<sup>4]</sup>

This is a proposal for revolution without revolution; the artist supposedly infiltrates and transforms society by doing various "jobs" somewhat differently, by injecting something of the autonomous spirit of the artist into them. In any case, whether by revolution or infiltration, the active negation of modernist autonomy would entail the fusion of artistic practice and everyday life into a living art or art of living – into a Lebenskunst that would forever negate its own momentary limitations – perpetually reinventing its own autonomy. Purely artistic autonomy never presents itself as the ideal of a praxis that can never be fully realised under the conditions that the avant-garde seeks to break with. Avant-garde autonomy is the autonomy that comes from surpassing "autonomous" modern art.

From the late 1960s onward, the problematic aspects of both modernist and avant-garde conceptions (and enactments) of autonomy became increasingly obvious. Artists such as Daniel Buren, Marcel Broodthaers and Hans Haacke criticised not only modernism's technocratic quest for the ever more "pure" artwork, which did not prevent such art from being increasingly integrated into the culture industry, but also avant-garde attempts to "leave" or negate art; in the absence of an actual revolution, such attempts could not effect the far-reaching consequences they envisaged. The artists in question were suspicious of claims for art's autonomy and aware of its actual status as a highly ideologised commodity, yet they were equally weary of naïve attempts to affect a radical and complete negation of art. Instead, these artists set out to investigate the conditions of their own practice in the institutions making up the art world, and the entanglement of those institutions within economic and political structures. Thus a faction of the neo-avant-garde critiqued and abandoned the ultimate avant-garde project, and inaugurated what would later come to be called institutional critique.

Institutional critique entailed yet another conception of autonomy, although it is again rarely articulated explicitly in terms of autonomy because of the notion's association with modernism. However, it is important to break this taboo in order to gain a clear view of the issue of autonomy in contemporary art. One might say that this kind of artistic practice revolves around critical autonomy. To be sure, this term is not perfect, since there can be no autonomy without criticality. Modernism, according to the Greenbergian version, was based on the progressive self-criticism of the various art forms and their mediums, while the avant-garde's transgressions obviously derive from a fundamental critique of society. However, modernist criticality is limited by its focus on internal, "purely artistic" matters, while the avant-garde cuts short its critique by gambling everything on a revolutionary break. With institutional critique, criticality is unbound. Critical autonomy is a matter of constant negotiation, of reflecting on one's practice and its conditions in the full knowledge that power is not located elsewhere, but in the social relations one enters – even before becoming familiar with Foucault, many artists were well aware of this.

As a more or less tacit ideal in conjunction with a number of important artistic practices, critical autonomy has generated and maintained a type of embedded critical reflection that is badly needed. But while institutional critique's attempts to sound out the limits and possibilities for artistic practice in the institutional forcefield remain important, the cumulative effect of its critical inquiries has been ambiguous at best. These reflections can ultimately become basic reflexes, and have certainly generated a long series of artistic and critical endgames, as well as a rather dubious, latently fetishistic fixation on institutions. Perversely, prolonged critique can become indistinguishable from

celebration. It is no wonder that in the past decade, a new breed of art institution has eagerly presented itself as a "critical institution", engaged in producing vital discourse.

The series of what I have here termed modernist autonomy – avant-garde autonomy – critical autonomy seems to form a rather pat dialectical triad, corresponding to a cartoon image of dialectics being peddled in many places. But dialectics need not be the imposition of schematic constructions on history, resulting in proclamations of history having ended, the dialectical process having resulted in some ultimate synthesis. At its best, dialectical thinking apprehends history as a forever unresolved play of contradictions, open to being negated time and again. Deleuze and Guattari and their followers like to celebrate pure difference, but in order to actually make a difference, difference will always have an element of negation in it – which is not the same as saying that it will somehow be a mechanical negative image, in the manner of a photographic negative. Allan Kaprow's happenings, to name one example, derived from Jackson Pollock's art, from Hans Namuth's photographs of Pollock at work, and from Harold Rosenberg's writings on 'action painting' in ways that negated essential characteristics of each of these practices, yet also retained certain elements by transforming or translating them.

CONTROL  
CONSENSUS  
DIRECTION

<sup>4]</sup> Allan Kaprow, 'The Education of the Un-Artist, Part 1' in: Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life, ed. Jeff Kelley, (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1993), 104.

■ Is there a way beyond critical autonomy, or its dominant version, with its hardened conventions and focus on institutions? One way of answering this issue might be to focus on the role of subjectivity and performance. A good starting point for such an endeavour is the work of Harold Rosenberg, who in his famous 1952 essay 'The American Action Painters' stated that a painting that is an act 'is inseparable from the biography of the artist. [...] The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life.' For the action painter, the painting had become 'an arena in which to act'.<sup>5]</sup> Taking cues from dada and surrealism, as well as from existentialist philosophy, Rosenberg thus constructed a depoliticised version of avant-garde rhetoric that was calculated to offend Greenberg's sensibilities.

■ Ultimately, Rosenberg's celebration of the act and the artist as prototypical subject goes back to a fundamental insight of Hegelian philosophy – and Hegel, of course, haunted both 1930s surrealism and Sartre's work – that truth is not immediate. Truth can only come from a displacement, an action, from a cut; it is to be realised in time, in history. The fundamental negation of immediacy is the subject, which is the product of its own making, a becoming that comes into being by distinguishing itself from object. But the idealist subject-object dichotomy has, rightly, come under scrutiny. In proclaiming the ultimate triumph of the subject, Hegelian philosophy and its offspring tended to frame and subjugate the object as well as the subject itself, which had its destiny mapped out for it in accordance with a philosophical script. Hegel posited the absolute Spirit as the ultimate subject, and Marx argued that the proletariat as a class was the historical subject that would ultimately, via a revolution, bring about a classless society. In the late 1930s, Rosenberg had subscribed to the Trotskyist version of this narrative – as had Greenberg. Greenberg, of course, would go on to turn modernist art itself into (a substitute for) a historical subject, while

Rosenberg replaced the belief in the proletarian mass subject with a glorification of heroic artist-subjects.

■ Rosenberg later declared that Marxist politics had foundered, 'on the issue of the subjectivity of the proletariat'.<sup>6]</sup> He saw an unresolvable tension between Marx's insistence that the objective conditions of the proletariat would lead it to revolution and the activities of Marxist 'revolutionary specialists' trying to bring that subjectivity about, effectively using the workers as tools. In the 1960s, Guy Debord and the Situationist International fashioned themselves as such a group of revolutionary specialists, and in Debord's view 'May 68' was more or less a reenactment of the October Revolution. What he failed to perceive is that the proletarian class subject was showing signs of disintegration, and in the wake of 1968 the notion of a "classical" communist revolution became increasingly untenable, and many came to share a conclusion that Harold Rosenberg had reached at an earlier stage: 'In our century the intelligible plot of history presumed by various philosophies has to all appearances broken down [...] To the Hegelian Marx it was inconceivable that a historical situation should not ultimately produce its true protagonist. With us, however, the surrender of identity seems the first condition of historical action.'<sup>7]</sup>

<sup>5]</sup> Harold Rosenberg, 'The American Action Painters' in: The Tradition of the New (London: Paladin, 1970; original edition 1959), 39, 36. <sup>6]</sup> Harold Rosenberg, Act and the Actor (Chicago/London, University of Chicago Press, 1970), 55.

■ The place of the proletarian revolution was soon taken up by Deleuzo-Guattarian notions of micropolitics and "molecular revolution". Guattari rightly criticised the traditional notion of the subject, writing instead about a continuing production of subjectivity that never coalesces into one definite subject.<sup>8]</sup> There is much to be said for this rethinking of the issue of subjectivity, but it does have a rather ambiguous relationship with an economic regime – Post-Fordism – in which the production of subjectivities plays a crucial part. In this context, the cultural sector has become something of an avant-garde for the economy as a whole: as self-exploitative self-performers, ever flexible and adaptable, cultural workers act out a constantly changing script.

■ Harold Rosenberg's later writings were already marked by anxiety concerning the act; genuine acts must be acts by autonomous subjects, but the status of the act had been undermined by a relentless capitalist pressure to perform, to get with the programme. From the late 1980s on, Andrea Fraser would often foreground the pressures involved in self-performance in a series of performances mimicking lectures, guided tours and speeches whose monologues are replete with verbal slips and twitches. What we see here is a shift in institutional critique towards

<sup>7]</sup> Harold Rosenberg, 'The Resurrected Romans' in: The Tradition of the New, 158.

the subject, towards the site of subjectivation. Compared to the work of an older artist like Hans Haacke, who still positions himself as a critical subject in the institutional forefield, Fraser's work collapses the distinction between outside and inside completely, as Fraser-the-performer turns herself into a cast of quasi-characters subject to competing ideological and discursive strains and beleaguered by performance anxiety.

■ In a rather beautiful recent text, Jan Verwoert has reflected on the problematic position of the act in a society marked by the pressure to perform: 'Where do the barricades stand today, anyway? We are the avant-garde, but we are also the job slaves. We serve the customers who consume the communication and sociability that we produce. We work in the kitchens and call centres of the newly opened restaurants and companies of the prospectively burgeoning new urban centres of the service society. To offer our services we are willing to travel. Being mobile is part of our performance. So we travel, we go west to work, we go north to work, we are all around, we fix the minds, houses and cars of those who stay in their offices [...] What would it mean to put up resistance against a social order in which performativity has become a growing demand, if not the norm? What would it mean to resist the need to perform? Is 'resistance' even a concept that would be useful to evoke in this context?'<sup>9]</sup>

■ It is no wonder that in recent years Herman Melville's clerk Bartleby, with his mantra of 'I would prefer not to', has become an object of fascination among cultural producers – not least visual artists. One might say that the character Bartleby is a sub-subject, a human thing, a residual person whose refusal to play the role of a 'proper' and well-behaved subject becomes, paradoxically, a real act. Perhaps subjectivation should be seen as a two-way street, creating a dialectic between the subject (still a powerful legal entity, if nothing else) and its dark other – a person whose place in relation to the subject is equivalent to that of the thing to the object. Bartleby, however, is a role model of such

<sup>8]</sup> Franco Bérardi (Bifo). Félix Guattari: Thought, Friendship, and Visionary Cartography, transl.

Giuseppina Mecchia and Charles J. Stivale (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 73-87, 113-123.

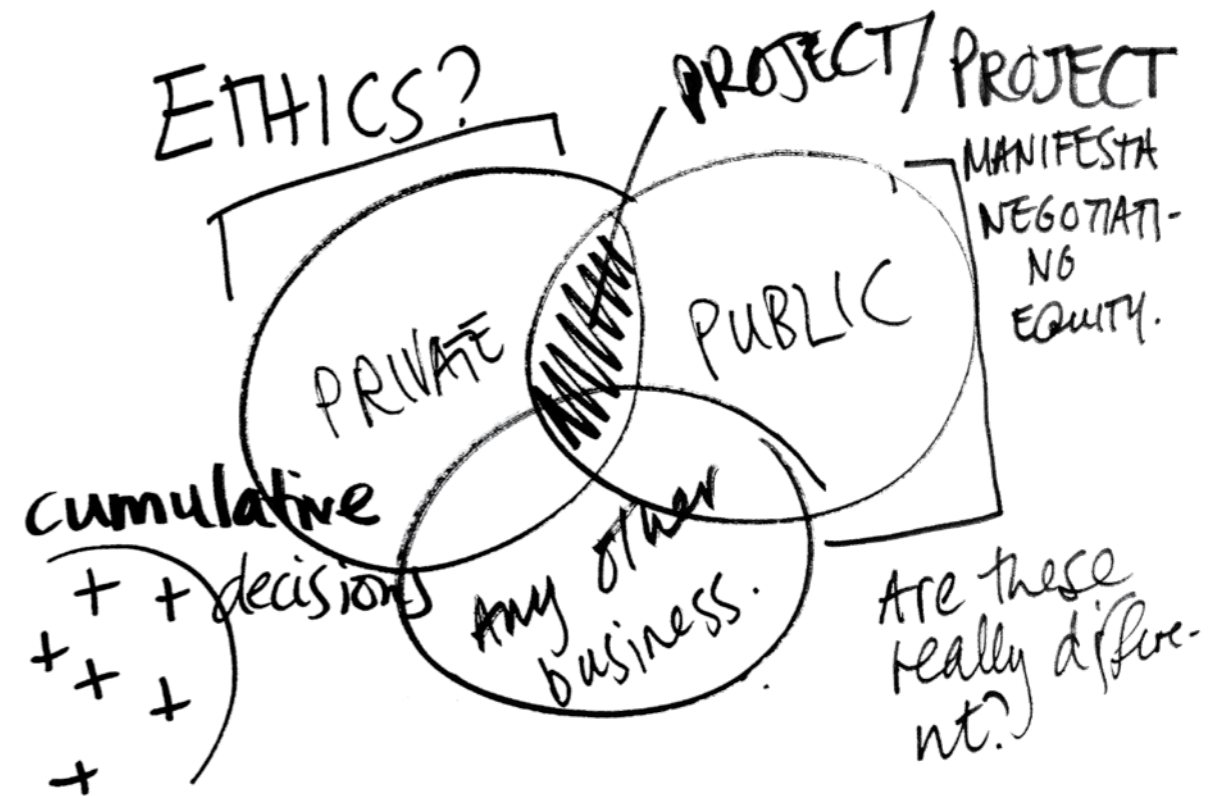
terrifying rigidity and consequence that one would not ever seriously try to follow him. Perhaps he is useful in assuaging one's conscience for giving in to yet another demand, for performing just a little bit harder. "I can't, but I'll do it anyway."

As Verwoert asks, 'What could make you utter the magic words "I can't"? Does it take a breakdown to stop you? Do the words "I can't" already imply the acknowledgment of a breakdown, a failure to perform, a failure that would not be justifiable if your body didn't authenticate your inability by physically stopping you? How could we restore dignity to the "I can't"?' Verwoert makes some thoughtful remarks on embracing the beauty of latency by making the 'I can't' a part of work. Above all, however, he suggests that performance needs to be anchored in care for others. You act because you care; 'So both the "I can" and the "I can't" may originate from the "I care".' Performances that result from this interplay of forces (including texts such as this one) will often show the strains, but they will hopefully be more than mere symptoms.

What Verwoert proposes is basically the development of strategies for turning performances back into acts, for making the leap from the implementation of an economic imperative to forms of action - that may in fact

take the form of choosing not to act. This could certainly be the nucleus for an ethic of performance, an ethics that would also be an aesthetic; this could be termed the project of performative autonomy - the pursuit of an ephemeral autonomy under the conditions of Post-Fordist performance. Without negating the important insights created by the previous conception of autonomy, this fourth notion of autonomy would move the focus from the institution to subjectivities that are produced by and operate in, as well as in between, institutions. If this is not to be limited to the individual sphere, however, such a project has to be articulated on a collective, and thereby political level. While a "classical" revolution may not be on the agenda, what should be attempted is the creation of a montage of different groups - from burnt-out cultural workers to laid-off labourers and sans-papiers - and their activities. The specificity of individual practices needs to be incorporated into the constellation of interrelated performances and/or acts, situated at the fraying edge of art.

As we are struggling to develop a contemporary conception and practice of autonomy, elements from previous "autonomies" may still prove relevant. In the early 1920s, the productivist critic Nikolai Tarabukin stated that the art of the future was to be transformed work; the statement can be found in a selection of Tarabukin's writings published in the early 1970s French by Champ Libre, a left-wing publishing house at which Guy Debord was something of an éminence grise.<sup>11</sup> What united Tarabukin and Debord was the avant-garde notion that in the future, art and life would have to form a continuum in which the division between creative acts on the one hand and dulling labour on the other would be abolished. Work in the sense of capitalist wage labour would be thing in the past; insofar as there would still be work, it would be indistinguishable from creative play. Now that we have witnessed a capitalist-realist version of such a transformation of work, of ourselves, Tarabukin's slogan anachronistically reminds us of alternative futures.



9 | Jan Verwoert, 'I Can, I Can't, Who Cares?' in: Open no. 17 (2009), available online at <http://www.skor.nl/article-4177-nl.html?lang=en>

10 | Le Dernier tableau (Paris: Champ Libre: 1972), 69.

→ Thomas Lange

# THE NECESSARY AUTONOMY

## A SKETCH |

Kant's thoughts about autonomy cover aspects of human rights, politics and the arts. Written in the spirit of enlightenment (in: Was ist Aufklärung?)<sup>1</sup> they were a necessary critique not only of the European absolutistic governments in the spirit of enlightenment, but were a necessary critique of enlightenment itself. In his text Kant confronted the benefits of true enlightenment with the vices that had become visible within the system. These thoughts revealed a paradox that still hounds enlightened societies to the present day: critique of the system is absorbed within the system as part of its self-definition.

The analysis of power today raises a fundamental critique of institutionalised power represented by the "global players" of modern democratic and worldwide economically networked governments. Parallel to the ubiquitous ideas about the web, concerning its

community and economy, knowledge and social benefits, all tendered in market language, today's neuroscience supports the phenomena of depersonalisation, of the loss of the individual and its free will. It is a "swarm being" that is being lived (by others? by other un-authored wills? by chemical and bio-electronic neuron-cluster-flickering?), that replaces the free subject's ability to make a living of one's own choice. Looking at the art world: the interactions of market, art criticism, sponsoring and public interests (towns, governments, interactive museum visitors' blocks, visitor statistics that tell everyone monetarily involved about the success or failure in an objective language of figures), allows us to conclude that there is no space for autonomous art or autonomous artistic life. If it's not the 'terror of economics' (Deleuze) that forces every successful artist to obey The Rules, then certainly he or she knows that to be successful, one has to skilfully apprehend the techniques of economy. To sell and be sold is intertwined with the ideology of freedom and of the individual - making us blind to the restrictions this cultural, economic and governmental practice implies. But from Kant to Benjamin to Adorno, from Foucault to Agamben, we can extract a certain staunch resistance to being governed to such an extent; that it (nowadays an anonymous administration) threatens the basic ethics of

modern society, founded on autonomy: the right and the possibility to be critical, to raise critique. In this situation autonomy needs to be remembered and re-valued as a necessary tool to implement resistance to administration, to being governed to such an extent. These arguments for the necessity of critique recurrently call upon the role of "art" to take present conditions and enlarge them to existential human questions. Art's ability to show borders by crossing and denying, by shifting and establishing them, reveals the structures of government (and of humanity) and the society it is in. Today, a practice of autonomy is needed as a vital form of resistance against its own consumption and neutralisation by a cynical (and perhaps sinister) system that levers out any true dialectics and make us believe that the dialectic is a self-neutralisation of the problems it raised to deny that these problems exist.

If we can't say where autonomy will aim in the end, we might be able to say where it wants to escape from: a self-inflicted mental immaturity. In §59 of the Critique of Reason Kant states that one cannot realise 'the good being' (the aim of reason).<sup>2</sup> Instead, one can symbolise it through aesthetics and the arts to show and to mark - to reveal the difference. Aesthetics (and art) becomes an instrument of a political realisation of the 'good

state' - it is the (necessary) utopian function of art as a reminder of that which is not. Schiller made clear that humans need to be educated to become citizens (of the 'good state') - and that this education has to be aesthetic before being able to become political and gaining a consciousness of the historical.<sup>3</sup> Autonomy is connected in Kant's philosophy with the free will and the idea of freedom. But he knows: freedom is an illusion, an idea of reason; the objective reality of freedom per se is highly doubtful; but it is a necessary illusion. As a necessary fiction it creates reality. Ethically this means: who is able to give him or herself the law is fulfilling the constitutive condition of personal soundness of mind.

Autonomy within the arts fulfils what Plato feared most about the arts: to show, to make visible that what they show is made, is constructed and invented (and can be made different any time). This bears a threatening potential to de-stabilise a state that is based on divine (= unchangeable and unquestionable) ideas. Within autonomic operations, power and its structures become visible in a field of possibilities and therefore in a field that is changeable; where the possible change is held open. Operational autonomy is the necessary critique to reveal forms of (and to what extent one is) being governed.

<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, "Was ist Aufklärung?" or What is Enlightenment?, and essay first published in Berlinische Monatsschrift (Berlin Monthly) in 1784.

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, The Critique of Pure Reason, originally published in 1781. Edition available: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> J.C. Friedrich von Schiller, Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man, first published in 1794.

Edition available: Harvard Classics, Vol. 32 Literary and Philosophical Essays ed. Charles W. Eliot, 1909.

# ABSTRACT RESISTANCE IS FUTILE – CALLING FOR A RESPONSIBILITY BEYOND HONOUR

Freak  
Lomme

“Finally, however, there is this fundamental stake in art and academy: the preservation, in an administered, affirmative culture, of spaces for critical debate and alternative vision.”

Hal Foster<sup>1]</sup>

Quite recently, according to Hal Foster's *The Return of the Real* (1996), critical theory became immanent to innovative art and furthermore I would say, the relative autonomy of aesthetics became the critical garnish decorating a high cultural experience. This is a story of the visual separation of a post-war elite – with old money in fake investments and old politics based on idealistic morals of the generation of '68 – into conceptual models beyond the real, beyond the tangible and the proven and thus beyond affirmation. The dichotomy between abstraction and reality so championed by critical theory lost its authority.

Likewise, a sense of reality got lost in the abstract chain of 'isms. Art's formal distance to reality has in fact become a distance to

itself. Rhetorical notions of form and content, subjects and objects within specific spheres, have lost their visual clarity. Subjects got off track while the turnover of objects rose tremendously. Notions on the subject of presented objects lost communicative reference and communicative urgency and thus fell outside of our social body. Nowadays they cannot compete with visual/experience culture as channelled either via populist subjects or via designed objects. The high-art internal visual succumbing, the 20th century conqueror, is just as much a democratic myth as the idea of art being of authority for the masses. Abstract resistance is futile. The point of reference, lost. Taking a stance, seemingly impossible.

Should we resist both high culture's abstraction and populist design, or can we utilise each phenomenon? It seems that what might still be distinguished as the “high cultural” artistic domain neglects the potency of effective communication as practiced by designers. It seems that theoreticians ignore the

“clear” communication of populists. The one side preaches abstract ideals to an “in” crowd without taking any responsibility on how to make these real through communication. Simultaneously however, there is little responsibility in the reality of an experience-based economy on the other side. If we're people respecting our kind, then we should acknowledge the subjective within and amongst us. If not, then what kind of experiences are we to bring about?

If we want to reason effectively and take a progressive position, we need to acknowledge that the imbalance between abstraction and reality needs to be revised continuously in order to make the tension between the two real and dynamic. While reasoning we must engage with both spheres. To reason effectively, we must reason clearly. To reason with responsibility, we must reason through morality and sincerity: by that I mean, an open construct of subjective truth at best. That's emancipation in a true humanist legacy; indeed a form of libertarian socialism...

<sup>1]</sup> Hal Foster. *The Return of the Real: Art and Theory at the end of the Century*. MIT Press: Michigan, 1996.



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THE  
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The Autonomy Project is an international collaboration between art/education/research institutes and organisations, practitioners and thinkers. The project began in 2010 and seeks to redefine and redress the issues around autonomy in the fields of art, design, theory and cultural policy today. From a multi faceted geographic and political context, the project will facilitate a number of events, exhibitions and publications in an ongoing discussion, which brings the notion and practice of autonomy back into debate.

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