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Critique of Autonomy

To speak of the autonomy of art, or of the artwork, is, for various reasons, anything but unequivocal. For one thing, the concept is historical, but it is again and again treated by prominent theoreticians of aesthetics as if it were timeless, which gives rise to inconsistencies. For another, it makes a difference where one situates autonomy, whether one speaks of the autonomy of art or of the artwork (for although both are connected, they are not the same). A historical reconstruction might shed some light on the obscurity of the use of this concept.

It is well known that the arts—the collective singular “art” as an encompassing designation for poetry, music, visual arts, and architecture—is only established later—were, in the feudal and absolutist society of the seventeenth century, still in no way autonomous. Molière (Jean-Baptiste Poquelin) had to struggle for years to have his *Tartuffe* performed publicly. In this dispute, it was a question of more than a single play, namely, of whether the author of a comedy should have the right to thematize essential problems of social coexistence, or whether this right should belong solely to the church. If Molière finally triumphed after a long dispute, he owed his success not only to his own stubbornness, but above all to the intervention of the king on his side. The *Querelle du Tartuffe* is significant in more than one respect.

It shows that Molière did, in fact, maintain the autonomy of the theater, which consists in the right of a comic author to take positions regarding society in his plays. Autonomy means here something quite different from the idea of *l'art pour l'art* in the aesthetic programs of the nineteenth century.

Molière may only assert himself against the power of the church by appealing to absolutist central power. The autonomy that he thereby attains remains a relative one. Nonetheless, he does not simply exchange one form of dependency for another, but reaches more freedom; for the functions that absolutism assigns to the theater—the representation of kingly grandeur and the divertissement of the courtly society—indeed leave the author, within these set limits, a certain measure of formal freedom.

Nor did the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century yet know the modern concept of autonomous art. The article “Beaux-Arts” from the *Encyclopédie* makes art responsible for social usefulness, and thereby for the practice of moral behavior; at the same time, it distinguishes itself from the conception of art connoted by courtly society: “Weak or frivolous minds repeat incessantly that the arts are only destined for our amusements.” For the history of the concept of autonomy, it is extremely revealing that the author of this article never regards usefulness as the original feature of the arts. Rather, he takes his point of departure in the idea that they had spontaneously arisen out of life praxis, much as the shepherd ornaments his crook, or as the nomad builds a well-proportioned hut. For the author, there exists therefore “a beauty that is independent of its usefulness.” Formulations in which the “particular charm” and the “magical force” of the art work is discussed point in the same direction. One should certainly not overvalue these remarks, but they show that the Enlightenment surmised potentials of spontaneous sensuality in art that it wanted not only to make useful, but also to keep under control. From this urge stem also the suggestions, in this same article in the *Encyclopédie*, for a restrictive cultural policy that would make the admission to artistic activity dependent on a preceding examination of the applicant in history, the faculty of judgment, and moral integrity. To be sure, views were formulated in Denis Diderot’s circle that clearly point beyond a moral and educatory function of the arts. This is above all true of the concept of genius, with the help of which, since the mid-eighteenth century, the artist is understood as an exceptional human being whose actions are subordinate to no rules. In the relevant article of the *Encyclopédie*, the work of the genius is characterized as follows: “it must have an air of neglect about it, appear irregular, rocky, savage.” The rejection of the normative poetics that were valid in France until well into the nineteenth century could hardly be expressed more clearly. The autonomy of art is thus found first as the autonomy of the artist regarding rules, and thus is in relation to the rational moment in the conception of art held in courtly and feudal society. This may be difficult to understand at first glance, because we are used to assuming a connection between the rise of the bourgeoisie and the establishment of the principle of rationality in society, even if this is done from a simplifying sociological viewpoint; for, with the concept of genius, the

same bourgeoisie creates a position that defines itself against rationality.

The writings of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's friend Karl Philipp Moritz, which were written in the years before the 1789 French Revolution, show particularly well why, in the transition to a modern society, art came into a relation of tension with rationality. [See Moritz.] If the Encyclopedists had been concerned with making the arts into useful tools of social progress, then Moritz defines the beautiful in opposition to the useful. "We may thus recognize the beautiful in general in no other way than by opposing it to the useful and distinguishing it as sharply as possible from the latter," he writes in his essay "On the Plastic Imitation of the Beautiful" (1788). Even more clearly than later in Kant, Moritz's texts betray the social conditions that have called up this definition of the beautiful. In the essay "The Noblest in Nature" (1786), he notes: "The dominant idea of the useful has gradually repressed the noble and beautiful—for one regards even grand and sublime nature only with the eyes of state finance [*Kameralistik*] and finds its sight only interesting insofar as one can calculate the profits of its products" (1973, vol. I, p. 263). For a society that tends to see nature only as the object of exploitation, nothing is more important than to keep open the possibility of another form of converse with nature. This relation to nature is the aesthetic one, which keeps itself as free of any considerations of usefulness as it does from immediately moral judgments. Transposed onto artistic beauty, there results from this the idea of the artwork's freedom from goals and its definition as a whole that exists for itself; for whereas the category of usefulness always refers an object to other things and sees it only as a part, the goal-free eye stays longer with the object of its contemplation and thus demands that it be a whole.

With this autonomy of art arises also a new, contemplative attitude of reception, which Moritz sketches as follows: "While the beautiful draws our contemplation entirely into itself, it also draws it away from ourselves for a time, and effects our self-loss in the beautiful object; and it is just this self-loss, this forgetting of ourselves, which is the highest degree of the pure and unselfish pleasure that beauty may offer us. We give up in the moment our individual and limited existence to a kind of higher existence" (1973, vol. I, p. 206). Aesthetic experience appears here to be radically separated from everyday experience, so radically that the subject loses itself. The analogy here between the experience of beauty and religious experience is extremely clear. Such an understanding becomes possible at a historical point in time where the loss of validity of religious worldviews awakens a longing for a metaphysical experience of a different sort, which will find its admittedly ever precarious fulfillment in autonomous art.

One might sum up as follows: the postulate of autonomy in the last third of the eighteenth century responds to central problems of incipient bourgeois capitalist society, and

for this reason retains its validity in the two centuries to come, however disputed that validity will come to be. The problems to which this new definition of art reacts are called forth by the transition from a traditional to a modern society and by the changes in attitudes and patterns of life that this conditions. One may also characterize these problems as a loss of a dimension of meaning of human existence, just as much as a nascent perception of increasing alienation between individuals who are directed to egotistical goals of action. To this individual, who is in conflict with himself and his fellow humans, and is abandoned by God, autonomous art opens a world that lets him experience perfection as reality, although only at the cost of the strict separation of this from any life praxis.

What makes Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790) the fundamental text of modern aesthetics is above all the fact that the separation of art from its life-practical relations is here reflected on with extreme conceptual precision: "If someone asks me whether I find the palace I see before me beautiful, I may indeed say: I don't care for such things which are made only for gawking at; or, like the Iroquois *sachem*, I might say that I like nothing in Paris better than certain kinds of cakes; I could also whittle down the vanity of the great in good Rousseau-like fashion, for this vanity wastes the sweat of the people on such unnecessary things. . . . One may admit and approve of all of this, yet this is not the question here. One wants only to know whether the mere representation of a thing in me is accompanied with pleasure" (*Critique of Judgment*, section 2). [See Kant.] The quote makes clear what Kant understands by "disinterestedness." Both the interest of the Iroquois *sachem*, which is directed to immediate gratification of need, and the practical interest of reason of a Rousseau-like critic of society lie outside the domain that Kant circumscribes as the object of aesthetic judgment. It is not Kant's purpose to make statements about the essence of art or the laws of construction of artworks; he wants only to isolate a specific mode of contemplation, while admitting that the object in question could be considered otherwise. The oft-cited definitions of disinterested pleasure, of purposefulness without goal, and of a generally valid pleasure without concepts are, for Kant, definitions of the judgment of taste, and not judgments on the work of art. "Art [*schöne Kunst*], on the contrary," he writes, "is a mode of representation, which is for itself purposeful" (ibid., section 44). But after Kant has first completely restricted himself to the definition of the judgment of taste, he then transposes the characteristics he has found onto the work of art and thus lays the foundation stone for a metaphysics of art that, even today, frames the context of what we call aesthetic experience.

The debate about the autonomy of art is taken up in France in the nineteenth century. The mutually contradictory positions are not easy to disentangle. For instance, the Saint-Simonians take up the Enlightenment idea that as-

signs to art the task of making sensual abstract ideas and acquiring thereby mass effectiveness; on the other hand, this same group inclines to see a religious function in art, and to view the artist as bearer of revelation. Théophile Gautier, in contrast, disappointed by the outcome of the July Revolution, already in the 1830s proclaims the turning away of the artist from society. His polemic against the principle of usefulness in art, in the preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), is well known: "There is nothing truly beautiful except that which serves no end; everything that is useful is ugly, for it is the expression of some need. . . . The most useful place in a house is the latrine." Not only the aggressivity of this polemic, but also the endless series of immorality trials (those of Charles Baudelaire and Gustave Flaubert are only the most famous), show that freedom from moral claims may indeed have been theoretically permitted to art but was denied to it in practice. This contradiction leaves its stamp on the concept of art of Victor Cousin, whose *Cours de la philosophie* (1836) can hardly be overestimated in its influence on the notions of art of the educated bourgeoisie in nineteenth-century France. [See Cousin.] Cousin does insist on the autonomy of art: "art is no more in the service of religion and of morality than it serves the agreeable and the useful"; (Cousin, 1836, pp. 224, 261) but since he also departs from the unity of the true, good, and beautiful he finally subordinates art again to morality.

There can be no doubt that the failure of the 1848 revolution crucially encouraged the radicalization of the autonomy of art. To the degree that social engagement became as good as impossible, the autonomy principle's inherent tendency to purity of the aesthetic had actually to establish itself. "One sees finally, toward the end of the nineteenth century, the accentuation of a remarkable will to isolate definitively Poetry from any other essence than its own (Valéry, 1957, vol. I, p. 207). Valéry's statement holds true not only for poetry, but also, with corresponding temporal delays, for visual art.

There are, however, different interpretations of the principle of autonomy. Flaubert dreamed of a "book about nothing," but his two most important books live precisely from the tension between their formal claims and the ugly everyday world of his age. The same is true of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal*. It is Stéphane Mallarmé who first renounces this tension, in order to drive the autonomy of art into that vertiginous height where the "absolute" is recognized as made by men, and where it coincides with the "game." "We know, captives of an absolute formula that, certainly, is nothing but what is. Incontinent to put aside nonetheless, under the pretext, the trap, would accuse our inconsequence, denying the pleasure that we want to have: for this beyond is its agent, and the motor, I should say, if I did not find it distasteful to operate, in public, the impious disassemblage of fiction and consequently of the literary mechanism, to spread out the principal element or nothing. But, I

venerate how, by trickery, one projects—to some forbidden elevation of lightning!—the conscious lack in us of that which explodes up there. What aim does this all serve—a game (Mallarmé, 1945, p. 647).

Mallarmé here pursues the destruction of the belief in the substantiality of art ("the impious disassemblage of fiction" [ibid.]), even when he pretends not to do so. The argument is simple: only that which exists, nature and the world of material objects. Humans may add nothing to this ("nature has taken place, one will not add to it" [ibid.]). The belief in art as an absolute is only a bait, certainly a necessary one, if there is to be aesthetic pleasure. This latter depends on a mechanism (Mallarmé carries through his technological metaphor consequently here) whose particularity consists in the fact that that which keeps it moving is nonexistent. More precisely: that which moves this mechanism is only the projection of a lack, thus a deception. Mallarmé unveils the metaphysical ground of art as an empty postulation, without this last's losing any of its value; for he discovers at the same time in "an ennui regarding things if they establish themselves solidly and preponderantly" the force that generates the longing for the ideality of art. Art is thus simultaneously the absolute *and* an empty game.

The importance of Mallarmé for the history of the autonomy of art cannot be overemphasized. On the one hand, he unveils the secret of art as a vacant arcanum; on the other hand, the principle of autonomy, in his work, takes hold of the artwork itself. Flaubert's idea of a "book about nothing" is thus elevated as if to a principle; that is, the semantic relations that tie the artwork to social reality are broken off. This was not yet the case in the original concept of autonomy as it was developed at the end of the eighteenth century. There, autonomy means, as we have seen, the status of art within society, its independence relative to moral claims and demands for social utility. Art is thereby understood as an institution in which the principles of that which is theoretically true and morally right have no application (or at least no immediate one). For the artwork, a domain of freedom is thereby opened up—also one for the theoretization of social problems. This domain is only limited by the principle of the unity of the work. Under the impression of the irreconcilability of art and modern society, this position is now radicalized in such a way that the work of art may only express its own impossibility. From the perspective of the artist, Mallarmé formulates this in a conversation with Jules Huret: "For me, the case of a poet in this society which does not permit him to live is that of a man who isolates himself to sculpt his own tomb" (Mallarmé 1945, p. 869).

The historical avant-garde movements such as Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism react to this situation in the crisis period around World War I. However divergent the programs and political positions of these individual movements may be, they are unanimous in their fundamental questioning of the autonomy of art. At least in their heroic phase, it

is, for the Surrealists, not a question of producing works of art, but rather of revolutionizing life itself. The formula "to practice poetry" from the first *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) preserves this intention: it is not a matter of writing poems, but rather of letting poetry become practical: for example, to return the potential of world-forming, which in autonomous art is severed from the world, back to the latter. [See Surrealism.] Out of despair over a world that mutilates individuals and in which art consequently remains impotent, the avant-garde drew a radical consequence: only through an attack on the autonomy of art itself did they believe that they could unleash the forces contained in art and use them for a revolutionary change in society.

The attack of the historical avant-garde movements on the institution of art led neither to art's sublation nor to the revolutionizing of the everyday; rather, the nonworks of the avant-garde have been absorbed into the canon or into the museum. It would be false, however, to draw from this failure the conclusion that the avant-garde had no effect. Its effect is very considerable, but it affects less the relation of art and life than the self-understanding of art. Since Marcel Duchamp, in 1917, sent a factory-produced urinal to a non-injured exhibition, the question of what a work of art is has become a necessary moment of artistic production. The avant-garde movements have robbed autonomous art of its self-evidence, and bequeathed to every post-avant-garde artist who wants to be up to the demands of the time doubts as to the meaningfulness of his or her actions (this may be already read in the text of Mallarmé cited earlier). Even beyond this, the avant-garde has confronted the artist with the question of what it is that one does when one produces works of art. The necessity of always seeking anew an answer to this question—a question that emanates from the avant-garde movements onto the art of the entire twentieth century—and of pursuing this search not alongside artistic production, but as an integral part of the latter, deeply alters the problem of autonomy.

This may be best explained with the example of Josef Beuys, who has depotentialized traditional oppositions. [See Beuys.] Beuys knows that in bourgeois society art will never be other than art, and that social ineffectiveness is the flip side of autonomy. Based on this insight, he seeks to leave the ghetto of art. Thereby he meets with the avant-garde project of leading art back into lived praxis, and also to this project's failure. His position is aporetic. He can neither "return" to the production of autonomous works (for thereby he would betray the claims formulated by the avant-garde) nor take up the project of the avant-garde (which has failed). He must thus attempt to bind the mutually contradictory, that is, to create works, but in such a way that these latter are absorbed in an intention that goes beyond them. He must invent a new place for art, which is neither within nor outside of art, but on the edge that separates artistic action from other forms of social action. It is an impossible

place, which exists nowhere, but rather must in each case be created in the moment. In this movement, the autonomy of art is both always assumed and overstepped. Instead of posing a weakness in Beuys's position, this contradiction proves to be the most precise answer so far given to the aporetic situation in which art finds itself after the historical avant-garde movements.

[See also Avant-Garde; and Mallarmé.]

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Autonomy and Its Feminist Critics

Aesthetic autonomy is an ideal with a distinguished lineage, its roots lying in the eighteenth-century works of British empiricists (interested in the psychological effects of art and aesthetic experience) and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Commitment to this notion—that works of art are valuable in their own right as objects of aesthetic contemplation—plays an essential role in modernism and formalist theories of art. Additionally, this idea has largely defined the discipline of Anglo-American aesthetics.

In recent decades, however, theories of aesthetic autonomy have come under attack by feminist aestheticians, art historians, and art critics. Feminists are not the first to object to traditional autonomous aesthetics, but the grounds of objection are new. Central among many arguments is the claim that an autonomous aesthetic—and the Kantian tradition out of which it grows—operates with an unacknowledged gender bias that infects purportedly impartial standards of evaluation and distorts judgments about which works of art and artists are significant. As a result, women have been consigned to the minor leagues of art history—not for lack of talent or ability, but because the standards by which they have been judged are discriminatory.

The effects of this critique have been striking. Feminist thinking has prompted a widespread examination of the established understanding of artistic production, reception, and evaluation. Even within mainstream Anglo-American aesthetics, the Kantian model no longer holds the place it once did: its advocates now find themselves forced to defend assumptions and methods once taken for granted. Furthermore, feminist criticisms of aesthetic autonomy merit scrutiny not only for their impact on contemporary aesthetic theory and the light they throw on Anglo-