

Autonomy as Aesthetic Practice

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Abstract

This essay examines various conceptions of autonomy in relation to recent artistic practices. Starting from the apparent opposition between modernist notions of the autonomy of art and theorizations of political autonomy, the text problematizes the notion of the autonomy of art by using Jacques Rancière's notion of the aesthetic regime. Focusing on the importance of the act and performance in the art of the last decades, it is argued that while political and artistic autonomy may never quite converge, aesthetic acts can under certain circumstances function in both the political and the artistic register, simultaneously or successively. The aesthetic act thus stages a passage from the artistic to the political, and vice versa.

Keywords

aesthetics, art, autonomy

For Greenberg as for Habermas and, with important qualifications, for Adorno, artistic modernism meant that art develops by making and challenging its own rules, reflexively, according to its own inner logic and 'learning processes'.¹ The socio-economical underpinnings of such definitions of autonomous art are usually based on Max Weber's analysis of modern society as being marked by the functional self-differentiation of its spheres, including art. This autonomy of *art* underpinned the autonomy of the *artwork* as a seemingly self-sufficient entity obeying its immanent logic, which is at the same time that of an art history. It is thus not surprising that autonomy has come to be associated with apolitical isolationism, with a retrograde ideology of High Art. For decades, 'autonomy' has been a bad word in art – though with the resurgence of *autonomia* as a banner for political and aesthetic action, it is obvious that this much-maligned and embarrassing concept is in fact central to any serious engagement with and in contemporary art.

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As Terry Eagleton has noted, the notion of autonomy as referring to ‘a mode of being which is entirely self-regulating and self-determining’ may on the one hand provide ‘a central constituent of bourgeois ideology’, but on the other hand its emphasis on ‘the self-determining nature of human powers and capacities’ hold an emancipatory political potential (Eagleton, 1990: 9). Is any radical political project thinkable without *such* a concept of autonomy, however implicit? In fact, while the term may have been suspect, avant-garde art movements that were critical of artistic autonomy strove for *an autonomy that dared not speak its name*. In the 1960s, neo-avant-garde groups from Fluxus to the Situationist International sought to *negate* the autonomy of art in favour of acts that would attain a greater degree of autonomy by not being containable within the framework of modern art.

Jacques Rancière has argued that the aesthetic regime ‘ties art to non-art from the start, it sets up that life between two vanishing points: art becoming mere life or art becoming mere art’ (Rancière, 2002: 150). In other words: art can be conceptualized and practised as life, thereby accruing an autonomy precisely insofar as it is not ‘mere art’; on the other hand, the conception of ‘an autonomous life of art’ conceives of art as its own autonomous historical life. According to Rancière, “‘pushed to the extreme”, each of these scenarios entailed its own entropy, its own end of art. But the life of art in the aesthetic regime of art consists precisely of a shuttling between these scenarios, playing an autonomy against a heteronomy and a heteronomy against an autonomy, playing one linkage between art and non-art against another such linkage’ (Rancière, 2002: 150). Thus, pushed to its extreme, ‘the plot of the life of art entails a verdict of death. The statue is autonomous in so far as the will that produces it is heteronomous. When art is no more than art, it vanishes. When the content of thought is transparent to itself and when no matter resists it, this success means the end of art. When the artist does what he wants, Hegel states, he reverts to merely affixing to paper or canvas a trademark’ (Rancière, 2002: 142). Meanwhile, the plot of ‘art becoming life’ has its own inbuilt entropy, as it can simply become an artistic point of entry into a life outside art. Rancière’s conclusion from all this is that ‘[aesthetic] art promises a political accomplishment that it cannot satisfy, and thrives on that ambiguity’ (Rancière, 2002: 151).

Rancière has stressed that his ‘aesthetic regime’ is not a historical regime of art, just a regime of the identification of art; he points out that this regime started with the re-interpretation of old art, not with the production of new art (Rancière, 2004). However, in the late 18th and 19th century this reinterpretation always went hand in hand with the production of the new – for instance in line drawings that were used to illustrate the earliest art historical publications, and in poetry about artworks. Even early on, aesthetic reflection became aesthetic practice in the form of artistic production. However, as Peter Osborne has stressed,

referencing and critiquing Rancière, ‘The autonomy of art is not – although it has often been thought to be – the same thing as the “autonomy of the aesthetic”. Nor can the autonomy of the aesthetic provide a conceptual basis for the autonomy of art’ (Osborne, 2012: 118).² In fact, the relation between Rancière’s ‘aesthetic regime of art’ and modern artistic production since the age of Romanticism is one of the most problematic, but potentially also most productive, aspects of Rancière’s meta-aesthetics. It is true that the autonomy of art is not the autonomy of the aesthetic, but modern art became a crucial vehicle for aesthetic practice *and* theory. If in the aesthetic regime an artwork is understood in terms of a dialectic of logos and pathos, in Rancière’s terms, as a perpetual problem demanding but frustrating analysis, this means that the aesthetic is not the sphere of autonomy. Autonomy, being self-legislation, in the aesthetic artwork appears to possess a self-legislating logos, but it remains to some extent opaque, mired in sensuous heteronomy.

The aesthetic is the constant questioning of art and more precisely of *claims for art’s autonomy*, counteracting its reduction from persistent problem to ideological given. This is why the comfortable assumption that art is structurally autonomous ultimately leads to aesthetic attrition: see much of the late-Modernist painting of the 1960s and 1980s. We thus encounter the constitutive paradox of all art since Romanticism: if it were ever possible for art to become completely autonomous, this would in fact mean that it would be insufficiently aesthetic, for the aesthetic is a constant renegotiation of autonomy and heteronomy. *Artistic practice* becomes properly *aesthetic practice* when problematizing the limits of art and of artistic autonomy. The aesthetic thus understood always returns to haunt circumscribed conceptions or forms of ‘autonomous art’. Autonomy is not a fact; we cannot possess it. If anything, autonomy is an exceptional occurrence in the realm of established, factual relations – including art and its institutions. And while it may be true that the aesthetic and the political never quite coincide, I want to argue that there can be a productive back-and-forth even within single practices and seemingly indivisible acts.

I. Autonomy in and against Art: Institutional Critique

The artistic practices that have come to be known as institutional critique – from Hans Haacke and Michael Asher, starting around 1970, to younger practitioners – differed from both the historical avant-garde and the neo-avant-gardes of the late 1950s and early 1960s in their approach to the problem of ‘the autonomy of art’. Whereas both the ‘ludic’ happenings and Fluxus artists and the much more politicized Situationist avant-garde sought to operate outside the institutions of art and the art market, institutional critique started from the realization that there is no ‘elsewhere’, no realm outside art, beyond recuperation. If

one reads writings from the 1970s by practitioners of what was then not yet labelled as institutional critique, such as Haacke or Asher, the term autonomy hardly plays any role at all; it is certainly not used with any degree of consistency. This is all the more remarkable if one looks at a book such as Peter Bürger's 1974 *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, in which it abounds. Bürger analyses the historical avant-garde as an attack on modernist autonomy and the neo-avant-garde as an institutionalization of the avant-garde that negates its original intentions (Bürger, 1974). Does a similar diagnosis not underpin institutional critique?

In Andrea Fraser's writings from the 1990s, which were shaped both by those of the 'first generation' practitioners of institutional critique and by the work of critics/historians such as Peter Bürger and Benjamin Buchloh, the concept of autonomy was addressed explicitly and incisively (Buchloh, 2001, 2007). Rather than presenting institutional critique simply as an attack on autonomy as a purely ideological notion, Fraser argued that 'the critique of the autonomy of the artwork' was 'rooted in a recognition of the partial and ideological character of that autonomy and an attempt to resist the heteronomy to which artists and artworks are subject'. Therefore, '[the] critique of the art object's autonomy was less a rejection of artistic autonomy than a critique of the *uses* to which artworks are put: the economic and political interests they *serve*' (Fraser, 2005a [1996]: 57, emphasis in original). In other words: what was criticized was a *lack of real autonomy*, the reduction of artistic autonomy to a sham. And this meant precisely that the autonomy that was the aim (an autonomy that still dared not speak its name) could not be traditional artistic autonomy, since such attempts had been shown to lead straight into heteronomy.

Far from being an abandonment of autonomy, institutional critique should thus be seen as an attempt to regain a degree of autonomy – an autonomy that cannot be that of modernist paeans. A work by Hans Haacke such as *The Chase Advantage* (1976) uses the similarities between the 'modernist' Chase Manhattan Bank logotype and 1960s art such as Frank Stella's shaped canvases to investigate art sponsoring as a form of PR that can help gloss over unsavoury business practices. Supplementing the 'autonomous' logo with a montage of quotations and data, the panels that make up Haacke's work are object lessons in the heteronomy of art. If such a work seems to posit a viewer who has some degree of critical distance, a 1974 project by Michael Asher stressed the viewer's own implication in the heteronomous habitat of art. For his show at the Claire Copley Gallery in Los Angeles, Asher removed the partition wall separating the white cube from the back office, making visible *labour* as the repressed base of the shiny superstructural surface of art – an expanding and morphing form of cultural labour. In this respect, the work can be seen to announce a later shift in emphasis in institutional critique.

There are various genealogies of institutional critique, various periodizations of its development since the early 1970s. In Hito Steyerl's account, the third phase (after the artist's 'integration into the institution' and 'integration into representation') is marked by his/her integration *into precarity*: 'while institutions are being dismantled by neo-liberal institutional criticism, this produces an ambivalent critical subject which develops multiple strategies for dealing with its dislocation' (Steyerl, 2009 [2006]: 19). What changes with the rise of precarity, with the formation of a relatively large cultural Lumpenproletariat, is that art's role as an economical factor becomes ever more part of people's lived reality.

The Marxian spin on the analysis of the artistic field as a differentiated autonomous sphere argues that – to quote Eagleton once more – the relative autonomy of such a field 'is itself a material fact with particular social determinations', since 'certain historically specific forms of consciousness become separated out from productive activity, and can best be explained in terms of their functional role in sustaining it. . . . Once an economic surplus permits a minority of "professional" thinkers to be released from the exigencies of labour, it becomes possible for consciousness to "flatter" itself that it is in fact independent of material reality' (Eagleton, 1991: 74–5). It is precisely this self-flattering that has become hard to sustain for ever more practitioners. Adorno, the self-critical modernist, noted that 'the autonomy of art is unthinkable without the obfuscation of labour' (Adorno, 1970: 80).³ But who can really flatter themselves into thinking that they are released from the exigencies of labour? The dirty little secret that is labour infiltrates every conversation, every gesture.

In her work since the late 1980s, Andrea Fraser has placed new emphasis on the subject as the real battleground for institutional critique, which came to be redefined in terms of *performance*.⁴ Fraser often foregrounds 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 the subject, towards the site of subjectivation. Having started out by playing the museum volunteer Jane Castleton in *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk* (1989), Fraser soon let go of any suggestion that she plays specific characters. In pieces such as *Official Welcome* (2001), she instead turned herself into a jukebox of unstable quasi-subjects beleaguered by performance anxiety. In this way, she anchored her performative art within a wider performative economy, using it to reflect on and intervene in it.

Here we see the emergence of a properly contemporary conception of autonomy: an enacted autonomy in the age of labour-as-performance. This is autonomy not as the grand gesture of freedom, but autonomy as *work on and with constraints*. It situates the dialectic of autonomy and

heteronomy within the practitioner. He/she is part of the problem, which is in fact the condition for his/her agency. This is neither the plot of 'life of art' nor that of 'art becoming life'; rather, it is an aesthetic problematization of artistic autonomy.

2. The Praxis of Autonomy

For Clement Greenberg, the history of art appeared as a series of rooms en filade, with artworks arranged in sequences that showed ever more rigorous solutions for formal 'problems'. However, for most of the 1950s this was not the dominant account of modern art; much more prominent was Harold Rosenberg's existentialist take on abstract expressionism, which he conceptualized as action painting. Rosenberg's reputation still suffers from a certain essayistic flightiness and from his 'inability to see', for which Greenberg chided him. Indeed, Rosenberg's seminal 1952 essay, 'The American Action Painters', does not mention a single artist by name (Rosenberg, 1970a [1952]). While this is certainly highly problematic, it has to be seen in conjunction with Rosenberg's valorization of the *act* over the artwork as tangible *fact* – as object with specific qualities. It was Rosenberg's contention that Greenberg's reduction of art to a series of observable facts was wrong; in so far as it becomes fact, the act is realized but its potential is curtailed.⁵ The problem ultimately lies in the abstract and undialectical nature of Rosenberg's negation of the artwork as obdurate fact.

The Rosenberg of the 1950s and 1960s was no longer the Trotskyist Marxist he had been in the late 1930s, but the central role of the act in his philosophy betrays his continuing indebtedness to Marx and to post-Hegelian philosophies of *praxis* in general. One might say that these post-idealist philosophies exacerbated one type of Kantian autonomy, and abandoned another – for in Kant's critical system, autonomy has a twofold function. On the one hand, Kant posited philosophy as a discipline that needed to develop autonomously, in accordance with its own inner logic – albeit in dialogue with the sciences. This is the meaning of Kantian autonomy that Clement Greenberg would use: 'The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence. Kant used logic to establish the limits of logic, and while he withdrew much from its old jurisdiction, logic was left all the more secure in what there remained to it' (Greenberg, 1993 [1960]: 85). This understanding of autonomy is compatible with the Weberian notion of functional differentiation – law, science, and morality all increasingly developing along lines of reflexivity, self-criticism.

The second sense of Kantian autonomy concerns not the *discipline* but the *subject* – a notion that is largely absent from Greenberg's historical

narrative of modernism, even though his practice as a rather judgemental art critic depended on his stance as critical subject. The Kantian subject is split between pure reason and practical reason, between the phenomenal and the noumenal world. It is only the subject of practical reason that that is free and self-governing: autonomous. Strictly speaking, according to Kant it is only the *will* that is autonomous; the free will seems to be autonomous from any sense of lived reality and voids the subject (Osborne, 2012). Adorno would be highly critical of this disembodied, abstract subject, a mere vehicle for the will, which seems to be a philosophical sublimation of socially imposed duty: *you must* (Macdonald, 2011). In attempting to restore a sense of lived ethics to the autonomous subject, Adorno was in a long line of thinkers who tried to overcome the limitations of the Kantian system by focusing not on ethical imperatives but on praxis, on the act – a lineage starting with Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. Rosenberg would anchor his theory of the act in a ‘revolution against the given, in the self and in the world’, that started with Hegel (Rosenberg, 1970a [1952]: 42).

It was of course the critique of Hegel in the 1830s and 1840s, by Marx and others, that would derive a materialist notion of praxis from the ‘spiritualized’ Hegelian subject. For Hegel, humans are subjects in so far as they participate in the dialectical progress of spirit; they are subjects in so far as they posit *objects* that are seen as cast-off refuse. For Marx, the subject could only consist of sensory human activity, of praxis, a praxis that can ultimately only be collective. In Brian Holmes’s words: ‘[the] attempt to give oneself one’s own law becomes a collective adventure’ (Holmes, 2003). But this collective adventure clearly can be *willed* only very partially by individuals; this insight took hold only very gradually during the post-war decades, parallel to the decline of the traditional working class, which would ultimately make the attempt of Bolshevik politics to forge a proletarian mass subject receiving its will from the Party look anachronistic. From the late 1960s, particularly from May ’68 onwards, many attempted to forge new forms of action beyond Party politics; Rosenberg, however, remained content with the depoliticized version of ‘the act’ as existential-aesthetic gesture within the Weberian domain of art that he had devised during the Cold War.

In a 1960 response to criticism from Mary McCarthy, Rosenberg drew a parallel between the radical artistic event taking place on the canvas and revolutionary political events: both demand on-the-spur decisions from viewers, who must play a part in these events if they are not to pass them by. The editors of *ARTnews* helpfully visualized Rosenberg’s parallel by juxtaposing black-and-white reproductions of abstract-expressionist paintings with photos of ‘students rioting in Japan’ (Rosenberg, 1960: 28). But Rosenberg insisted that artistic acts remain restricted to pictorial gestures on canvas; while there was a parallel between painterly and other acts, they should not be mixed. Rosenberg

rejected the 'logical' conclusions that Allan Kaprow drew from the theory of action painting with his happenings. Against happenings and events, Rosenberg now stated that '[to] dissolve "the barriers that separate art from life" is an impossible ideal – the dream of a world in which all actions are intended to be forgotten at their moment of fulfillment' (Rosenberg, 1969: 156). Rosenberg's response to the total event of May '68 was as blasé as his reaction to the earlier artistic happenings; this, surely, was retro-avant-gardism. In a piece about May '68 in Paris titled 'Surrealism in the Streets', Rosenberg remarked that the wall slogan 'Culture is the inversion of life' is itself culture, 'since it is inherited from the radical art movements of fifty years ago' (Rosenberg, 1972: 51). However, Rosenberg showed no sign of being aware of the Situationist International, whose agenda shines through from this slogan.

Why bring Rosenberg into the discussion at all? The aim surely cannot be to create a new cult of the artist as free subject par excellence – the way that action painting was ideologized in the Cold War. If anything, institutional critique has taught us that the institution is inside us – and in an age of networked subjectivities, '[the] individual is defined . . . by the pass codes that delineate his or her area of access' (Groys, 2011: 41). But it is precisely this entanglement in structures and scripts that seems to create a need for returning to the notion of the act, or of action – as evidenced by the vogue for that other action theorist of the post-war era, Hannah Arendt, and her triad of *work-labour-action*. This ultimately takes the form of a crypto-idealist progression: the dumb *animal laborans*, labouring simply to consume and survive, needs to be complemented by the *homo faber*, who makes durable things, and ultimately by human action and speech (Arendt, 1988 [1958]: 173). As Richard Sennett has noted, this leaves one rather empty-handed when trying to deal with the material world (Sennett, 2008: 6–7).

But was it not a crucial aspect of avant-garde practice to *transform labour*, to make labour itself the field of action? Rosenberg's aesthetic act seemingly abandoned this aim, focusing on the privileged act of the isolated painter-genius. However, via Kaprow and others, Rosenberg bequeathed a notion of action to a period in which the culturalization of the economy started in earnest, in which culture became integral to labour. The more interesting and productive interventions in the 'new labour' of culturalized capitalism go beyond sub-existentialist voluntarism; they explore and explode the daily performance of the dialectic of heteronomy and autonomy.

3. Aesthetic Practice beyond the New Labour

We live in a culture of performance, and this 'performance' is as ambiguous as Rosenberg's notion of 'acting'. Rosenberg's writings were characterized by a constant slippage that he himself detected in the work of

André Malraux: 'In Malraux's thinking, action constantly blends into acting: with historical script in hand, the only problem is which part to play and how to play it' (Rosenberg, 1970b: 165). Rosenberg was fascinated by Marx's passages on the 'Resurrected Romans' of the French Revolution; historical re-enactment could be all but indistinguishable from historical acts. And since socialism's basic proposition is 'an aesthetic one', the re-making of man and of society, why would such slip-pages not be possible and productive? (Rosenberg 1970b: 140–58). As for performance, today it stands both for one's quasi-dramatic *self-performance* and for one's economic achievement – and increasingly, the former is essential to the latter. This is what I call *general performance*. Using but not being limited to specific (artistic) disciplines, this economico-theatrical performance occupies different contexts and most of many people's time – it is *permanent* performance (Lütticken, 2012). In the 'social factory' of post-Fordism there is no *sortie de l'usine*. Performance is ongoing, in different constellations and with different degrees of publicness. It is modulated: languid stretches alternate with intense moments.

General performance is at the heart of the new labour of post-Fordism. Or is it really a kind of substitute for labour, as Hito Steyerl has argued? Is it really a kind of *occupation*, a form of keeping busy (Steyerl, 2012)? The new labour can look like occupation, but ends up being a new type of work with even less security and less return than old industrial labour. The new labour is marked by the *inability to distinguish* between labour and leisure, between work and occupation, between working hours and free time, between performance and life – and ultimately between objective economical pressures and subjectivities that are constantly updated, upgraded, remodelled. As part of the erosion of the distinction between labour and non-labour, looking and reading have become productive of value – often for others. We all work for free all the time – practically every time we go online.

Michael Asher's 1974 gesture in LA, a somewhat theatrical revelation of labour, also created an interplay of gazes between office workers and visitors, who were both turned into (or revealed to be) self-performers; the latter became momentary co-workers of the former. A 1998 project by Hans van Houwelingen might be read as an update and critique of Asher's work: for *Guard on Art*, Van Houwelingen had asylum seekers that were not legally permitted to work patrol a space in a Dutch museum, functioning as museum guards and as a reminder of the policing of borders and of access to legal work in western countries, and the sequestering of unwanted immigrants. The temporary museum guards in Van Houwelingen's project are the invisible reverse of neo-liberal self-performers – and Van Houwelingen gave them a degree of (highly problematic) visibility by turning them into actors. Such projects suggest that, under certain conditions, neoliberal performance may malfunction and

become, briefly, an act – and possibly the ‘act of imagination’ sketched by Negri (2011: xii, 31). It is through such acts, such acting, that performance may morph into something that is more than was bargained for, more than was programmed.

In Paul Chan’s words, a work of art works by not working at all (Chan, 2011). One specific form that this can take is that of a pointed intervention in today’s labour regime, which works only too well – except for the actual labourers. The ‘culturalization’ of labour in the form of general performance remains *sub-aesthetic* until its functioning is questioned, and until it is placed in conjunction with seemingly disparate forms of work. It is true that at times it appears as if the notion of work and labour have been reduced to an art-world preoccupation, having lost their galvanizing political potential in society at large (De Bloois, 2012). However, it would be an intellectual capitulation to present this historical deadlock as an immovable fate; there are possible points of departure for challenging it.⁶

In his critique of the idealist subject and its hubristic eradication of the non-identical, Adorno stressed the ‘primacy of the object’ (Adorno, 1970: 477). The subject is at least as much the refuse of the object as the other way round; object and subject are each other’s *effect*. The object in question does not have to be thought of as a single physical entity. The very working conditions under which the subject labours have an ‘objective’ character, and in the cultural field these conditions are also *performing conditions*. To act in and against these conditions is not some form of voluntarist ‘actionism’ that knows no obstacles, but precisely an attempt to make these conditions visible as an obstacle, as a form of resistance shapes the subject, both enabling and disabling it. What Benjamin Buchloh decries in the post-Fordist culture of self-performance is the *lack of friction* between subject and its other – an obstacle, something that is not identical to the subject (Buchloh, 2011). Of course, such friction is in fact produced all the time, but at the same time it is being neutralized and absorbed. In this sense, an act is a failed performance, a symptomatic interruption of *business as usual*. In other words: we are not talking about some grand existentialist-expressionist act, but about a glitch, about an interruption. Such an interruption can be caused voluntarily, but this is not a necessity; neither is the mere intention to create one sufficient.

If Melville’s character Bartleby and his refrain of ‘I would prefer not to’ are so popular these days in intellectual and artistic circles, is this not because Bartleby’s act seems to spring from some kind of unreasoned, dumb resistance? Bartleby hardly appears to be a free subject. His autonomy comes from being object-like; his act of resistance is one of radical passivity. In today’s performative economy, something as unplanned and unwilling as a burnout can become an act, a reclamation of self-legislation. The current interest in the agency of non-human things, as exemplified by the work of Bruno Latour, can thus also be regarded as a way of

conceptualizing autonomy in terms of actants that need not be human subjects – actants that are part of an assemblage in which moments of autonomy are distributed unevenly. The Latourian conception of the actant may seem to be as far removed from modern subject-centric theories of action as is possible, but it – its author's rejection of dialectics and critique notwithstanding – can also be interpreted as a further unpacking of antinomies that reach from modernity into the present.

There is of course a fundamental asymmetry in that the power of definition still rests with human actors; they decide when something qualifies as a 'proper' act. Of course some acts may go unrecognized, their effects not being acted upon by human subjects. Those acts may, in that sense, be autonomous from human autonomy. In fact, *all* acts by all possible actants are only ever partially assailable to the subject. They may be acts precisely by virtue of their resistance to the very conceptual frameworks that make it possible to theorize and analyse them in the first place. It is here that the aesthetic dimension truly comes into play. If autonomy cannot be a structural fact but appears in an act within certain limiting conditions, such an act can be termed aesthetic to the extent that it foregrounds its entanglement in heteronomy. If the aesthetic problematizes the relationship of autonomy and heteronomy, then this means that an act can be termed aesthetic insofar as it lets autonomy *appear* sensibly as a problem – in a world where subjectivities and objectifications are profoundly entangled, where different agencies coexist and collide.

There are any number of stern philosophical pronouncements concerning the (in)compatibility of the aesthetic and the political, in particular in so far as they involve different 'autonomies'. But while an act's aesthetic and political qualities may never quite converge, some acts may function in different registers simultaneously, or successively. It may precisely be the *passage* from one aspect to the other that is of most interest – both politically and aesthetically. A (seemingly) single act or action can be perceived politically as well as aesthetically. Who is to determine what the 'proper' register is for watching the chilling online video of UC Davis chancellor Katahi walking to her car through throngs of silent protesters after the notorious use of police brutality on campus?⁷ Even if an act appears to fall squarely within art, or within the realm of politics, it may migrate in unforeseen ways. Hito Steyerl's film *November* (2004) recalls how, as teenage girls, Steyerl and her friend Andrea Wolf would be influenced by images of women from cheap exploitation flicks, and tried to make their own feminist karate flick. Andrea Wolf later joined the Kurdish PKK as a real fighter. After Andrea's death, Steyerl then made a montage in which fictional and 'real' martial poses and performances were placed in questioning constellation, possibly generating a next generation of unforeseeable effects.

Here the notion of *aesthetic practice*, though perhaps a bit cumbersome, seems often more productive than that of art or artistic practice.

The ‘culturalization’ of labour in the form of general performance remains *sub-aesthetic* until its functioning is questioned; this, however, also means that cultural labour needs to be placed in conjunction with seemingly disparate forms of work. The outlines of a genuinely aesthetic economy only become visible once work stops working. In 2011, a number of artists called for a boycott of the Guggenheim Museum if the abysmal treatment of workers on the construction site of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi – the latest outlet of the McGuggenheim franchise – would continue. Walid Raad was one of the initiators, and Hans Haacke supported the action.⁸ Guggenheims in New York, in Bilbao, in Abu Dhabi: a system of architectural objects serving for the circulation of other (art) objects that thereby maintain or increase their value. Artists, critics and curators are supposed to play their part. But what if these labourers, these sub-subjects, were put on the agenda as stubborn and opaque persons, rather than as pure abstracted labour power? This political protest created a different kind of visibility by complicating the official image (of, in this case, the Guggenheim). In that respect it was – though not an artwork per se – a form of aesthetic practice.

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Notes

1. Adorno was of course acutely aware of modern art’s *Doppelcharakter* as being both autonomous and a (commodified) ‘fait social’, but this *Doppelcharakter* still distinguished modern art sharply from the culture industry, which was *only* a fait social.
2. I am greatly indebted to Osborne’s careful parsing of various misleading accounts of autonomy in relation to art. However, I would argue that his reading of the aesthetic, based on early Schiller and Adorno, does tend to privilege these positions without sufficient regard for their counterpoints. A return to Kant or to early Schiller can be helpful in analysing the emergence of the foundational antinomies of the aesthetic, but one should be careful not to create a new cult of origins. I see no reason to privilege Kant over Schiller, and the early Schiller of the Kallias letters is not any less problematical than the ‘late’ Schiller of the *Letters on Aesthetic Education*, just as Adorno’s melancholic modernism is not less problematical than the avant-gardism of Benjamin’s ‘Kunstwerk’ essay. These positions are all part of the moving constellation – the set of interacting antinomies – that is the aesthetic regime.

3. 'Lässt überhaupt keine Autonomie der Kunst ohne Verdeckung der arbeit sich denken, so wird diese im Hochkapitalismus... problematisch und zum Programm.' (Author's translation)
4. Fraser contributed significantly to establishing the term 'institutional critique', using it in her 1985 essay on Louise Lawler (Fraser, 2005a [1996]; see her discussion of this in Fraser, 2005b). The term had occasionally been employed before, but such usage was relatively imprecise and isolated.
5. Rosenberg tantalizingly states that those artists whose work completely matches a theory are usually not the 'deepest'; while most people thought that the essay was largely based on Pollock, this remark suggests that De Kooning, whom Rosenberg admired, was in fact a greater painter for being less of an action painter (Rosenberg, 1970a [1952]: 35). One may say that Rosenberg's writings constitute a missed encounter with works by both De Kooning and Pollock as sensuous fact; yet these works, in their factuality, are also a missed encounter with Rosenberg's writings.
The developments of the late 1950s and 1960s forced Rosenberg to argue that, after all, it was crucial that the act *did* result in material traces. 'In emphasizing the creative act rather than the object created, Action painting, or – by the testimony of Allan Kaprow—the *idea* of Action painting, led logically to the Happening. Action painting is ambiguous; it asserts the primacy of the creative act, but it looks to the object, the painting, for a confirmation of the worth of that act... Action painting is subjective, yet it is bound to a *thing*, even though a thing in process' (Rosenberg, 1969: 224, emphasis in original). While Kaprow had drawn logical conclusions from the notion of action painting, 'in art it is always a mistake to push a concept to its logical conclusion' (Rosenberg, 1969b: 226).
6. For instance, the group ASK! (Actie Schone Kunsten), founded in the context of Casco's project *The Grand Domestic Revolution*, sought to make visible the 'invisible labour' of domestic workers engaged in a struggle for rights. The political and/or aesthetic qualities of such undertakings must of course be evaluated.
7. See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8775ZmNGFY8>.
8. See: <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/gulflabor/>.

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