

NONSITE

# Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism

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Whatever previous ages might have fancied, we are wise enough to know that the work of art is a commodity like any other. Chances are that we don't have any very clear idea what we mean by that. Marx, however, does.

Autonomy names the fact not that artworks are free from external circumstances, but that precisely those external circumstances are actively taken up by works of art in ways that are irreducibly normative.

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## The Compulsion of Sedimented Form: Aesthetic Autonomy and Culture Industry

Marina Vishmidt

For Adorno, the market existence of an artwork was extraneous; it always came second, analytically speaking. For Nicholas Brown, it is simply an unavoidable parameter, forming its condition of legibility as an artwork; thus, institutional definitions cease to have traction. This is why Brown can pursue an inquiry wholly indebted to Adorno, Kant and Hegel and discuss figures such as Ben Lerner, *The Wire*, and the White Stripes, a trajectory he has been working on for several years through essays published in this journal and elsewhere. As with those philosophies of the aesthetic, for Brown the stakes of autonomy as a social ontology of art lies nearly exclusively on the side of reception, not production; or, perhaps more to the point, in the nature of the artwork that mediates reception and production. Thus the book juxtaposes one form of immanence with another: the historically unprecedented immanence of the market to artworks may be confronted or suspended when works succeed in realizing an *immanent* purposiveness, and thereby make their claims to aesthetic autonomy. One of the primary vehicles for this claim, in Brown's

account, is genre, and the significant discussion on this is found in the chapters cited above.

Brown may not be talking about visual art as his referent for "art," but this is not only to demonstrate that autonomy can extend to artefacts of popular culture, but so can the category of "art," underlining Burger's thesis that art and autonomy in modernity are different names for the same thing. Autonomy is the ideological (de-historicized and essentialised) social fact of an exemption from the relations of capitalist production. Precisely because it is a social fact, or, more strongly, a social ontology, it cannot be transcended ethically, strategically or through any variant of "critical practice." This is a state of affairs whose disavowal has become consensual in contemporary art. But if the modernist commitment to autonomy is revealed as aesthetic ideology, i.e. an imaginary relationship to the real conditions of existence, that doesn't bring a contemporary commitment to heteronomy any closer to truth. Like modernist autonomy, it's a productive ideology, with autonomy ever ritually slain by those constituencies of the institution of art that are committed to extending art's capacities beyond its walls, or re-situating it as yet another managerial "competence" useful in any manner of predicaments. In this regard, it's to be noted that the emphasis on experience and interaction in art that tends towards "social practice," as has been critiqued by Claire Bishop and others in recent years, as well as the spectacle economy of "mirror rooms" and ice cream museums, is taken up by Brown as an equation of experience with the heteronomy of the market, with "external contingent compulsion" rather than internally generated meaning – a meaning which is excess to the medium or the institutions that condition it.

One of the more fascinating turns in the argument is its foray into a value-form theory spin on the determination of the artwork's autonomy as internal law vs external demand. This is sketched out early on in the introduction although not developed elsewhere. Specifically, it is intended as the response to a question that paraphrases, as it were, the question of autonomy: why is the social ontology of art different from the social ontology of all other commodities? The difference is surprisingly simple. Using Marx's circuits of c-m-c' and m-c-m', Brown shows us that in the first circuit, the commodity is an end in itself and its exchange is mediated by money; this corresponds to use-value. In the second, the telos is money, mediated by the commodity, and this corresponds to exchange-value. The difference, however, is set out in affective terms: "What we have arrived at is an entity that embodies, and must seek to compel, conviction and an entity that seeks to provoke interest in its beholder—or, perhaps, all kinds of different interest from different beholders." (p. 6) Although the gulf here is seen to be an ontological one, the two circuits can also be seen, as they are in Marx, as different moments of the same

process, or, as Brown puts it, the same process considered from different standpoints. Such dialectical agility shows the mediating hand of the "systematic dialectic" and the return to Hegel that has pervaded some corners of Anglophone Marxist theory since discussion and translation of the *wertkritik* publications started to emerge in roughly the past decade, a project that Brown has also been dedicated to (Brown, Larsen, Nilges, Robinson, 2014). What it also does is give a potentially solid Marxist theoretical footing to the book's orthodoxy vis-à-vis the thinkers of aesthetic autonomy, which is to say, the insistence that the question transpires purely on the side of circulation.

The close readings that comprise the substantive part of the book are each persuasive exercises in "reading for autonomy" as the tracking of internal coherence in art works, whether in the visual arts, novels, television series, or albums, with respect to their participation in the social, historical and formal conditions of their "genre." The innovativeness of the approach, at heart a classical one, is in the possibilities thrown up by bringing the autonomy thesis out from the hothouse of high modernist art into a much wider field and into the present. *Autonomy* is thus concerned to show there much life yet in the category and the problems it identifies. At the same time, there is a moment in the epilogue, which vies with the introduction in density and abundance of conceptual energy, where an opening towards a differently articulated notion of autonomy is made. This is the discussion of "purposiveness without purpose" as it reflects on Roberto Schwarz's renowned essay on Kafka's *Cares of a Family Man*, and its uncanny homunculus, the spool-person Odradek. While the character may represent the impossible, phantom underside of the "bourgeois order," what is more interesting, according to Brown, is its evacuation of the punitive structures of that order: "a lumpenproletariat without hunger and without fear of the police." (p. 181) As such, the figure of Odradek is an analogue to the "internal, unemphatic other" (Brown) of the artwork, in its purposelessness and its vague menace to all right-thinking. But what if its excess, its negativity were to be followed as worklessness, as the negativity of labour? Neither the dimension of labour as internal negativity to capitalist valorisation, nor the art-adjacent psychology of "human capital" formation, are broached in the version of autonomy as strictly artwork-immanent here. But neither the immanence of the contemporary artwork to the cultural market nor its institutionally underwritten internal coherence can really be grasped when neither producers or consumers—the subjects for such objects—come into the picture. Can an object be autonomous when autonomy as a disposition or a relation becomes unavailable to its viewers, to take up Brown's contention that market saturation has now engulfed pretty much everything? As Catherine Rottenberg notes, "Human beings are

remade as specks of capital so that our relationship to ourselves and others becomes one of capital appreciation. Our relationships are perceived as forms of capital that need to be invested wisely in order to enhance the self's overall value." It could be argued that if there is no space left for an autonomy of the subject, the autonomy of the object becomes something akin to a Zen koan. The internal, unemphatic other to capitalist values becomes a talisman of another civilization or spacetime, not ours.