Radical Autonomy
Art in the Era of Process Management

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Now that art is being deployed more and more in public / private development processes, people expect it to have a clearly described effect. The artist's autonomous position is seriously undermined by this requirement – which, in Jeroen Boomgaard's view, is a bad thing. He argues the case for a radicalization of the autonomy of art. That alone will allow art to wrest itself free of processes where the law of the strongest holds sway, and so become truly effective.

At first sight, art seems to be doing quite well for itself, particularly outside its traditional spheres of action. There are plenty of commissions for work in the public domain and for the enhancement of new buildings, and artists regularly play a part in landscape and urban redevelopment projects. This erosion of boundaries between art, architecture and design seems like the accomplishment of a longstanding dream. Many avant-garde ideals are fulfilled in the progressive integration of art with society. But this goes along with new obligations and duties, and these tend to be projected almost blindly onto the whole field of the visual arts. The reduced autonomy of the artist in the field of publicly commissioned art results in problematizing the autonomy of art in general. Autonomous art is out of favour, and with it the widely held view that art, if quite important, is on the whole a dispensable frill. [1] This idea of mandatory inutility is an outworn idea. Art is now supposed to serve a purpose, to achieve an effect, to 'do something', much more than in the past.

A salient illustration of the new tendency is the demand for interactive art. Visual art that explicitly seeks interaction exists in many kinds and on many scales. They range from works of art that raise their roguish caps on command like pathetic circus chimps, to substantial projects that elicit public participation in various forms and at multiple levels. A much-favoured medium is currently the website, embodying as it does the ideal of endless and unbridled interactivity. What these forms of expression have in common is the intention to elicit an active interchange between the work of art or the artist on the one hand, and the spectator, target group or general public on the other. The work of art is no longer permitted simply to exist and be viewed or experienced; it demands a reaction and reacts in its own right. The significance of the work is placed more than ever within the spectator's sphere of responsibility. Without his presence or participation, there would seem to be no point in the work's existence.

Interactivity is nothing new. Twentieth-century avant-gardes, particularly those of the 1920s and of the '60s and '70s, sought to achieve direct contact with the spectator as a way of overcoming the existing boundaries of art. It was a form of interactivity that required patience on the part of the viewer, who often seemed more like a victim of the artist's imaginative whims than a participant with something of his own to contribute. A good illustration of this passive kind of interactivity is provided by Tinguely's mechanical objects. These typically consist of a big red button connected to a monstrous machine which flails wildly and makes a terrifying din. The public in this case serves as no more

than an agent to activate the mechanism which then proceeds entirely in accordance with its own built-in logic. The work celebrates interactivity while at the same time taking it to the absurd. Yet more complex forms of interaction, such the Happening, similarly roped the spectator into their own artistic scenario, rather than attempting to scan the wavelength of the audience. In the 1960s and '70s, autonomy was more important than interaction.

The Equivocality of Autonomy

That rather half-hearted interactivity illustrates the ambiguity of the avant-gardes of those years. The autonomous status of art was upheld, although the goal was the transgression of both artistic and social frontiers. But this duality is inherent to autonomy itself. The belief in artistic independence arose in a period when it was seen as art's constant duty to draw attention to the prevailing shortcomings, to proclaim truth and beauty in a world that did not want to hear. Surrounded by a dishonest, unjust society, art stood for the Utopia of universal and total communication, although without being understood by more than a handful of insiders. [2] Art bore a heavy burden – or pretended to – and paid the price with poverty and isolation. Although the contemporary critique of autonomy might lead us to think otherwise, autonomy did not mean that art was supposed not to be about anything, or that its only subject matter could be the artist's own inner life. Autonomy meant above all that visual art tried to unify its form and content in such a way that it could no longer be treated as a handy means for illustrating a moral or a story. Autonomous art does not withdraw from the world but tries to comprehend it by artistic means. The communicative or even democratic ideal implicit in this aim is the notion that art's visual language not only touches on the essence of life, but is, precisely for that reason, universally understandable. However, since its reach and the comprehension it received fell short of expectations, the impression arose that art existed solely for art's sake. Autonomy changed from being the promise that art held out into the proof of its unwillingness or incapacity to fulfil that promise.

Autonomy was, and still is, seen by many artists as a self-imposed destiny, but like most things in life it is more a matter of fate than of free will. In bourgeois and generally democratic societies, art, as explained, fulfils the role of a conscience and a contemplative response, of a representative of those higher things which risk getting lost in an existence gauged to functionality. That role is the function of art, and the independence to which art lays claim is an essential component of Western society's self-legitimization. The bourgeois society can see itself in art's mirror as good and caring, because it fosters a highly appreciated area within itself (even while not spending a penny on it) where higher values are professed and where dependency on the market does not hold its normal sway. By placing an emphasis on individual choice, however, this ideology simultaneously underwrites the basic principle of market forces. This double illusion, of the freedom of the individual and of unimpeded universal communication, was the point on which the avant-gardes concentrated their attack. But because personal, autonomous freedom of choice remained uppermost for many artists, the duality was perpetuated and the avant-gardist output could still be unproblematically absorbed by the market. This tractable compliance meant, however, that the autonomous position of art still played an important ideological role.

Happiness – Right Now

Patience with autonomy seems to have run out. Autonomy has become a reproach and is considered one of the foremost reasons for art not functioning properly. Some people have placed it on a line with incomprehensibility, egocentricity and navel-gazing. Art is now called upon to make good its communicative pretensions, to fulfil its promise immediately and to cease hiding in a domain where it responds and is responsible only to itself. It must give up its aloofness and show genuine commitment in the form of reaction and interaction. Art, in other words, must play along.[3] This new brief would at first sight seem to liberate art from the ideological shackles the bourgeois society has held it captive in. Art is no longer expected to proclaim higher values or hold out the promise of future happiness, but to pursue direct involvement in the realization of a better world here and now. The ideal of the avant-gardes of the past has at last some prospect of success, in a way that overshadows the achievements of those avant-gardes.

It is not immediately clear where this aversion to autonomy and explicit desire for interaction come from, or what their further implications are. One could after all argue that, as a symbolic system, art is always interactive, that it always communicates.[4] And precisely because art's role is not an entirely self-chosen one and because it has a clear relevance to society, there is an existing framework within which it can be interpreted and it can enter into a dialogue with us. When we come across a work of art, we do not know exactly what to expect of it, but we do realize that it is something that demands a special effort of attention. The act of interpretation is part of the work itself, which is even changed as a result, for our interpretation is passed on within the institution of art quite independently of anything the artist wanted or intended. The rejection of this form of interaction and the demand for a more emphatic way of reacting implies that the symbolic meaning that art clearly used to have is no longer understood or no longer recognized. This gives rise to ironic situations, for example that the desire for art which proffers clearly unifying symbols proves the decline of art's symbolic value; or that this expectation hence fits seamlessly into the tendency discussed here to require art to have a definite repercussion or effect.

The confusion there has been about the nature of the new symbols art is required to provide, typifies the vagueness surrounding the desired interactivity. Despite a requirement of relevance, art still stands for the unconventional, the unexpected, the indefinable and the creative; in short, for everything we do not presume to encounter in everyday life. But the purpose is no longer an acute analysis of today's deficiencies or the promise of happiness in a future world. The deficiency must be compensated, and the promise must be fulfilled immediately. A wholly improved world is no longer the objective: a small contribution to local satisfaction is sufficient. But the modesty of the expectation should not be allowed to obscure the arduous character of the task. The dualism which art so long suffered and which it formerly tried to justify to itself in the form of autonomy, is, especially now that autonomy is no longer available as a buffer, more than ever a hallmark of art. The artist is required to provide originality and surprise, something that is not on the programme; but it must still meet our expectations, take account of our wishes and be grist to the mill of today's amusement economy – without appealing to autonomy or serving an agenda of its own. This has not made the artist's task any easier.

Two Birds with One Stone

The impact of the changed job description for art is conspicuous – not only in the upsurge of socially-involved, well-meaning projects 'for the people', but at a more fundamental level, in its relation to time. Scarcely any work is still made in which the temporal dimension does not play some part or other. If the work does not simply move, then something inevitably grows or rots away; and if the spectator is not required to sit through it he must at least play along with it. Time, in the sense of a shared moment, is included in art's brief as an opportunity to connect with the public. Shared time is less permissive than a shared place. By engaging with the spectator for a little while, the work of art declares its solidarity: it can no longer be indifferent to the presence of the Other. The preference for a shared moment rather than a shared place not only enables art to offer its public an altered temporal experience, but subjects art to a regime of movement and change – a regime that may be considered revealing about our society. [5]

The crucial political trend of recent decades is the government's systematic withdrawal from the guiding and shaping of society. This has not only resulted in a new social model but in an entirely different dynamic. The discipline of process management which has laid claim to the relinquished territory places advancement of the process before all else. Principles and points of departure are seen as barriers to progress, and specific interests are the only thing that counts. The old participation model seems to have been radicalized, in the sense that everyone is now able to become involved. There is no longer a clear central authority which sets itself up as the mouthpiece and custodian of the public interest; rather, there is a non-centrally governed process in which each player is free to stand up for his own rights. This ostensible consummation of democracy has side effects that achieve the exact opposite of what the model suggests. All the disparate interests are taken into account, but the linchpin on which the process turns is The Market. That linchpin is primary in controlling the continuing motion but is itself never at issue; it is the obscure point whose influence prevails at all levels but which never comes up for discussion as an interest to be defended. The consequence of this implicit dynamic is that the process tends to steer in the direction of those parties with the greatest market share; but, since everyone is implicated, the result may be portrayed as a natural outcome. [6]

The government's role nowadays seems reduced to the launching of absurd, impractical, electorate-serving efforts at palliating the symptoms, while major infrastructural decisions are left almost entirely at the mercy of market forces. [7] But that is not the whole truth: the government also explicitly concerns itself with the progression and legitimization of the model. The demand, backed by subsidies, for interactive and often participatory art projects is a consequence of official concern about malfunctioning of the process model. Not participating in society has become more than ever a social sin. Here, too, it is not so much the outcome of taking part that matters as the participation itself; and reaction or interaction is considered proof of participation. By officially declaring everyone to be a participant and by condemning or even punishing non-participation in the name of public interest, the government manages to mask its abandonment of that public interest. Involving artists in this undertaking kills two birds with one stone. They are able to breathe new life into the exhausted participation models, and at the same time artists are stripped of their role as official outsiders and hence of their symbolic payload that once held out the promise of a better world.

It all seems so neat: art with a function, and artists included in the planning process. But this development robs art of much of its dissident potential. In the best case it may introduce an artistic dimension, although art will be the first to fall by the wayside in the drive towards the completion and budgetary discipline of the project under which it falls. [8] In the worst case, art will form part of the end result, and will rightly be condemned for trading in the promise of a better world for a pragmatism that accepts the misery as the natural state of affairs.

Radical Autonomy

The requirement of effect and the impatience with autonomy may be seen as symptoms of the decline of a traditional bourgeois society. Not much can be done about it, nor is it something we would wish to go back to. That does not mean that we must unthinkingly embrace all the phenomena that go along with this change. In a society that seems to have abandoned most of its values in favour of untrammelled market action, returning to artistic autonomy could have its merits. Especially now that the ideological implications of autonomy are fading, revival could bring its inherent contribution into play. The role imposed on art by the bourgeois ideology was, after all, more than a product of that society. Defining autonomy as the mere legitimization of a defective system would not only strip works of art of some of their critical potential, but would eliminate any prospect of changing the system from within. Autonomy allowed art to make the idea of a different and possibly better society seem credible. It also became possible for the avant-gardes to test the limits of that autonomy, and hence of the dominant system, by putting interactivity and direct involvement on the agenda.

The special position art once claimed is nowadays translated into the requirement for the amenable alternative. The indefinable and the unconventional, the surprising and the tongue-in-cheek, and even the critical and the subversive are all usable, because they do not stand in the way of the fundamental law of movement and progress. Indeed, the artistic alternative may succeed in furnishing the current state of affairs with a conscience, or in making it seem more light-hearted, without actually changing anything about it. Society proclaims its tolerance by allowing even the most dissonant expressions to thrive. The participation of the artist who has relinquished his autonomous position shifts the spotlight onto process management as a natural, unassailable process. In this situation art loses its visibility and its legitimacy. The huge artificial structures that define social life are not only capable of incorporating or even rewarding any form of rejection, but they leave no room for art, which is simply no match for the experience of economy's lavish excesses of artificiality. [9] All art can do is counter these with something which is not born of our longings or which is not explicitly calculated to satisfy our wishes. When interactivity threatens to become obligatory, autonomy becomes useful again for probing the limits of the system. Only an autonomous work that relates to its context, but which chooses its own time and place within that context, is capable of leaving the world of artificiality and of revealing something that lies beyond the limits of our expectations.

Opting for autonomy may have another benefit. The requirement of effect and interaction which is placed on art conceals the facts that the effectiveness of process management primarily benefits the market, and that interaction with all the individual interests is little more than a diversionary tactic. The public interest that it claims to serve is nothing but shameless self-interest and a case of the right of the strongest prevailing. An autonomous work of art can, in this context, not only succeed in unmasking self-interest as the dominant principle, but can impart new authority to the symbolic freedom that was formerly the hallmark of autonomy. Because the artist chooses of his own free will to create an entirely personal world, he shows that it is possible to choose radically. And because he places that out of self-interest-created world in the real world as a symbol of the possible, he succeeds in charging the idea of public interest with new energy.[10] The power of that gesture lies in its real presence. Even if the work is ephemeral, even if it is little more than the brief pleasure of a shared meal, it differs fundamentally from the world of self-indulgence we create for ourselves because it adds something new. The work of art produces presence instead of consuming it.

Interactivity, process art, social involvement: all these things are possible. They only become truly effective, however, when they depend not on the calculated effect of process management but on a radicalized autonomy. The autonomous work of art meets the

demand for the abnormal, for the different, which is capable of feeding the imagination once more while doing so in a way that contradicts expectations. Radical autonomy can play along with every process; the place, the public and the discourse are all factors that can be a part of it. But the radically autonomous work of art will always add something which transgresses the borders of the context and adds a value that cannot simply be classified as a pragmatic benefit. The artist's symbolic act can consequently propagate the idea of freedom even more strongly than it could in the days when autonomy was still the hallmark of art – if only because that autonomy no longer has an ideological background. The autonomous action of the artist depicts the world as we do not yet know it. Interaction can only follow panting in its footsteps.

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Footnotes

1. An idea recently expressed once more by the departing head of the Council for Culture, Winnie Sorgdrager, in *de Volkskrant*, 29-12-2005.
2. Yves Michaud uses the term 'communicative Utopia' in connection with the history of autonomy in 'Het einde van kunstutopie', *Yang*, volume 39, no. 3 (Ghent, November 2003), 259-381. Other primary texts on artistic autonomy and the attempts of the avant-garde to break away from it are Martin Damus, *Funktionen der Bildenden Kunst im Spätkapitalismus* (Frankfurt am Main, 1973); Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt am Main, 1974); Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass. / London, 1996).
3. There are far too many instances to name. Suffice it to note the appeal rising from the publication *Nieuw symbolen voor Nederland*, ed. Rutger Wolfson (Amsterdam, 2005) discussed by Lex ter Braak elsewhere in this issue of *Open*.
4. I am not concerned here with claiming, in analogy with Bourriaud, a certain capacity for art. It is rather a fundamental aspect of symbolic systems, of which art, like language, is one. That the interpretation is sometimes extremely limited, understood by few, and possibly serves as a distinguishing feature in Bourdieu's sense, is another matter altogether.
5. See for instance 'Kunstenplan Openbare Ruimte Tilburg 2002-2010' (Tilburg Plan for Arts in the Public Domain), published under the title *Kort* (Tilburg, 2001).
6. See also BAVO (Gideon Boie and Matthias Pauwels), *De metropool of je leven!* (The Metropolis or Your Life!), private publication, undated.
7. At the time of writing, the Dutch Minister for Integration and Immigration Rita Verdonk has just uttered the ridiculous proposal to make the Dutch language mandatory in the streets of the Netherlands. Presumably this idea will be long forgotten by publication time, but it is nonetheless typical of the present government.
8. This aspect comes out clearly in a dialogue among several leading players in the public-private collaborations. See Jaap Huisman, 'Kansen en risico's zijn getrouwd met elkaar', *Smaak*, vol. 5, no. 24 (December 2005), 6-11. It appears from this article that artistic (or 'soft', as the article calls them) values have little prospect of survival in collaborations of this kind.
9. See also Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären III. Schäume* (Frankfurt am Main, 2004), 812-813.
10. A good example of this is presented by the work of Thomas Hirschhorn, who rejects the notion of interactivity and instead emphasizes activity. His work never complies with external expectations or wishes. On this, see Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October 110* (Fall 2004), 51-80.

Tags

Art Discourse, Autonomy, Public Space

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