# Autonomous Art as Process
## Reflections on the Autonomy Project

*Steven ten Thije*

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**From 7 to 9 October 2011, the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven held a symposium on autonomy. Steven ten Thije, one of the symposium's initiators and organizers, reports on the urgency of this project. Particularly during this period of drastic cutbacks that are being borne by a majority of the population, it is necessary to reformulate the position held by autonomous art and its associated activities in our society.**

*Politics occurs when those who 'have no' time take the time necessary to front up as inhabitants of a common space and demonstrate that their mouths really do emit speech capable of making pronouncements on the common which cannot be reduced to voices signalling pain.*

— Jacques Rancière, 'Aesthetics as Politics', p. 24

The Autonomy Project took place at a turning point, in which a roughly ten-year-period of fluorescence, characterized by internationalization and a tight interweaving of theory and practice, was being fundamentally reconsidered. A period of fluorescence that to a large extent was the result of the inspired policy of the Mondriaan Foundation and of the Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture (Fonds BKVB). The subsequent merging of the Mondriaan Foundation and the Fonds BKVB into the Mondriaan Fund, the withdrawal of financing for international showpieces like postgraduate schools, and the stopping of the subsidy for SKOR| Foundation for Art and Public Domain – and consequently for art magazines like Open – are the bitter signs of a chapter that is coming to an end. Until the cutbacks, it seemed as if there was social support for the activities developed by the art sector. Now, with a one-seat majority, it is clear that that support is no longer there – to which it must be added that general support for the cutbacks in art and culture is greater than the majority in the chamber that advocates them. It confronts professionals active in the Dutch art sector with the question of why there is so little support for art and culture in the public domain. And following upon that, what is the legitimization of (autonomous) art in a democratic society? The Autonomy Project's urgency lay in the contribution it made to answering these questions.

These questions were not explicitly posed as such when the Autonomy Project had its informal kickoff in March of 2010. For the group of people involved in the project, the autonomy of art was sooner a kind of 'past imperfect', which despite many objections kept popping up again in the practice of making, mediating and thinking about visual art. Autonomy had turned into a 'dumpster' concept, an all-purpose label for the necessary, yet frustrating, distance between the art world and society. This dumpster concept was both friend and foe. On the one hand, autonomy stood for a formalistic approach to art that stuck it in its own playing corner, where it could do nothing but harmlessly conduct an endless and often boundless discussion about 'quality'. Notwithstanding all noble intentions, 'autonomy' functioned as a shield to hide behind in this discussion. On the other

hand, it was clear that socially involved art also needed a certain freedom in order to be able to exist. However delicate, art was still a domain of its own that must not be entirely absorbed by the general political discussion. Autonomy remained the shield, but for protecting something else. But what and how?

Initially, the manner in which the members of the Autonomy Project went about answering this question was fairly abstract, more of a specialist discussion between a number of professionals than a general public debate. But because we were posing it in a society which a year later so radically questioned the importance of this space, we were in a very short time forced to bring the answer back to the concrete political reality of the Netherlands in the year 2011. (To give an example of the turnabout that has taken place: The conservative-liberal party VVD, which only five years ago had published a liberal manifesto in which 1 per cent of the GNP was relegated to art and culture – back then this meant an increase of more than 40 per cent in the cultural budget – took the standpoint during the deliberations on the latest cultural budget that, in an ideal world, art doesn't need subsidizing at all!) In this tense political climate, our research on autonomy turned into an investigation into the very same question that is so painfully urgent now: What is the significance for society of an 'autonomous art', and how do we realize that significance?

### Ideological Position

The symposium at the beginning of October 2011 ultimately became the place to seek an answer to the question of art's social significance. Within the context of this paper, it is useful to spend a moment on two of those contributions. The first is cultural philosopher Kees Vuyk's description of the historical development of the Dutch arts and cultural policy; the second is Rancière's analysis of the relation between art and society. In his contribution, Vuyk gave a small tour d'horizon of the development of art and cultural policy in the Netherlands since the Second World War. The crux of his argument was that Dutch cultural policy during the Cold War took an ideological position within the larger political-ideological conflict between the 'free' West and the communistic East. For the West, free, autonomous art was the perfect counterpart to the applied, social-realist art promoted by the Soviet Union. All states in the West were thus ideologically obligated to accommodate a free art. While this did not lead to a complete absence of debate on art, the approach to that debate was not the question of whether an autonomous art deserved a place in the public domain, but was mainly directed at the question of how to interpret that place. For indeed, political support for autonomous art did not stem from a debate on art itself, but was a paragraph, as it were, in the broader ideological contract to which the Western states had committed themselves. When this contract lost its validity in the 1990s, art's place in the public domain initially remained unaffected, seeing as there was neither a lot of money nor a lot of votes to be gained politically by tinkering with it, until the situation changed with the rise of an ultra rightwing political party, the PVV. What the PVV stirred up is not only an awareness that the majority of the electorate is indifferent to art and culture at this point in time, but also that all other parties now suddenly have had to rethink their motives for considering art socially important in the first place. The present situation therefore not only shows that a conservative, popular, neoliberal politics can make relatively heartless cuts in the cultural sector, but also that there is no solid political counter argument affording broad insight into why an autonomous art is a great social good.

Finding a political argument for an autonomous art is therefore of vital importance. One of those who have made a start at this is Jacques Rancière, whose work was pivotal for the entire symposium. [1] The value of Rancière's work is that he describes art not as an entity in itself, nor as a part of a more universal quest for knowledge, but as a structural component in a democratic political process. Rancière observes that politics does not so much consist

of a struggle for power, but rather is about the struggle to be 'heard'. He gets this notion from Aristotle and his description of man as a 'political animal'. What makes man political is his gift of speech, which Aristotle describes as 'the capacity of placing the just and the unjust in common, whereas all the animal has is a voice to signal pleasure and pain'. In Rancière's definition, politics is the process in which voices that at first only seem to be a personal, 'animalistic' expression of pleasure or pain turn into an expostulation that makes a pronouncement on justness or unjustness. The misconception about politics that Rancière addresses here is that the discussion about what is good or bad does not only take place in the domain of reason. Politics is not a rational discussion about standards and values, but a process in which emotions and experiences must be translated into a sensible argument that says something about the whole.

In the political process, the private becomes public, which means that something that initially was not rational translates itself into something that is rational. And that is essentially an aesthetic process in which 'autonomy' plays a determining role. In order to explain this, Rancière turns to Schiller and his letters on the aesthetic education of mankind. In a fictitious gallery, Schiller describes a meeting with a Greek statue and remarks that the statue 'rests in itself' and therefore radiates a certain passivity. The statue expects nothing of the viewer and is indifferent, autonomous. The viewer is thus capable of reflecting on this passivity, because he or she does not have to look at the statue from a pre-defined agenda (the statue wants this or that) and gains the space to freely speculate on the meaning of the statue. It is this open space that is necessary in order to hear someone whose voice initially was not understood as being politically significant. The political aspect of autonomous art, according to Rancière, therefore does not so much lie in a work's political content, but in the space that the work creates through its passivity so that people can be open for arguments that at first were irrational and invisible. Autonomous art's creation of a space for this process makes it an indispensable component of the political process.

### The Role of Theory

If we go along with Rancière, it seems as if the art sector in the past ten or 20 years sooner has moved in the opposite direction, and that theorization about the public aspect has gradually entered the almost closed and private context of the art world. Even when there is much talk about the public domain in a certain segment of the art world, the language and manner in which it is discussed maintains the gap between art and society. The severity of this reproach must be put in perspective, however, for the neoliberal 1990s produced a technocratic politics in which hardly any traces of the political process described by Rancière were left to be found. That also made the free space of autonomous art one of the last places where many people felt they could still truly speak about public aspects. Although this is very understandable, it does not take away the fact that, as Vuyk argues, this space had been maintained by an obsolete ideological construct from the Cold War that perished for good in the populist first decade of this century. The sudden (for that's what it has felt like to many people) vanishing of support for practices developed over the years has forced those who are involved, in which I include myself, to reformulate the place that autonomous art, and the activities we now associate with it, has in society. In doing so, we must critically examine whether the present method really does justice to this place.

The Autonomy Project has been a step in this direction – perhaps a small one, but purposeful. It has shown that we should not treat autonomy as a 'given' or as a self-evident privilege, but should realize that it describes a process that is necessary for our form of politics. From Rancière's analysis, it is understandable that this process consists of a combination of experience and language: politics is literally the translation of the private into the public. And the fact that the discussion on art and society is characterized by a

certain degree of abstraction and specialism is also not insurmountable. The material is often complex, and there must be space in order to investigate this complexity in all of its subtleties; the free speculating done by the visitor in Schiller's gallery does not come about just like that, but requires effort and dedication. This doesn't take away the fact that the search for subtlety and complexity must not become set in a methodical shutting out of the rest of the world. There must be places where the translation to society at large is the central focus and where non-professionals can learn from the discussions in art or can participate in them in a constructive and meaningful manner. If the existing system has to be consigned to the rubbish heap, let's try to set up the new system in such a way that political parties can clearly see how the social significance of an autonomous art finds its way back into society by investing more in the areas where the translation can take place. In order to do that, the art sector will not only have to look critically at society, but also at itself – which will not be easy, but if it does this, it might emerge from the storm stronger than before.

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## Footnotes

1. Jacques Rancière, 'Aesthetics as Politics', in: *Jacques Rancière, Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 19-44.

## Tags

Autonomy, Art Discourse

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