Autonomy and Its Contradictions

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More than anybody else, artist Andrea Fraser has for decades painstakingly investigated the concept of autonomy, basing her work on the analyses of the cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. She discovered that the different dimensions of autonomy are contradicting one another more and more sharply in their functioning. A more meaningful autonomy can be developed by approaching the concept from a psychoanalytic perspective, provided that certain conditions are accepted.

The conditions and contradictions of artistic autonomy have been a central concern of mine since the 1990s. I began my 1996 essay 'What's Intangible, Transitory, Mediating, Participatory, and Rendered in the Public Sphere, Part II', by enumerating four different aspects or 'dimensions' of artistic autonomy. First, I listed the 'aesthetic dimension', including 'the freedom of art works from rationalization with respect to specific use or function, whether moral, economic, political, social, material or emotional'. Second, the 'economic dimension', which emerged with 'the relatively anonymous bourgeois market and with it, the artistic commodity; the consequent separation of sites of production and consumption and with it, the separation of production from the demands it meets or satisfies in the places and processes of consumption'. Third, the 'social dimension': the autonomy of art as a field which, like the autonomy of other fields, in Pierre Bourdieu's analysis, is a condition of its capacity to impose 'its own norms on both the production and the consumption of its products' and to exclude norms and criteria dominant in other fields – especially the economic and political fields'. And, finally, the 'political dimension', which I frame in terms of 'the freedom of speech and conscience and the right to dissident opinion'. [1]

My characterization of the 'aesthetic' and 'political' dimensions of autonomy in that essay are perhaps particularly in need of elaboration, and I would now also add to this list what might be described, broadly, as a psychological dimension of autonomy. However, I still believe that any meaningful and productive discussion of autonomy in relation to art must include a clear articulation of which aspects of autonomy – these or others – are at issue, and how these aspects of autonomy are interrelating. The challenge that I became aware of in the mid-1990s, as I confronted some of the consequences of the services model that I was developing at the time, is not only that discussions of autonomy often blurred these different aspects, but that these different dimensions of autonomy often seem to function in contradiction to each other. I think that these contradictions have only become more acute since that time.

Bourdieu was a central influence in the development of my thinking about artistic autonomy and its contradictions. Bourdieu himself, to my knowledge, only used the term 'autonomy' to describe what I would call the social dimensions of artistic autonomy. He develops his theory of relatively autonomous social fields in the context of 'The Field of Cultural Production, or; the Economic World Reversed' and other essays from the 1970s and 1980s, which he later revised into the book *The Rules of Art*. Interestingly, he hardly uses the term in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, which is where he

engages those aspects of art that are often central to discussions of autonomy in the context of art discourse, and which I think of as the aesthetic dimension of artistic autonomy, such as traditions of disinterestedness, distancing, and freedom from rationalization with respect to specific functions, etcetera. He engages these as aspects of art in terms of the 'aesthetic disposition', but never in terms of 'autonomy'. However, clear links are to be found between these two sides of his analysis of culture, particularly in the homology between the social conditions of the relative autonomy of the artistic field, and the social conditions of the formation of the aesthetic disposition, both of which he links to the negation of the economic and, perhaps more broadly, of material interests, needs and forms of determination.

For Bourdieu, of course, all social fields are 'relatively autonomous' – otherwise they would not exist as or be recognizable as fields (he says somewhere that a completely heteronomous field would be, rather, an 'apparatus'). The relative autonomy of all fields, from this perspective is contingent upon their capacity to 'impose their own norms and sanctions' within their sphere and to exclude external or competing norms, values and so forth. In this sense, to say that fields are 'relatively autonomous' is not just to say that they are never completely autonomous, but also that they are autonomous only relative to other fields. What is particular to cultural fields as they developed in the west, in Bourdieu's analysis, is their tendency not only to exclude but also to negate and even invert economic values specifically. With art in particular, this is then linked – although usually only implicitly in Bourdieu's work – to specifically aesthetic traditions of disinterestedness, the conditions of which, in his analysis of the aesthetic disposition, are also a negation of the economic. In this case of the 'aesthetic disposition', however, Bourdieu's emphasis shifts from the negation of economic values to the negation of economic and material determination more broadly, in the form of need, and of the uses and functions that would serve such need. The 'aesthetic disposition' is thus 'the paradoxical product of negative economic conditioning' in that it manifests the economic conditions that determine it precisely by negating economic conditioning and determination. [2]

This is where artistic autonomy becomes really problematic. It is at this juncture that one finds the homology between, on the one hand, the freedom from economic (and other forms of) rationality, which, in left traditions, has been won by artists through sacrifice and struggle, and, on the other, the freedom from economic rationality that is a by-product of economic privilege. It is here that one finds the structural logic of the objective collusion between avant-garde artists and economic elites that is performed in the art market and bourgeois art institutions, despite the apparent social and even political opposition between these positions. Within the structure of this homology it also often seems that avant-garde negations of instrumentality are felt most acutely not by those in power and against whom they may be manifestly addressed, but by those who do experience themselves as subject to this instrumentality. I encountered this quite directly in my research in corporate collections, where the autonomy performed by the artists and curators seemed to be experienced by employees as no more than a particularly arbitrary and violent manifestation of managerial power, stripped of the logic economic rationality that governed their own working lives. I think it is extremely important to recognize that this is a matter of collusive homologies and not of the kind of cooptation that many avant-garde traditions have made it out to be. From there we might begin to be able to reflect more honestly and productively on what it is in our field, our practices, and even our politics, that serves to reproduce these structures.

Looking back over the past 30 or 40 years, it seems that efforts by artists to reject the privilege, elitism and idealism that has been associated with the aesthetic disposition have often led not to an emancipatory gain but to the development of even more rarefied cultural forms. For example, the rejection of specialized modes of artistic production and reception – commonly associated with the 'de-skilling' of Minimalism but in fact on-going through most twentieth-century art movements – most often ended up producing

aesthetic forms that are even more obscure and demanding than the craft-based competencies it eschewed. A similarly bitter irony can be found in many cultural activist and culturally engaged political positions that often seem to slide into a aestheticization of politics or that replace an artistic vanguardism with a political – and often also intellectual – vanguardism that is no less demanding of cultural capital and competence, no less life-style determined and no more egalitarian, except perhaps in rhetoric.

On the other hand, it now also seems likely that many of the developments that have been identified with the artistic critique of autonomy, or at least some of the privileged forms of production and consumption associated with it, have been motivated more by a frustration with the limits that go along with artistic autonomy than by radical egalitarian impulses. The 'specific principle of legitimacy' of relatively autonomous fields in which producers produce for the recognition and evaluation of other producers – institutionalized in mechanisms such as peer-review – tends to generate increasingly specialized forms of production and consumption. While these mechanisms and the highly specialized discourses and practices they produce are more or less accepted in the sciences, in cultural fields they have been decried as elitist and obscure and cut off from the culture of everyday life. However, one can see in pop traditions, as well as in the more recent vogue of all forms of participatory art, a hunger of artists as well as art institutions for larger audiences and wider influence in which radical democratic rhetoric and corporate populism, if not marketing, often seem to merge all too seamlessly.

Another example of this may be found in activist and productivist positions that perform a protest against art's traditional lack of function, material effect and use value, but which seem most often to fall to the side of the instrumentalization or bureaucratization of art – most problematically not only by artists, but by public and other institutional funders. The expansion of these positions in and since the 1990s clearly have coincided with what is sometimes called the instrumental turn in cultural policy in the USA as well as Europe, as the end of the Cold War, European integration and globalization led to the collapse of traditional rationales for public subsidy in the West, such as national prestige and regional competition (although these seemed to have gained ground in the East), and as neoliberalism trampled on notions of social democratic public goods.

I ran up against these tendencies quite directly in the 1990s, when I was deeply involved in trying to work through a model of art making as service provision. By the mid-1990s, I ended up feeling that most forms of artistic autonomy were just too problematic and contradictory to defend, except perhaps for the political dimension of artistic autonomy, which I identified with free speech rights above all and which are not specifically artistic. However, as I learned in the course of a study of censorship battles over art in 1999-2000, even this form of autonomy is often also reduced to a kind of artistic or professional privilege in the context of culture wars, as 'artistic freedom' specifically, and that in fact artists and art institutions rarely defend freedom of speech as political principle or a civil right. The reduction of free speech to a kind of artistic privilege is one of the most vicious forms of symbolic violence produced by such art controversies – and one in which, again, the art field often seems to collude with conservative forces, despite their apparently opposed positions. [3]

All that being said, practically speaking, I continue to be deeply committed to the autonomy of and cultural as well as educational institutions in the very basic sense of defending traditions of self-governance and self-regulation, peer review and freedom from market criteria as well as the immediate rationalization of art and other cultural and intellectual endeavours with respect to social use, economic value and political interest. Much more pressing, in my opinion, than the loss of autonomy in art is the loss of autonomy in the sciences, where research and practice is increasingly market directed and 'inconvenient' facts come under immediate political attack. In our political and economic context today, any critique of the professional or expert privilege historically associated

with these forms of autonomy runs the risk of playing right into the hands of the rightwing populists who have so successfully identified class hierarchy with educational and cultural rather than economic capital and who are intent on destroying anything that gets in the way of their political agenda.

In this context, we must also be careful that some of the constructions and claims of artistic autonomy, as well as those emerging from the theoretical field with which the art world has become so closely allied, do not serve to weaken the autonomy of other fields, and perhaps even, ultimately, of the artistic field itself. I am thinking in particular of formulations that seem to reach for a kind of pure autonomy, a kind of pure freedom, in which avant-garde practices are sometimes identified with radical political practices, such as anarchist traditions and autonomia. I am also thinking of formulations that identify artistic autonomy as an essential property of the aesthetic, rather than as a historically specific social form. Such formulations have appeared, for example, in recent debates about the definitions of artistic research and requirements for PhDs in art practice, in arguments that artists should not be required to write book-length dissertations for PhDs or to formulate an explicit research methodology. Such requirements, the arguments often go, constitute an attack on artistic autonomy and the subjection of art to the criteria of academic fields. But it must be obvious at this point that such arguments themselves constitute an attack on the autonomy of academic fields, which is itself based on their capacity to impose their own norms and sanctions within their sphere. Surely, if artists were as autonomous as they are made out to be in some of these arguments, they would not be pursuing academic doctorates in the first place. In this case it begins to look very much like some of the most apparently radical formulations of artistic autonomy are in fact often only the most expedient. Even more problematic is to see such artistic positions structurally aligned with the political and market forces that see academic standards only as impediments to the reduction of academic fields to instruments in their own economies.

Critical Art Practice

For artists invested in critical practice today, one of the most challenging aspects of the conditions and contradictions of artistic autonomy is their relationship to artistic critique. Historically and discursively, the notion of critical art practice is unthinkable without some notion of autonomy – even if one of the primary objects of artistic critique has been artistic autonomy itself. However, I think both of these terms need to be radically rethought if they are to be useful at all. In fact, I am beginning to wonder if the term 'critique' ever really can be made useful again – but I would much sooner toss 'critique' than I would 'autonomy'.

We use the term 'critique' incessantly in art discourse but it is even harder to pin down than 'autonomy'. Art's 'critical' capacity or potential can be linked to all of the dimensions of artistic autonomy I listed above. Art's capacity to negate or invert the values and principles of hierarchization dominant in other fields or in the social world is linked to the autonomy of art as a social field. The freedom of artists to question and challenge is linked not only to politically guaranteed free speech rights, but also to the practical and economic autonomy of artists as independent producers who control our own labour and the products of that labour to a relatively large degree. But then there is the link between critical art practice and the aesthetic dimension autonomy, which, once again, proves to be particularly problematic. That link can be found most clearly in the distancing that is one of the basic features both of the aesthetic disposition, in the form of disinterested pleasure, etcetera, and of critical art practices, through the operation of estrangement that may be found in almost all critical art strategies. (Here I would distinguish critical from political art practices and cultural activism, which may be much more direct and not rely on such forms of distancing.)

This distancing now seems to me to be the most problematic feature of both 'critical art practice' and of some conceptions, and perhaps also dimensions, of artistic autonomy. Developing on Bourdieu's scattered references to 'negation in a Freudian sense', I am beginning to believe that this distancing functions through an operation of negation that often is more defensive than dialectical. Bourdieu himself seems to vacillate on this question a great deal. Sometimes he links artistic autonomy to 'a bad faith denial of the economic', with all its intimations of moral failing and fraud. At other times, he links negation to the social conditions of art as a relatively autonomous field, which he defends vigorously, particularly in the context of his anti-neoliberal activism; and, in language that parallels many representations of artistic critique, to art's capacity to achieve a 'partial anamnesis of deep and repressed structures'. [4]

In many ways, the complexity of negation in Bourdieu's work mirrors its complexity in Freud's. Freud beings his essay 'Negation' (1925) introducing negation as a mechanism of defence. However, while he describes negation as a form of denial, it is a denial that nevertheless also represents a partial lifting of repression. The key distinction he makes is between idea and affect: with negation, something may be admitted to consciousness as an idea, but is nevertheless distanced emotionally; it may be thought, but only negatively, as an idea that is rejected, dismissed, etcetera. More broadly, however, what is at issue is inside and outside: whether the idea or affect is owned and accepted or whether it is split off, expelled, projected or otherwise disowned, often, in a sense, by locating it outside of the boundaries of the self – which is also thus constituted, in some sense, by way of these boundaries, as autonomous and perhaps we could even say as an autonomous field.

Freud then goes on to describe negation as a condition of the development of the intellectual function and even of thought, as well as of judgment, in some sense, precisely by virtue of the role it plays in distinguishing what is inside and what is outside, what is only subjectively or also objectively existing, and of whether something thought also exists in reality.

One question I have been preoccupied with lately is whether it is possible to distinguish, in practice, between defensive negation and critical negation. Can there be a 'critical' distancing that is not also a defensive disowning? This has led me is to consider substituting the term 'analysis' for 'critique', or at least to consider analysis as a necessary step following critique. If critique is indeed a moment of defensive negation that nevertheless allows a repressed idea to make its way to consciousness – but as split off and disowned – then we may still need a second step that allows for a recognition and reintegration of that idea as well as our affective investment in it. Such a second step might be called analysis, and my hope is that such analysis might finally lead us out of the now seemingly perpetual reproduction and expansion of contradictions in which we seem to be trapped in the art world today.

This is all very schematic, of course, and I don't believe that a psychological model can be transferred directly to a social field. However, this psychological model also has interesting implications for a discussion of autonomy. Autonomy is also a very much-debated term in the field of psychoanalysis. Part of the critique of autonomy that was important to my development in the early 1980s derived from Lacan's rejection of the notion of the autonomous ego, dominant in ego psychology, and of the Cartesian *cogito*; his identification of the autonomous self with the Imaginary; and the theory of ideology developed by Althusser in response to those formulations. This rejection of the autonomous ego was also central to many other Marxist as well as feminist critiques of the 'autonomous' subjects produced by and for capitalist and patriarchal institutions.

In my recent return to psychoanalytic frameworks—not Lacanian so much as object-relations, Kleinian, Bionian, and relational perspectives – I am finding that 'autonomy'

figures most prominently as an unconscious fantasy of agency, often linked to infantile omnipotence. This fantasy of agency also serves a defensive function: it wards off anxiety associated with the frustrations, privations, discomforts and potential losses that go along with helplessness and dependency; or even against the trauma represented by the external world as such – overwhelming, impinging and determining – whether that external world is physically or only narcissistically injurious. In these perspectives, the tenacity and rigidity of that unconscious fantasy of autonomy and agency often appears as a key factor in the development of psychopathology. [5]

Interestingly, it is also linked to art, particularly in object-relations theory, which posits infantile omnipotence as a developmentally necessary stage in which infants are protected from premature and traumatic subjection to reality and revelation of their own helplessness. Winnicott developed the theory of a transitional phase in which infants are gradually 'failed' by their environment and exposed to their own dependence. This phase is characterized by 'transitional objects' and 'transitional phenomenon' that are both found and made, inside and outside, subjective and objective: that belong to both reality and fantasy. Interestingly, Winnicott suggests this is a matter not only of infantile belief but also of adult collusion: sustained by an implicit, collective, unconscious if not conscious agreement and participation. And this transitional space, for Winnicott, is also the location of cultural experience. [6] In this, Winnicott agrees with Freud, who in his 'Two Principles of Mental Functioning' (1911) famously suggests that art brings about a reconciliation of fantasy and reality in a particular way: artists turn away from reality to fantasy, but then find a way to return from fantasy back to reality by moulding fantasy into a new kind of reality. Artists do this, according to Freud, without 'creating real alterations in the outer world'. Instead, he suggests that fantasy is realized through the recognition and collusion of others who share the artist's dissatisfaction with reality, which itself is part of reality.

Clearly, Bourdieu read Freud: I'm convinced that he also read Winnicott. There is a passage in *Distinction* that recently jumped out at me in which Bourdieu links 'the suspension and removal of economic necessity' and the 'objective and subjective distance' from determination that characterizes the aesthetic disposition, to 'a child's relation to the world'. In what sounds very much like a reference to infantile omnipotence, he then mentions parenthetically that 'all children start life as baby bourgeois, in a relation of magical power over others and, through them, over the world'. [7]

From the psychoanalytic perspectives I'm interested in these days, the question raised by all of this is not whether artistic autonomy is fantasy or reality, but whether constructions of artistic autonomy, perhaps like some of those of critique, serve defensive functions, vis-à-vis negation, splitting, externalization, etcetera, that ward off affectively experienced and invested conflicts, social or psychological, by disowning the bad parts of them and expelling them from the boundaries of the ideally autonomous field, practice or self. Such defensive constructions of autonomy would thus serve to reproduce those conflicts on some level, perhaps especially as contradictions, by keeping them protected from potentially transformative engagement. Or, on the other hand, whether constructions of autonomy serve to enable a working-through of those conflicts, for example, by creating a space, like the analytic space or frame (which has certain homologies to the artistic frame), in which the a temporary suspension of immediate material consequences as well as familiar patterns of existence, relationships, thought, behaviour and, perhaps especially, judgment, provide for a possibility for new relationships and new experiences of relationships to emerge.

From these psychoanalytic perspectives, meaningful autonomy and agency can only develop out of an acceptance of dependency and determinisms; the taming of the anxiety provoked by dependency and a loosening of the defensive idealization, splitting, projection, and so forth, that we employ not only to manage that anxiety but also to put off the often unpleasant and only marginally achievable task of making real changes in ourselves or in

the world. And I would like to imagine that this would be a form of autonomy that would also escape those problematic homologies with economic privilege and the not-so-magical power of the adult bourgeoisie.

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Footnotes

1. Andrea Fraser, *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 56.
2. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 55.
3. See my essay 'A Sensation Chronicle', *Social Text*, no. 67 (summer 2001). Reprinted in *Museum Highlights*, op. cit. (note 1).
4. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: The Structure and Genesis of the Literary Field* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 3-4.
5. See, for example, D.W. Winnicott, 'The Use of an Object', *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 50 (1969), 711-716.
6. See D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971).
7. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, op. cit. (note 2), 54.

Tags

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