Theorem 4: Autonomy
Can It Be True of Art and Politics at the Same Time?

Peter Osborne

Essay – May 1, 2012

It is a distinctive feature of much recent critical discourse that 'autonomy' has become increasingly derided in art, while being increasingly valued in politics. Indeed, autonomy is frequently claimed to be the very basis of politics, and hence of a politics of art – art activism – dedicated to the production of non-autonomous art. Yet it is not clear that the sense in which some art may be claimed, critically, to function autonomously is well understood; or that the theoretical intimacy of relations between claims for autonomy in art and in politics is fully appreciated. This short piece (brutally brief) approaches these relations from a historico-philosophical angle and a broadly Adornian point of view. It sets out from four common misconceptions of the autonomy of art, and proceeds to what Osborne takes to be Adorno's less inadequate conception, its political limits, and the dialectical entanglement of its critique with artistic autonomy itself.

1. Aesthetic Autonomy

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. It is a widespread historico-philosophical myth that it is the logical autonomy of aesthetic judgements of taste from other types of judgement (as theorized by Kant in his Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment of 1790) that is the conceptual basis of the autonomy of art from other types of social practice. Over the last 200 years, this myth has been perpetuated to the level of a philosophical commonplace in part through the slippage created by the use of the term 'aesthetic' to mean 'of art'. The phrase 'aesthetic autonomy' has thereby come, in most places, to be used synonymously with 'autonomy of art'. However, with regard to autonomy, this identification of 'art' with 'aesthetic' is both philosophically incoherent and art-historically implausible. Philosophically, Kant's Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment cannot, in principle, provide the conceptual ground for a philosophical account of the art work – which was actually the contribution of Jena Romanticism – since it has no account of (nor any interest in) the ontological distinctiveness of the work of art. Indeed, the whole of Kant's transcendental philosophy is systematically orientated towards the avoidance of all ontology. This is its methodological distinctiveness. Kant's thought on aesthetic requires objects that can 'occasion' the possibility of pure aesthetic judgement, for which his model is nature. The 'produced' and hence purpose-based character of the art work means that no judgement of 'artistic beauty' can be a pure aesthetic judgment of taste, in principle, for Kant (genius notwithstanding). Indeed, what Kant called 'aesthetic

art' – an art appropriate to pure aesthetic judgments of taste – precisely cannot be viewed as autonomous qua 'art', or as an instance of any particular art, but only 'as if' a part of nature. Aesthetic autonomy is indifferent to the art/non-art distinction. This makes it interesting, in itself, of course, but not as an account of the autonomy of art. Correspondingly, historically, autonomous art has largely been indifferent to the aesthetic/non-aesthetic distinction, for 50 years at least; and in important cases much longer.

Is there, then, no 'aesthetic regime of art' – to use Jacques Rancière's now established phrase? Well, there is no strictly Kantian one; although there appears to be a Schillerian one. However, this Schillerian regime is not strictly aesthetic, in either of Kant's two main senses ('of sensibility' and pertaining to a 'critique of taste'), since Schiller's aesthetics involves the application to Kant's transcendental analysis of aesthetic judgement-power of a principle from Kant's philosophy of pure practical reason: namely, what in his 1788 Critique of Practical Reason, Kant called 'Theorem 4': autonomy of the will. Theorem 4 is the source of all productivity and all problems of autonomy in this tradition. This was an application that took place, precisely, in order to solve the problem for Kantianism that it cannot account for the beauty of art, other than by abstracting from, or negating, the artefactual, art-status of the art work. It is here, historically, in Schiller's early (1793) Kallias Letters (his letters to Gottfried Körner, 'Concerning Beauty') that 'autonomy' first became philosophically associated with the work of art. The autonomy of the art work is thus, in this German tradition, philosophically mortgaged to Kant's practical, as opposed to his aesthetic, philosophy. This genealogy poses a political problem for nearly all accounts of autonomous art, Adorno's included; as it does also (albeit in a more subterranean, disavowed manner) for supposedly quite different accounts of the autonomy of politics – the supposedly Spinozist politics of Autonomia, in particular. (Where is the theorization of autonomy in Autonomia?) For this genealogy rests upon the myth of a purely rational determination of the will, the inapplicability of which was to be mitigated by Schiller via the aesthetic mediations of the play and form drives. The residue of this history appears within the Autonomia tradition of political autonomy in its dependence on a Kantian negative freedom of autonomy from . . . autonomy from economics, capital, the state, the party, and ultimately, perhaps, the social itself. Refusal – exodus – escape.

But what, then, of the aesthetic tradition: the historical manifestation of the Schillerian 'aesthetic regime of art'? Two things may be said about this. First, there is, certainly, historically, a Kantian self-understanding of the Schillerian 'aesthetic regime of art' – an 'aesthetic ideology' as it has been called. In its conventional form, it runs from 'art for art's sake' (in early nineteenth-century France), through aestheticism (in late nineteenth-century England), formalism (in late nineteenth-century Germany and early twentieth-century England and Russia) and formalist modernism (in mid-twentieth-century USA). Second, however, insofar as this 'aesthetic regime' exists as the practical enactment of a philosophical misunderstanding, it is not the same thing as the 'regime of autonomous modern art', or indeed, even the basis of the autonomy of the particular 'aesthetic' art that it theorizes. For once 'purposiveness without a purpose' becomes the purpose of art, as it did in 'art for art's sake' (as proposed by Benjamin Constant as early as 1804), such art's beauty is no longer 'free', on Kant's own terms – no longer actually 'without a purpose'. This is its dialectical dilemma.

Conceptualization of art's autonomy, or of autonomous art, must be sought elsewhere. The second most widespread misconception concerns self-referentiality.

2. Self-Referentiality

The autonomy of art is not – as it is often thought to be – the autonomy of self-reference. The idea of an autonomy of self-reference is the product of the transposition of the concept of aesthetic autonomy into a linguistic register, in literary modernism (T.S. Elliot influenced Greenberg here): a new way of conceiving of being 'without purpose'. This in turn became the basis for a reinterpretation of aesthetic autonomy in the visual arts, in Greenberg's transformation of the concept of self-referentiality into that of medium-specificity ('medium-specificity' means medium self-referentiality): aesthetic autonomy was thereby transformed into the task of medium self-definition through purification. Historically, this did achieve a (ideological) 'regime' of autonomy, for practices recognized as medium-based – not 'autonomous art', that is, but autonomous arts – but it arbitrarily denies autonomy to other art practices, ungrounded in the history of a medium. The institutional history of art practices, since at least the 1960s, embodies the widespread rejection of this foreclosure, as it does of the earlier, generalized 'aesthetic' variant.

Third common misconception (this one is more tricky, and also more 'living'): freedom of the artist.

3. The Freedom of the Artist

The autonomy of art cannot – as has often been thought – be reduced to the expression of the autonomy of the artist, although it is conditioned by whatever elements of autonomy (in the sense of rationally subjectively willed components) are involved in art practices. This is the difficult bit: theorizing those 'elements', other than by purely retrospective attribution to an artist-subject of the action of the structure articulating the process of which he or she is a part; that is, other than by retroactively confusing the 'artist-function' with the individual human being(s) inhabiting its place in the structure. (In fact, this confusion is 'the subjective process' – in its distinction from 'subjectivation' – to use the terms of Alain Badiou's Theory of the Subject). [1] Yet the whole point of the idea of autonomous art (it's metaphysical distinctiveness and experiential and political productivity) is that of the ontological primacy of the work of art, sedimenting the process of its production, as a whole, into an immanent structure, with its own, apparently independent productivity (Schein: actuality of the illusion of autonomy). As an organizing principle and component of the production process, the artist (and his or her intentions and intentionalities) drops out; his/her/their creativity is literally consumed by the work. The artist cannot be treated as the ground of the action of the work, which appears as the only relevant 'subject' at stake.

However, finally, this does not mean that art is free from social determinations.

4. Freedom from Social Determination

The autonomy of art is not – as it is often thought to be – a freedom of art from social determination. Historically (so the familiar story goes, and Bourdieu tells it quite well in The Rules of Art), the autonomous work required the production of a special social space in which it can be received as autonomous, from the standpoint of its art-character. This requires, of course, famously, first, the development of a market in art (the commodification of the art work), and second, the transformation of art-institutional spaces into spaces of exhibition for autonomous art. The social history is familiar. From the standpoint of the concept of autonomous art, however, the by-now-well-established dialectical point is that autonomous art requires (ideally) the social determination of a space free from social determinations of meaning based on non-artistic functions. Separation. Artistic autonomy is thus – in part – a social form, an institutional form, as Bürger famously argued, taking his cue from Adorno.

So, if the autonomy of art is not best conceived as any of these four things – aesthetic autonomy, self-referentially, mere expression of the autonomy of the artist, or freedom from social determination – how is it best conceived?

A Better Account (or, a More Dialectical Adorno)

A better account starts out from the notion of a socially determined autonomy: not viewed in a 'causal' sociological manner (although there is social determination/conditioning of that kind), as some kind of explanatory external determination, but rather, viewed as immanently construed, as art's taking up of its social conditions into itself, as part of its constitution as art, (historico-)ontologically speaking. Otherwise, social determination simply negates any 'actual' or 'effective' autonomy (which is the problem with so much of Bourdieu's work, of course.) Adorno famously writes, in a conjoint Dostoevskyian-Marxian vein, of art's 'double character' (Doppelcharakter) as autonomy and social fact (fait social – alluding to Durkheim's sociological notion, as one element), in order to express the contradiction at its core. [2] This contradictory double character is best expressed dialectically, in the idea of the work of art as being internally structured by dialectical relations between its autonomous and dependent elements. On this conception, rendered more formally dialectically explicit than it is in Aesthetic Theory (oddly, it is more so in Dialectic of Enlightenment, generally a less dialectical text), and adopting the language of a dialectic in which contradictions are 'structured in dominance': autonomous art is an art in which autonomous or immanent determinations of meaning 'dominate' heteronomous or dependent ones; dependent or heteronomous art is art in which heteronomous or dependent determinations 'dominate' autonomous ones. (These are 'determinations' in the logical/conceptual – not causal – sense.) There is dependence in autonomous art, and there is autonomy in dependent art – of course! The history of autonomous art is the history of the development and increasing complication of this dialectic. Adorno subjects the social concept of autonomous art to the history of capitalism. The history of modern art thus becomes for him, in large part, the history of art's relationship to/struggle with the commodity form – a dimension as absent from Rancière's account of the aesthetic regime of art, as it is from much Autonomia and post-Autonomia writing on art activism.

But what are the 'autonomous determinations', enabled by this social form? At this point, we need to refer back to Schiller's taking up of Kant's philosophy of practical reason into his attempt to supplement Kant's aesthetic with an 'objective' concept of beauty.

The first half of 'Theorem 4' of Kant's Critique of Practical Reason reads as follows: 'Autonomy of the will is the sole principle of all moral laws and of duties in keeping with them; heteronomy of choice, on the other hand . . . is instead opposed to the principle of obligation and to the morality of the will [that is, to all universality, PO] . . . the sole principle of morality consists in independence from all matter of the law (namely from a desired object) and at the same time in the determination of choice through the mere form of giving universal law that a maxim must be capable of. That independence, however, is freedom in the negative sense, whereas this lawgiving of its own on the part of pure and, as such, practical reason is freedom in the positive sense. Thus, the moral law expresses nothing other than the autonomy of pure practical reason, that is, freedom.' [3]

This is not the autonomy of 'the subject', but the autonomy of 'pure practical reason' itself, or the autonomy of pure reason in its practical deployment, as Kant describes it, transcendentally. The subject's relation to the causality of this freedom, whose act it is, is problematic.

In the Kallias Letters, Schiller transposes this problematic from the domain of practice to the domain of the appearance of objects, viewing objects from the standpoint of pure practical reason – what he calls the 'adaption' or imitation' of 'the form of practical reason'. 'The analogy of an appearance with the form of pure will or freedom', he writes 'is beauty

(in its most general sense). Beauty is thus nothing less than freedom in appearance', or 'autonomy in appearance'. [4] (Freedom and autonomy are synonymous in this tradition.) Beauty, then, for Schiller is the appearance of the free or 'autonomous' determination of form. Autonomous art – which gets its first philosophical definition here – is an art that so appears. This is what Adorno is repeating when he refers to the autonomous work of art as exhibiting a self-legislating 'law of form'. It does not mean that the art work actually is 'autonomous', in some positive ontological sense, but that it appears to be so: it has the capacity to produce this illusion. Or, to put it another way, the work of art is autonomous to the extent to which it can generate the appearance or illusion of autonomy. As Peter Bürger argued, 40 years ago now, autonomy operates at two discrete levels: both as a set of institutional conditions; and as the achievement of an individual work, in each individual instance (this involves, but is not reducible to, the individuating moment of the aesthetic aspect). Certain social conditions (the market and art institutions) help make this possible, and can also hinder or negate it, but they can only facilitate what appears as a self-legislation immanent to the work.

Adorno's argument is that the appearance of self-legislating form positions the work critically in relation to the demand for social functionality – including its own functional aspects, which it must somehow internally 'resist' or counter, in order to achieve autonomy (meaning the illusion of autonomy); thereby allowing it to figure freedom. This is the 'truth' of art, in this tradition: the figuring of freedom, or what Adorno refers to as a free praxis. In this respect, autonomous art is not part of an 'aesthetic regime of art', it is part of a 'supra-aesthetic artistic regime of truth' (of which 'aesthetic art' is one restricted and historically passing variant). From this point of view, the historical development of modern art is a development in the social forms and dynamics of the dialectics of autonomy and dependence that constitute this supra-aesthetic artistic regime of truth. Politics is inscribed within the structure of this dialectic in three main ways.

First, as I have said, the political meaning of autonomous art resides in its image of freedom: the pre-figuration of a free praxis, or praxis in a free society. As such, it is taken to be a criticism of the existing state of unfreedom: hence, the work of art, any work of art, 'criticizes society by merely existing', Adorno somewhat hyperbolically claimed (or at least, a work that has achieved autonomy). [5] This is a politics of form – an affirmation of freedom as self-legislating form; not a 'distribution of the sensible'.

Second, the political meaning of the dialectical unity of autonomy and dependence within the work is as a model of reconciliation. The unity of the work functions as a 'promise of happiness' by offering a model of reconciliation, a non-coercive identity, via the 'belonging together' of the one and the many. In both cases, the political meaning inherent in art is pre-figurative, and hence 'imaginary'. Yet it is also, thereby, in danger of being affirmative, in the bad, Marcusean sense – affirmative of the society in which such pre-figuration is possible – and hence socially functional. This complicates the critical criteria for the achievement of autonomy. [6] Furthermore, subsequent to the recognition of the socially affirmative function of autonomous art (in the early twentieth century) and the subsequent so-called failure of both the historical avant-garde's and institutional critique's assault upon the institution of autonomy, there is an additional critical requirement for the achievement of autonomy. Under these conditions, autonomous art critically requires an element of anti-art – the contradictory incorporation of an un-integrated, dependent element, for which collage and the readymade are the historical models – but 'politics' is another way – in order to mark (that is, to render self-conscious) the illusory character of the autonomy of the work of art by staging its connection, indexically, to the world.

This points to a third way in which politics appears within the dialectic of autonomy and heteronomy within the work: namely, as the major mode of heteronomy as external determination, necessity or constraint: politics is one form of dependence – either within autonomous art (as a subordinate aspect) or as a type of dependent art, political art, which

itself still has a (subordinate) autonomous aspect. However, when a political art (a dependent, non-autonomous art) is taken out of its practical political context, by historical change or geographical displacement, and ceases to function politically, autonomous (formal) aspects come to the fore, and the character of the work changes. This is what happens when, for example, classically, works of Soviet Constructivism and Productivism are displayed within Western art institutions as part of the history of the artistic avant-garde. Here, politics appears as an external condition that is nonetheless incorporated into the work as one of its conditions, remaining partly heteronomous, but nonetheless thereby, in its very anti-formalism, becoming form-determining in a new way, and hence 'autonomous', at a structural level.

As a paradigm of a dependent element, politics is thus one paradigmatic, if paradoxical, way of rendered art critically autonomous, that is, of maintaining its autonomy in a political sense. (This is one way of reading Thomas Hirschhorn's or Andrea Fraser's work.) However, this critical function, internal to autonomous art, only operates so long as the anti-art (dependent) element in question resists incorporation into the art institution's conception of art. Once it is incorporated, the originally anti-art element will itself become affirmative of 'art' – and hence art's affirmative function – contradicting its initial critical function. (This is another way of reading Thomas Hirschhorn's or Andrea Fraser's work.)

In this regard, autonomous and dependent elements of the work of art do indeed turn into their opposites: dependent becomes autonomous; autonomous becomes dependent. This is why a dialectical thought is still needed to grasp these dynamics. This is a great strength of Adorno's position: despite his personal artistic preferences, his position refuses the red herring of having simply to choose between monolithically conceived blocs of 'autonomous art' and anti-institutional 'avant-garde activism'. First, because the relationship is structurally dialectical; and second, because the institution changes in response to this dialectic. Contra Bürger, the issue is thus not anti-art-institutionalism, as such, but socially alternative modes of the institutionalization of art (which was the problematic of the productive phase of the Soviet experience, for example, in the first place).

This leads me to the limits of this conception of autonomous art: namely, its basis in the analogical application of Kant's concept of autonomy: autonomy of the will in its 'positive' guise as self-determining universal form.

The Limits of Adorno and Art Activism, Alike

The conceptual and political limits of Adorno's conception of autonomous art derive from the individualistic assumptions behind Kant's application of the concept of pure rational will. Adorno's notion of autonomy continues to pertain to individual subjects; autonomous art thus provides no more than an immanent criticism of liberal capitalist societies, through which it figures the possibility of a free individual praxis.

Now, Adorno's is not a 'straight' Kantianism, to be sure, but a certain kind of Marxian one. He is a Marxian Kantian. He thinks that the development of capitalism has destroyed/demobilized collective subject formation, leaving a retreat to individual freedom the sole remaining progressive option. But this does not get around the conceptual issue that for him the work of art images the political freedom of the ideal liberal individual: this is its 'enigmatic', subject-like, singular object status. Despite the historical argument, the political limitation remains the result of a conceptual limitation. The question is: Is this a limitation of Adorno's thought, or, an inherent limitation on the critical functioning of autonomous art in capitalist societies? On the Schillerian argument that both Adorno and Rancière appear to accept, autonomy appears most adequately, albeit only analogically, in the art work, because it cannot appear in the world, directly, in practice itself – since freedom in the form of pure practical reason is alienated from life. Those who believe the

contrary, however, that freedom does appear directly politically in a movement (Autonomia and post-Autonomia political movements, for example), believe that it can do so only through withdrawal ('exodus') from the existing form of the capitalistic form of the social. And they think this relationship, politically, primarily negatively (although they rarely acknowledge this fact): freedom as negative freedom – autonomy from . . . economic determinations, capital, the state, the party, etcetera – as the social condition of positive freedom; despite the latter's usually ontological construal. Yet, in an ironic mimesis of the autonomous work of art, such autonomy from – or separation from – prevailing forms of social practice makes the exercise of any such positive freedom impotent; impotence famously being the price of autonomous art's criticality. Political autonomy, in the Autonomia tradition, is thus not so much the negation of the autonomy of the work of art as its ironic political mimesis. It is thus critically redeemable primarily only as art – an art more strictly autonomous than the political art the heteronomy of which it aims to radicalize. Such is the dialectics of activism and art in the politics of Autonomia.

To put it more formally: Theorem 4, Kant's concept of autonomy, cannot be true of art (analogically) and politics (directly) at the same time. It is in the historical contradiction between art and politics that the truth of autonomy lies.

Peter Osborne is director of the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP), Kingston University London, and an editor of the UK journal *Radical Philosophy*. His new book, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, will be published by Verso in early 2013.

Footnotes

1. Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* (1982), trans. Bruno Bosteels (London/New York: Continuum, 2009), Part V.
2. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1997), 225.
3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment* (1790), trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Mathews, edited by Paul Guyer (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
4. Friedrich Schiller, 'Kallias or Concerning Beauty: Letters to Gottfried Körner', in J.M. Bernstein (ed.), *Classical and Romantic German Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 145-183; 151-152.
5. Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, op. cit. (note 2), 226.
6. Herbert Marcuse, 'The Affirmative Character of Culture' (1937) in: *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 88-133. For Adorno's critically modified adoption of this position ('its thesis requires the investigation of the individual artwork'), see *Aesthetic Theory*, op. cit. (note 2), 252.

Tags

Art Discourse, Autonomy, Philosophy, Aesthetics

This text was downloaded on November 28, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
www.onlineopen.org/theorem-4-autonomy