

Midterm Assignment:
More on Artistic Freedom in 2020

Christopher Denq
Prof. Karen Detlefsen
PHIL 362, 12/22/20

INTRODUCTION

This paper will build upon the starting idea in my short paper assignment—that artists have no artistic freedom in the twenty-first century when it comes to the traditional art market*. While the short paper started with Skinner as a foundation for what general liberty is, this essay will now draw upon Rousseau and Wollstonecraft to specify two distinct forms of liberty: what I will call **“naturalistic” liberty** from Rousseau and **republican liberty** from Wollstonecraft.

Firstly, this paper will briefly highlight why these two conceptions of freedom are good starting points from which to define contemporary artistic freedom. Having established Rousseau and Wollstonecraft as divergent theories on liberty, this paper will then explain how in *both* cases, the artist’s freedom is still impaired by primary, secondary, and tertiary market forces. **In the end, I hope to reinforce the claim that artists have no freedom in this new, “democratized” era--regardless of which kind of liberty (Rousseau’s or Wollstonecraft’s) one were to espouse.**

ROUSSEAU VERSUS WOLLSTONECRAFT

While the short paper argued against artistic liberty in the general sense (Skinner), this paper will look specifically at the naturalistic and republican iterations. Direct opponents when it comes to education, Rousseau and Wollstonecraft also diverge on their methods of attaining liberty. Rousseau, for example, mobilizes *amor de sui* as a goal from autonomy, while Wollstonecraft champions republicanism as a goal from self-empowerment. Rousseau yearns for a regression to the independence of primal self, while Wollstonecraft advocates for a progression to a fully realized and rational self (though specifically for women). In another sense, Rousseau rejects society in favor of a “natural hierarchy” and strict gender roles; Wollstonecraft betters it with an equalized hierarchy built around non-domination and expanded gender roles.

Starkly contrasted, these two liberties serve as persuasive starting points for artistic freedom because they account for the strongest case of liberties on either end of the spectrum. Demonstrating the lack of artistic freedom in both these conceptions would further reinforce the idea that freedom *in all regards* is at risk, since both faces of the freedom coin are marred. Thus, I will use Rousseau's naturalistic and Wollstonecraft's republican liberties to interpret artistic freedoms in the modern art market space.

“NATURALISTIC” AND “REPUBLICAN” APPLIED TO ARTISTIC FREEDOM

Rousseau would interpret artistic freedom as the freedom to do what one pleases *earnestly*. An earnest artist is one who:

- 1) naturally—without interference or instruction—discovers a medium s/he truly loves (return to primal state),
- 2) is fully capable of producing loved art (self-sufficiency and independence), and
- 3) is fully capable of enjoying loved art and the fruits of its labor without comparison to others (*amor de sui* over *amor propre*).

To satisfy all of Rousseau's other conditions on duty, we assume that art production is a mechanical/industrial skill instead of a luxury skill, the artist is simultaneously best at and heavily interested in art production over other types of production, and the traditional art market is an instance of necessary dependence on other men's labor (since an art career must naturally include social relationships with others for sales and admiration).

Wollstonecraft would interpret artistic freedom as the freedom to do what one pleases *truly*. A true artist is one who:

- 4) freely—without societal pressure towards “beautiful and decorative” art—discovers other untraditional mediums s/he could accomplish much more in (progression to enlightened state),
- 5) is fully capable of producing said untraditional art (self-realization via education), and
- 6) is fully capable of enjoying said untraditional art and the fruits of its labor—without domination from others (same moral rights require non-domination).

Unfortunately, both flavors of artists run into opposition when it comes to the market conditions.

Pushed away from intrinsic artist merit, the careers of the naturalistic and republican artists are wholly dependent on the primary market, dominated financially by the secondary market, and incapacitated or stymied by the tertiary market.

PRIMARY MARKET FORCES ON ARTISTIC FREEDOM

The freedom-yearning artists’ first exposure to the art market is through the primary market, which takes on the form of galleries and dealers. Here, they run into three main prisons: 1) exclusive networking privileges, 2) the arbitrary choice of galleries and dealers, and 3) the industry-standard “critical evaluation”, which takes everything *but* artistic merit into account.

Networking. Very quickly from the onset, artists realize that they are incredibly dependent on who they know in order to gain the proper exposure. For example, a recent statistic from Christie’s shows that about 40% of the top artists from just 3 schools—a gross monopolization of “artistic success”; similarly, Sotheby’s reports that 38% of its biannual highest grossing artworks were at some point from the same, *one* collection. Unfortunately, attempting to penetrate the primary market with “weaker” network options was seldom successful—even harmful—for a burgeoning creator. Being exhibited in lesser known galleries meant being overlooked by

prestigious media outlets and critics, as well as, potentially marring the artist's reputation as "unserious" or "low-quality". Simply put, familial and professional connections did not just help an artist's career—they *were* the artist's career. Such powerful dependence on your artistic lineage and peers completely rejects both the naturalistic and republican artist's desire for self-reliance.

Gallery and dealer choice. Having the lucky and proper network was unfortunately still not enough for the naturalistic and republican artists to gain the proper exposure. While one could be recommended, it was ultimately up to the primary market's galleries and dealers on whether they would exhibit artwork. The decision to adopt a burgeoning artist depended on four main factors: a) the artist's credibility, b) the gallery's or dealer's credibility, c) the time of the year, and d) the market saturation. The first factor measured the artist's career size—namely in which other galleries or dealerships it had been exhibited in before (networking)—while the second factor measured artist-dealer fit—specifically, a more prestigious gallery would reject exhibiting a lesser-known artist. The third factor related to the calendar planning of the various art "seasons", and the fourth related to whether the market had already seen too many similar paintings. In other words, a gallery would refuse to exhibit an artist, regardless of artistic merit and even networking credibility, if s/he worked in a style and medium too similar to an already in-demand artist. The primary market is keen on preserving the scarcity of styles in circulation as a way of artificially extending the lifeline of each selling style. Regardless the factors, Rousseau's and Wollstonecraft's artists are unfortunately still left miserable, as *none* of these factors are directly in the artist's control.

Critical evaluation. Once successfully exhibited, the artist runs again into another market force that prevents them from directing their own careers: the industry-standard "critical

evaluation”. These price evaluations—done by the gallery and dealer with consultation from art critics (note lack of artist input)—are vital to the burgeoning artist as it plays a major role in the price tag of an artist’s oeuvre. If critically evaluated within the thousand-dollar range, the artist is considered at most, “fledging”—at worst, “unserious”. These evaluations once again factor in the artist’s career history, the gallery’s and dealer’s credibility (prestigious dealers can charge premiums for artists’ works), and the artwork’s material cost and size. The naturalistic and republican artist is dismayed to have learned that their works are entirely at the mercy of judges who look not at the artistry, but the profitability, of art.

These three background forces of the primary market deny the independence championed by Rousseau and Wollstonecraft.

SECONDARY MARKET FORCES ON ARTISTIC FREEDOM

Having sacrificed independence for the needed exposure to the art market, both artists move into the secondary market, which takes on the form of auction houses, collectors (or “speculators”), and museums. Chagrined, they realize they have even less control now over their works, as the secondary market dominates their careers through two major forces: 4) financial speculation and 5) the “artist’s” lifestyle.

Financial speculation. Perhaps the most disruptive to the artist’s freedom is the business phenomenon known as financial speculation. Entire careers live or die at the mercy of the speculator, as it is this collective “stock market” that determines whether collections skyrocket, plateau, or plummet in price. Extremely fickle but momentarily impactful, speculation is something that is entirely dependent on the auction house or collector that an artist’s work arbitrarily ends up with. Mentioned in the short paper, speculators can accidentally cause

overestimates with an artist's work—plummeting their perceived value; auction houses engage in collaborative pricing to constrain the value of an artist, either to prevent it from destabilizing the seasonal market price, or worse, to differentiate said artist as lower tier than another artist who is currently in vogue. Overestimation and collaborative pricing are ultimately exercises in comparative aesthetics that uses no aesthetic judgment, for one artwork is deemed higher class from another because the market needs to it be sold that way. Auction houses and collectors also engage in other none-transparent business strategies, such as hidden price tags and chandelier bidding. The masking of the price tags allows specialists to gauge the audience willingness to pay and adjust the asking price between each client, while chandelier bidding enables the anonymity of bidders. In other words, collectors and auction houses could potentially raise the bid on their own artworks to artificially increase the demand. All these practices together create the financial speculation bubble that the artists themselves cannot pop, but wait silently for their consigned speculators to pop at their own discretion. Thus, financial speculation is form of domination over the Wollstonecraftian artist due to the sheer amount of control it has over the pricing, as well as, an institutionalized form of *amor propre* over the Rousseauian artist; the republican artist derives value from the owners of their works, while the naturalistic artist derives value from being more profitable than other works.

Artist's lifestyle. While the financial speculation denies the artists' their input, the artist's lifestyle is one that demands the artist's livelihood. Hoping to continue the growth of the artist's reputation, collectors begin instructing artists on how to enact in their artistic careers. Limits on the number of works produced, how the work is produced, where and when the work is exhibited, and even how the artist is to interact at the social level are all features of their life that become enslaved to the business master known as the marketing campaign. Adopting an almost

celebrity-like scheduling, successful artists often sign with galleries and collectors who become the sole proprietor of their works. These gatekeepers then modulate the entire artistic production as means to grow the collector's credibility and the artist's profitability. For example, prematurely releasing too many of the artist's works reduces the scarcity and therefore value of the artist, while exhibiting too experimental of a work would conflate the artist's image. The artist is convinced that this lifestyle seems to be the only way to continue growing their careers, and completely given into the system. One of the most notable examples in modern art is French impressionist collector Ambroise Vollard and impressionist painter Paul Cézanne: Vollard was not only the primary collector of Cézanne's radical impressionist paintings but also major art advisor. Cézanne's popularity grew with the collector's advice, but quickly lost public appeal when he started to deviate into his signature mature style. Vollard's connections and business knowledge benefitted Cézanne, but only if he followed the laid-out artist's lifestyle. Cézanne posthumously receives his recognition today, but if our naturalistic and republican artists must wait for a future review to receive their due credit, it can hardly be called artistic freedom.

TERTIARY MARKET FORCES ON ARTISTIC FREEDOM

With predominance of social media, self-learning, and digitalization, the turn of the century saw what was known as a “democratization” of high art within the art market spaces. Known as the tertiary market, this alternative to the primary-secondary system allows artists to control their own production, pricing, and marketing. Exhibiting through their own studios, pop-up galleries, and social media, the artists in the tertiary market essentially “field test” their own way before being recognized, bought, commissioned, and/or partnered by galleries, dealers, and auction houses. Ostensibly, the tertiary market gives naturalistic and republican artists their

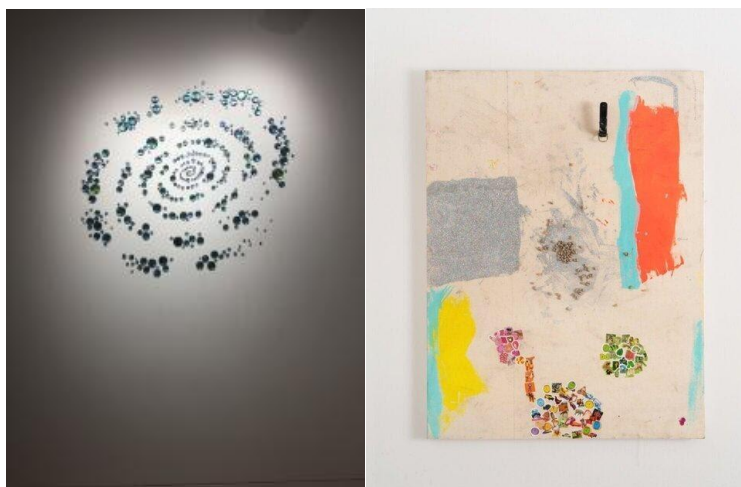
freedom back while still granting them exposure to the same wealthy and prestigious clientele, but unfortunately, their careers are still ever-stymied by its trappings, specifically: 6) exclusive schooling barrier to entry and 7) an unforgiving public judgment.

Exclusive schooling. Due to the relative novelty of the tertiary market, artists who partake in the platform are seldom acknowledged fairly. For example, collectors readily overlook artists who have a sizeable online following but less prestigious artistic lineage for those who just started but graduated from the same alma mater. Harkening back to the point about the reliance on networks, the fact that tertiary market artists must come from the few exclusive schools is a high barrier to entry and a limit on the self-sufficiency and self-realization needed for artistic freedom. The top art schools gatekeep the education needed for artists to fully train themselves to produce art, and if said education is acquired elsewhere, the artist is often denied the chance to fully exhibit their skills due to collector distrust. Thus, the exclusive schooling, even for the online, tertiary market, serves as a barrier for the self-starting artist.

Public judgment. The difference between the world of high art and the world of public art is analogous to the public “Instagram-famous” photographs against the more academic appreciations of Renaissance masterpieces. While in the primary market, the naturalistic and republican artists (supposedly) appeal and work within the full spectrum of artistry; but while in the tertiary market, they must now appeal to a largely visually illiterate public. Artwork is judged two-dimensionally—surface aesthetics and perceived production expertise—, a methodology that heavily limits the artist’s range of expression.

One major case study of the tertiary market influence is the accelerated success of Rob Wynne’s Fluxus glass sculptures (Locks Gallery) over the slower climb of Hannah Beerman’s conceptual, multi-modal art (Kapp Kapp Gallery). Both contemporary galleries utilized social

media's marketing potency to attract millennial collectors, but within opening week, Wynne's pieces generated a lot more in-person interest than Beerman's despite the both galleries' critical evaluation that Beerman's pieces would perform stronger in the secondary market. In other words, were it not for the millennial collectors that were attracted via social media, Beerman's pieces would have likely been purchased at higher price points in the gallery (primary market), which would have raised the price of her pieces when it eventually reached the art auction (secondary market)—ultimately bettering her artistic career. However, because social media *did* play a vital role, the audience surrounding opening week paid higher for Wynne's pieces at gallery (primary market), setting it up for potentially an overestimate at auction (secondary market). This is especially a fear because the millennial audience that overpaid for Wynne's at the primary market gallery will likely *not* be at the secondary market auction houses; instead, the traditional collector audience will be present and not value Wynne's at the inflated price (suggested from Kapp Kapp and Lockes critical evaluations). In this case, social media—heavily reliance on surface-aesthetic qualities—jeopardized both Wynne's and Beerman's mid-seasonal series in 2019.



Left: Wynne's *Daylight Vortex*, 2019
Right: Beerman's *The Pink Slip Isn't Always Pink*, 2019

Thus, I believe the tertiary market to be a threat to self-realization to the republican and naturalistic artists, since their artwork is often unable to reach the proper audiences nor be judged with the proper metrics within the context of traditional art.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the artist still lacks freedom in the twenty-first century art landscape. For both Rousseau's and Wollstonecraft's artistic freedoms, their conditions are denied by the **primary market**—dependence on 1) networking, 2) dealer and gallery choice, and 3) price evaluation via non-artistic metrics—, the **secondary market**—domination from 4) financial speculation and 5) the consuming “artists” lifestyle—, and the **tertiary market**—stymied by 6) exclusive schooling and 7) a visually illiterate public. Thus, I reinforce the claim that artists are being oppressed by market conditions, which favor the will of external agents over the intrinsic artistic merit of the naturalistic and republican artists.