





# (NOT) MORE AUTONOMY

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1. The exclusive concentration of artistic talent in individuals and the suppression of it in the greater masses is the result of the division of labour.

– Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels,  
*The German Ideology* (1846)

2. As no autonomy of art is conceivable without the concealing of labour, this becomes, within high capitalism, by means of the antagonisms growing from such dominance, problematic and programmatic [...] The artwork substantiates what ideology otherwise denies: labour desecrates.

– Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner* (1952)

3. What is theoretically right can be politically wrong. Theory is understanding and foresight, knowledge, that is, be it only one-sided, of the objective tendency and process. Politics on the contrary is the will to revolutionize this process, an all-encompassing rejection of its objectivity, subjective action, so that this objectivity cannot assert itself and does not carry off the victory. Theory is anticipation. Politics is intervening.

– Mario Tronti, *Workers and Capital* (1962)

4. As visual art, a highly conceptual work still stands or falls by what it looks like, but the primary, rejective trends in their emphasis on singleness and autonomy have limited the amount of information given, and therefore the amount of formal analysis possible.

– Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler,  
*The Dematerialization of Art* (1967)

5. The work of art leaves the domain of representation to become 'experience', transcendental empiricism or science of the sensible.

– Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (1968)

6. Efforts are made to avoid everything which could contribute to the articulation of this conflict between aspiration and reality [...] this articulation is avoided in a simple way [...] in that a certain part of life is severed from the societal one, is tabooed, in giving it the name private life [...] this tabooing entails that the specific exploitive relationship under which women are kept is suppressed.

– Helke Sander, Action Council for the Liberation of Women speech at the SDS Conference (1968)

7. No theory can develop without eventually encountering a wall, and practice is necessary for piercing this wall [...] Representation no longer exists; there's only action – theoretical action and practical action which serve as relays and form networks.

– Gilles Deleuze, 'Intellectuals and Power: A Discussion between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze' (1972)

8. The return to the immanence of the work in art [entails] the rigid separation of forming and acting [...] the end-result is the amputation of culture from its dimension of praxis [...] the obsessive fear of the artist without a work proves to be the heritage of the bourgeois fission of one and the same artistic process of production into art and life.

– Peter Gorsen, *Transformierte Alltäglichkeit oder Transzendenz der Kunst* (1974)

9. A theory of socialization (is needed) [...] which understands Freudian 'individuation' as a working process and associates the artistic working process with it, comparing it [...] early childhood socialization [is characterized by] the confrontation of the interfamilial 'sphere of reproduction' with the later 'sphere of profession' [...] this separation of the sphere of production and that of reproduction relies on the identification of production-labour-profession, the sphere of production *posited* by society.

– Gisela Dischner, *Sozialisierungstheorie und materialistische Ästhetik* (1974)

10. One of the questions we have yet to answer is whether women do want the same things that men have wanted; whether 'greatness' in its present form is in fact desirable.

– Lucy R. Lippard, 'Changing Since Changing' (1976)

11. What defines labor as such is not the production of a commodity or even a 'useful effect' [...] but rather the production of value that is appropriated by another as profit. What our modern myths of artistic production have effaced is [...] that the professional artist, like other laborers, works not only for his or her satisfaction, but for the enrichment of others.

– Andrea Fraser, 'Creativity = Capital?' (1986)

12. The depicted [*dargestellte*] structure of capital is idealistic, its depiction [*Darstellung*] is not. Capital is depicted after the model of an absolute subject, the subject of theory in its dependency on the given material proves to be a not-absolute, historical subject.

– Frank Kuhne, *Begriff und Zitat bei Marx* (1995)

13. The submission of dependent labour can no longer be only formal, that means it can no longer take only the form of a separation of the labour force from its personalized bearer, but it must become real, the dependency of labour needs to be restored in its subjective character, in its singularity. It is the living labour as living, which needs to be subjugated.

– Yann Moulier Boutang, preface to  
*Umherschweifende Produzenten* (1998)

14. We frame the character's conceptual focal points. We might interpret a car commercial as a hairdo, an ideology as a designer skirt tone, a banking situation as a cheekbone, copyright issues as a jaw line, or maybe an application as facial agenda [...] It is the value of how things break down now.

– Ryan Trecartin, 'Ryan Trecartin in  
Conversation with Cindy Sherman' (2011)

15. 'We called ourselves Chia Jen, or The Family', the choreographer Simone Forti wrote of the collective she lived in during the late 1960s. 'The life we lived in common provided a matrix for the profuse visions we lived out in various twilights' [...] Using Contemporary Art's self-reflexivity, it could be that anti-brands like American Apparel, achieving much of their psychic power from the real-time lives of their employees, are able to reach more deeply into the culture than art ever can.

– Chris Kraus, *Where Art Belongs* (2011)

16. The usual effort to locate and identify the self, at once shifts into considerations about its deployment [...] The outcome is open, if one understands this deployment of oneself not only as competing for attention but as a critical gesture or revelation.

– Karolin Meunier, *Return to Inquiry* (2012)

17. The phenomena of self-positioning, self-affection, self-referentiality as opening towards processuality, creation of possibilities, and initiation of becoming and mutation are originary. But these autopoietic spaces only gain materiality by transversalizing, repositioning and reconfiguring all realms considered as ‘structural’ (economic, political, social, linguistic, sexual, scientific, etc.)

– Maurizio Lazzarato, lecture given at *Psychopathologies of Cognitive Capitalism*, Berlin (2013)

## §

The history of art as that of the progress of its autonomy

– Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970)

And what is progress in art’s autonomy? Simply *more* autonomy? But ‘more’ leans toward isolation as much as toward utopia, an uneasy ideal, a figure exceedingly unengaged and unrelated, unliveable. ‘Less’ does not sound much more promising, because heteronomy cannot principally be assumed to be only a loss of autonomy, but its commitments need to be justified in order to avoid becoming dependencies. Progress in autonomy cannot be – nor historically has it ever been – measured in quantitative units. Rather, the need for autonomy has been repositioned in relation to society’s political, economic, and cultural



developments on an ongoing basis. The collection of quotes that precede this text serve as a background to the brief and somewhat brutal historical grid I want to set up in order to locate notions of artistic autonomy and autonomies of art. These references not only offer an entrance into thinking about the role that autonomy has occupied in modern European intellectual history; they also put forward a thesis.

Autonomy in art is no longer modern, and far from being the remnants of a lost ideal, its modern forms are, where they are simply imported into our present, stabilising heteronomies. In modern times, autonomy was an abstraction from the reproduction of life, preconditioning the realm of art as one marked by a subjective excess of expression; in contemporary times, autonomy is a concretion, an individuation that designates specific figurations within this life. Its excess is one *of* life. I want to argue that autonomising strategies in the arts today are only significant where they actively counteract nostalgic modern notions of artistic autonomy.

I will construct a historical narration of autonomy's appearances in art from this perspective.<sup>1</sup>

## **Pre-histories**

The quest for autonomy in the arts designates a social relation that developed historically with the distinction between manual and intellectual labour (see quote 1). Figures of artistic autonomisation can be traced back to the courtly arts of the late Middle Ages, where autonomy was pursued in the 'secularizing tendencies, which detached the forms from their genuine location and organized them after artistic principles addressed to visibility [...] in

which the aesthetic meaning supersedes the symbolic and historical meaning'.<sup>2</sup> The development was later reflected in the social realisation of this proto-aesthetic formation: in order to not ideologically collide with the former religious or feudal use values of the artworks the artworks' early bourgeois acclamations had to render them purposeless, free from any applied function – ultimately *aesthetic*.<sup>3</sup>

The philosophical transfer of the political and juridical figure of autonomy as an ideal into the evolving realm of aesthetic practice makes an exemplary appearance in the writings of Immanuel Kant during the late 18th century. Out of his retrospective dictum that 'all philosophy is [...] autonomy'<sup>4</sup> rises the necessity that this intellectual conceptualisation of human self-determination bear an aesthetic side. This aesthetic side of Kant's conceptualisation of human self-determination was a capacity of judgement directed toward the outer appearances of the world that is destined to reflect them as one manifestation of the synthetic faculties of human reason. Kant introduces the 'heautonomy' of judgement,<sup>5</sup> a curious mixture between heteronomy and autonomy not yet directed toward art but toward the perception of its aesthetic 'primer': natural beauty. Kant systematically reintroduces autonomy at the core of all human potential, and heautonomy designates its sensible capacities. He identifies the philosophical realm of the aesthetic and forestalls art's modern claim to autonomy as a function of this realm.<sup>6</sup>

It remains important to underline the distinction of manual and intellectual labour as it begins to establish itself at the core of European intellectual history, before industrialised capitalism installed itself as the core of all human (re)production in the 19th century. One could argue that autonomisation came into existence as a social

and artistic process of differentiation before autonomy came into existence as a socially and aesthetically distinct locus. It is this historical slippage that leads Theodor W. Adorno in the middle of the 20th century to attempt to sever the potentialities of autonomy from the capitalist implications it later became exposed to. Adorno employed the antecedent, more process-related understanding of autonomisation to loosen the capitalist determination of autonomy. Adorno wilfully constructed links through time between Kant's, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling's, and Friedrich Schiller's pre-capitalist visions of autonomy and his own historical location in the 20th century in order to conceive an alternative fiction of autonomy that can sustain itself beyond capital and can be set against it. For this purpose, the philosophical disclosure of the historic distinction between manual and intellectual labour remains ineluctable – either in the form of Schelling's artist-genius or in Schiller's characterisation of an 'autonomy of the sensible'.<sup>7</sup> But, as Adorno argues, artistic autonomy from life is the result of a heteronomous social differentiation of that life (see quote 2).

There were already strong theoretical objections to the affirmation of this differentiation by the end of the 18th century. The early writings of Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel, Dorothea von Schlegel, and Novalis established a concept of critique where the subject autonomised himself or herself not only by reflecting the object and thus distinguishing the subject from it, but equally by being reflected through this object itself, thus rendering their opposition obsolete and turning relations of representation into ones of mutual differentiation.<sup>8</sup> Schlegel polemicised against his contemporaries that 'views of totality, as they are in fashion today, are formed when someone overlooks

all individualities and then subsumes'.<sup>9</sup> The Kantian autonomy proved to be Schlegel's favourite example.

But the systematic fashion icon of such totality, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, began to develop his philosophical system only a few years later. In his writings, however, 'autonomy' as a word hardly ever appears. It is used neither in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807), *The Science of Logic* (1812–16), nor in the *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1818–29). A reason for this absence is laid out in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1820), where Hegel criticises Kant: 'This "formal" is nothing other than interest, activity of the subjectivity in general. Autonomy is this (formal) self-determining'.<sup>10</sup> Autonomy to Hegel is nothing but a stepping-stone toward its own substantialisation as an 'absolute spirit'. which alone for Hegel is 'real'.<sup>11</sup> Autonomy necessarily remains incomplete, subjective, and relational, a quality which Hegel systematically strives to externalise.

It is in his *Capital: Critique of Political Economy* (1867) that Karl Marx systematically reintroduces autonomy, albeit under different premises. Marx does not employ it as a positive concept (or much at all), but it figures implicitly as a necessary undercurrent of his systematic contestation of capital's historical role as an actualised and industrialised absolute spirit [*Weltgeist*]. As Frank Kuhne points out, autonomy is the characteristic of capital's de facto dependency on the individual's engagement with it (see quote 12). Marx explains: 'the Hegelian dialectic [is] turned on its head, or, rather, from its position of standing on its head, it is placed upon its feet'.<sup>12</sup> The world spirit is hereby attacked by exposing its ultimately material and thus flawed synthesis. In understanding the emanation of capital's seemingly immaterial totality as a violent, historical, and material process, Marx enables a critical understanding of

autonomy as a process no longer primarily intellectual but consisting instead of ongoing materialisations: processes of integration, functionalisation, separation, exclusion, and destruction.

## Autonomy – A Capitalisation

In the phase in which historically the producers were cut off from the means of production the artist remained as the only one who had been bypassed – albeit by no means tracelessly – by the division of labour.

– Berthold Hinz, *Zur Dialektik des bürgerlichen Autonomie-Begriffs* (1972)

Within this general history of economic capitalisation, however, art's role has been a conflicted one, as Hinz, Marx, and Adorno have described (see above and quotes 1 and 2). Art's autonomy had been based on its conception as an intellectual faculty, and accordingly its value had been measured by its ability to represent the subjective capacities for intellectual consistency. Within the 'so-called primitive accumulation' (Marx) of labour in the 19th century – as Hinz describes above – artistic forms of production had remained relatively unaltered and came to represent an ideal of unalienated, autonomous work. Artistic forms of work had not yet been subjected to the division of labour.<sup>13</sup> Autonomy became art's economic and cultural emblem, its mark of distinction, and the core of its affirmative role within the social formation of bourgeois capitalism.<sup>14</sup>

The 'so-called primitive accumulation', as Marx argues, 'plays in Political Economy about the same part as original sin in theology'.<sup>15</sup> It constructs a foundational myth in

which all history before capital turns into its pre-history so that lines of praxis become hardly traceable beyond capital's developmental scheme. Intellectual autonomisation herein is codified as intellectual property and segregated accordingly. The historical autonomisation of art was thus dramatically enhanced by the systematic capitalisation and industrialisation of life in the 18th and 19th centuries. Artistic production was subjected to so-called primitive accumulation<sup>16</sup> in that it was, as Marx calls it, 'formally subsumed under capital'.<sup>17</sup> Artistic production was severed from its ties to other applied cultural productions and established as a discrete cultural, social, and economic realm, an autonomous sphere in which the work expended bore no systematic relation to the value produced.<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, the industrial autonomy of art thus stood in contrast to capital's strictly reproductive measures: it served neither the reproduction of the labour force (not even that of the artist), nor did it produce a systematically measurable profit and thus an industrial average. On the other hand, it existed as an autonomous sphere only due to the division of all other labour. What had been instituted as art's supposed spiritual autonomy within capitalism, as its idealised subjective capacity, was deemed to be an exception, relegated into a socially cast off, autonomous domain. This was characterised by the ideological and material suspension of all social reproductive capacities and necessities, a structure already indicated in Marx and Engel's critique of art as a mechanism of social hierarchisation (see quote 1).<sup>19</sup> When Walter Benjamin wrote on artistic productions and their mechanisation in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' around 1936, he spoke of expanding reproductions of the autonomous works within modern capital, not of the

reproduction of its workers – the artists. While the artwork is economically generalised, its producers remain isolated. Their ‘negative’ autonomy remains untouched at this point.

As a result, the autonomy of art was not an objective of the artistic avant-garde of the early 20th century; it was not regarded as the ineluctable precondition of artistic production. The autonomy of art was only retroactively systematically desired and instituted, namely after the Second World War. Many Productivists, Constructivists, Realists, Dadaists, and Surrealists in Russia as well as in Europe were actively attempting to counteract the autonomy art had been afforded within bourgeois culture, to ruin the capitalist exemption-form art had come to acquire through its industrialisation. What Peter Bürger and others have discussed as the avant-garde’s aim to overcome the division of art and life, an intrinsically artistic endeavour, was discussed in less compartmentalised terms by authors like Peter Gorsen as an ongoing attempt to regenerate art as an integrated social praxis (see quote 7). Most of the ‘isms’ listed above did not exist as discernible artistic styles at the time,<sup>20</sup> but were strands of historically specific actions running through the field of art, which were later immobilised into spectacular, autonomous artistic schools.

One could argue that Adorno’s postwar endeavour to recast the autonomy of art against the defeat of the avant-gardes in the first half of the 20th century within an ‘aesthetic theory’ attempts no less than to restage such an expandable understanding of artistic practices beyond styles, but acts from within a historical situation in which the field of intellectual labour, however contested, is the only one that remains open for such actions.<sup>21</sup> Adorno calls for intellectual labour against its capitalist compartmentalisation.

## Autonomy – A State of Reproduction

At about the same time, another eminent figure of postwar Marxist theory, Mario Tronti, intervened against the segregation of life through its totalisation as a reproductive cycle of capital – though the direction of his approach was quite different to Adorno's (see quote 3). In Tronti's *Operaismo*,<sup>22</sup> autonomy appears as a position to be wrought from the disintegrated status of individual work as abstract labour. Where Adorno discerns intellectual labour as that realm of capitalist life that has not yet been fully subsumed under capital, Tronti presents autonomy as a necessarily tactical category of material labour. 'The autonomy of the political', he writes, 'proves to be a utopia, if considered as a directly capitalistic political project; it is the very last of bourgeois ideologies; it becomes sustainable, maybe, only as a labour claim'.<sup>23</sup> For Tronti, the autonomy of the political is a bourgeois operation obscuring the immanently economic nature of the political. Where Adorno locates autonomy in the realm of the aesthetic to construct a maximal distance from the reproductive brutalities of capital, Tronti argues that autonomy cannot be won at any distance from the production process but can be anticipated only as an autonomisation from within divided labour. Otherwise, autonomy within capital is, according to Tronti, nothing less than its driving force, because it is where labour 'appears to be an autonomous inner power of capital' that capital thrives.<sup>24</sup>

Tronti's reconstruction of autonomy as a category immanent to capital lays out the ground for an understanding of autonomy beyond its modern fate as a dialectically bound figure of emancipation and regression. As I intend to understand it here, he offers a reconstruction of autonomy



as a figure of immanence and affirmation: not so much of capital as *against* it. Tronti's orientation toward the primacy of autonomisations in material praxis turns theoretical reflections upon autonomy upside down. Autonomy is once again brought into process. In analogy to Marx's understanding of capital as a negative *Weltgeist*, autonomy here fulfils the Hegelian argument against autonomy: it is systematically rendered as a merely formal, subjective, but necessary step within the fulfilment of the *Weltgeist* – that is, of capital. Thus, it returns as an affirmative figure of capital, but, as Tronti demonstrates, where this claim to autonomy is transposed into a category of a praxis against this actualised *Weltgeist*, it can develop self-affirming forms of material life that strive for the abolition of labour and capital alike.<sup>25</sup>

While Tronti focuses his discussion exclusively on the classical Marxist political subject, the worker, this transposition might also be – and was, in fact – refigured in other realms of capitalist life. The relocation of autonomy from a deficient developmental step of a subjective conclusion within capital to a transposed subjective emblem developed beyond and against it brings autonomy's aesthetic and political uses once again into closer proximity. Such an immanent understanding of autonomy repudiates the capitalistic distinction between art and life as an inadequate circumscription of subjective praxis from which nothing is to be won – and that under current conditions seems increasingly nostalgic (see quote 7). As Gilles Deleuze suggests, it denies the representative meaning of autonomy within bourgeois societies by strengthening its practical meaning; intervening into the relentless (re) production of capitalist totalities, it tries to traverse the institutionalisations of art and life alike. The subjectivism

for which Hegel disregarded the figure of autonomy herein becomes its individuating potential.

This individuation has not least been attempted by feminist theoreticians like Silvia Federici and Mariarosella Dalla Costa, who, coming out of the Operaismo movement, demanded that autonomy be affirmed as a category of reproductive work. Their insistence on the productive character of the privatised, invisible, and – in Marx’s sense – unproductive forms of reproductive work in the household enacted such a transposition: the transposition of a struggle for autonomy *into* a social realm deemed heteronomous. This is precisely what Helke Sander addressed in 1968 (see quote 6) when she declared that the political struggle for autonomy could not be achieved by displacing heteronomy into specific sectors of life.<sup>26</sup> Gisela Dischner’s similar attack (see quote 9) on the social distinction of the ‘sphere of reproduction’ and the ‘sphere of production’ implicates art within this process.<sup>27</sup> She suggests understanding artistic processes as a potentially general factor of individuation, one that can enhance a more integrated conception of subjective development, counteracting not only the social exclusiveness of artistic actions (see quote 1) but also the insinuation of the distinction of production and reproduction into the process of subjective individuation.<sup>28</sup>

This social mobilisation of autonomy – its transposition from a perquisite of specific fields of intellectual labour to politics – provoked confrontations between persisting modern expectations, as Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler characterise them in 1967 for the field of visual art (see quote 4), and contemporary practices, in which autonomy was no longer assumed as an ineluctable precondition of artistic work but the condition of *its* reproduction was brought into focus. In works by Mel Bochner, Lee Lozano,

Adrian Piper, and others, the factual economic and social de-autonomisation of contemporary artistic practices became explicit. The understanding of autonomy on which their practices were based was no longer expressed in representative displays of subjective artistic fullness, but in purposeful autonomisations from modernistic (and utterly masculine) nostalgic stereotypes inside and outside of the actual work.

The advent of contemporary art through pop art and conceptual art socialised artistic production by actualising its economic status into a socially contemporaneous strand of cultural production.<sup>29</sup> Art was transfigured economically into a branch of mass culture. This development included the professionalisation of art education, the expansion and institutionalisation of art's distribution, and a strongly enhanced division of labour in professional artistic productions. The figure of formal quality was also actualised (see quote 4). It changed its meaning. Its Hegelian sense as a merely subjective and thus limited and particular fullness continued to be mobilised as a nostalgic modernist projection, but that same identification of formal quality enabled the mobilisation of autonomy as a dynamic figure for capital. What Yann Moulier Boutang describes for all labour in the 1990s (see quote 13) characterises the process of artistic labour's real subsumption, anticipated in the 1960s and 1970s: autonomy turned from an economically secured social locus of art into the social label of economically actualised artistic labour conditions.<sup>30</sup> And autonomy as an exclusive formal quality of art was counteracted by artists who began to recognise and strategically expose such formal qualities in everyday objects, actions, gestures, and deployments. What Moulier Boutang later characterises as life's subsumption under capital is transposed here. The

subjective formalism of autonomy that Hegel indicated was capitalised and became a function of capital, which conceptual art disclosed in appearances of individuation beyond the subject.

Ten years after Tronti published *Workers and Capital*, Deleuze led a conversation with Michel Foucault entitled 'Intellectuals and Power', revisiting the question of theory and praxis (see quote 7).<sup>31</sup> And where Tronti had rejected the objectifying and thus ideological function of theory against praxis, Deleuze levels the two out. For Deleuze, the realm of art (see quote 5) and the realm of politics are distinct only as varying institutionalisations, different culmination points in 'a net of relations and transfers' in which the modern relation of representation registers as not much more than a brutal fiction, a stabilising social projection. Deleuze introduces a fundamental primacy of action, an autonomising move, but one that is no longer centred on the subject's intention and instead appears involuntarily, automatically. Representation is fundamentally rejected as a repetitive identification that systematically suppresses differences that produce autonomising effects.

## **Autonomisation – A Praxis and a Standstill**

In artistic production, practitioners like Andrea Fraser, John Knight, Alice Creischer, Andreas Siekmann, and others have based their praxis since the 1980s within the economic identification of contemporary art without subjecting it to representational escape strategies from capital. Fraser's argument (see quote 11) lays out the grounds of an integrated social artistic praxis that does not rest on the subjectivisms of its makers (for example, the projection

of a genius) but on their systemic integration.<sup>32</sup> Arguably, this is the field in which autonomy operates artistically today, and one might even argue that it is this very same field into which the praxis of political autonomy has been transposed, too. This perspective *does* seek for strategies of de-capitalisation and anti-capitalist autonomisation, but it does not define those spheres of resistance in contrast to a more general sense of contemporary artistic and cultural practice. Rather, it seeks to lay open and expand internal systemic non-simultaneities, excesses, and breaches. Autonomisation herein might become a substantially affirmative process in which those moments of reality, of traces of a lived life, are cherished and extended as vantage points of possible autonomisations.

In closing I want to open up this enforced historiography of appearances of autonomy from within the rise, emancipation, and capitalisation of art by assembling a few recent motifs in art that concern such autonomisations within the present tense:

## **An historical understanding of form through art**

In the productions of Bernadette Corporation, Isa Genzken, Josephine Pryde, and others, form – be it distinct formalisms or demonstrations of their breakdown – have become a medium to enhance the presence of the social materials of their art. Society's surfaces and objects, roles and statuses, turn into a naturalised pool of materials, a misguided arrangement on which artistic production preys without assuming bourgeois moral superiority (see Ryan Trecartin, quote 14). Form gets employed as a weapon of real-time concretisation, of autonomisations of forms of life against

the real abstraction of contemporary crisis-ridden capitalist society: a no-longer subject-centred autonomisation; one in which materialisms are not constructed but found.

## **An ongoing re-identification and re-individuation, via art**

In opposition to the institutionalised spectacles of participation, an artistic self-deployment might act within an integrated field of contemporary art, but it recedes, bearing a developing repertoire of autonomisations, establishing a set of practices, of discernible gestures and discrete forms, that commands an arsenal open to collectivisations, quotes, and shared authorships, which can exceed the practices of art – as in the works of Ian White, Discoteca Flaming Star, Emma Hedditch, Johannes Paul Raether, Ulrike Müller, and others. (See also Chris Kraus and Karolin Meunier, quotes 15 and 16). Here, that subjectivity – which, within the modern idea of art, was idealised as an expressive genius – returns as a socialised component of its own productions. And it is in acting out this socialisation that autonomisations from it become legible.

## **A proposition of a non-functional, a non-discursive, non-developmental singularisation within the procedures of art**

In Maurizio Lazzarato's recent writings the global economic system of capitalism is portrayed within an ongoing process of violent disintegration. The expansive ideology of relentless economic progress has been historically

locked down within a vicious cycle of debt, which Lazzarato characterises not only in economic terms but, notably, as the drama of a crisis of subjectivity. The capitalist crisis, in Lazzarato's view, has turned into a catastrophe and at its core lives 'the indebted man'.

In the 1970s, Lazzarato was part of the very same Italian workerist movement of which Tronti had been a founding member. The collisions of this autonomist approach with the theories and practices of Félix Guattari have informed a simultaneously micrological and macrological understanding of autonomy, reconstructing possible modes of subjectivisation to overcome the historical deadlock of the present tense by way of a re-existentialisation of the subjective that is aesthetically as well as politically destined to struggle against the relentless endgame capitalism forces us into (see quote 17).

Referencing Félix Guattari, Lazzarato proposes a 'non-discursiveness', which in artworks, like those by Monika Baer, James Richards, Amy Sillman, Susanne M. Winterling, and others, opens up affective points of concentration, which do not expose a representative subjectivism. These artists do not appear as champions of the discourses into which they intervene, but as the cause of breaks within it. Crudeness, affects, desires, insecurities, and minor predicates are brought full circle instead of becoming part of a larger whole. Herein, singularisations lose their developmental sense and spiral back into individuations; they do not strive for completion, but for expanding specification – autonomisations that want no functional, discursive place within contemporary catastrophic capitalism.

The modern ideal of the autonomy of the arts in all of the above-mentioned artistic practices appears as a

representational leftover, which practices of autonomisation constantly struggle to overcome. The modernist figure of a somewhat prior autonomy of the arts fulfils a solemnly affirmative function within catastrophic financialised capitalism. It reiterates a nostalgic figure that can linger on only at the price of its social remoteness and conservative discursive function. Artistic strategies that have attempted to materialise instances of autonomisation, which have come into being with the rise of contemporary art in the 1960s, have, conversely, built lineages that span from art across society, across social strata and identifications. It is these autonomisations from within that map out ongoing trails of differentiation from capital, and that point toward a possible life without it.

## Footnotes

- 1 I want to thank Danny Hayward. Without his anticipatory editing this text would have turned out significantly less intelligible.
- 2 Günter Bandmann, *Mittelalterliche Architektur als Bedeutungsträger*, Berlin: Mann, 1951, p.17. All quotations translated by the author unless otherwise noted [ed.].
- 3 A discussion of the genealogies of the aesthetic is found in Sven Lütticken's 'Autonomy after the Fact', where he argues that 'the aesthetic is a constant renegotiation of autonomy and heteronomy'. See Sven Lütticken, 'Autonomy after the Fact,' in *Autonomy: New Forms of Freedom and Independence in Art and Culture*, Jorinde Seijdel, Liesbeth Melis and Sven Lütticken (eds.), *Open*, no.23, 2012, pp.88–104.
- 4 Immanuel Kant, quoted in Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer and Gottfried Gabriel (eds.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol.1, Basel: Schwabe, 1971, p.708.
- 5 Immanuel Kant, *Über Phil. überhaupt* (1794). This text later was published under the title 'Erste Einleitung in die Kritik der Urteilkraft', in Immanuel Kant, *Werke*, vol.5, *Kritik der Urteilkraft und Schriften zur Naturphilosophie*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche



- Buchgesellschaft, 1983, pp.173–227.
- 6 The most consequential and materialist reading of Kant's writings in my opinion is still to be found in the writings of Peter Bulthaup. See, for example, Peter Bulthaup, *Das Gesetz der Befreiung. Und andere Texte*, Gesellschaftswissenschaftliches Institut Hannover (eds.), Lüneburg: Zu Klampen, 1998.
  - 7 Friedrich Schiller, 'Kallias oder über die Schönheit: Schönheit als Heautonomie,' in Gerhard Fricke and Herbert G. Göpfert (eds.), *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 5, München: Hanser, 1962, p.400 and p.416.
  - 8 For these writers, Karl Philipp Moritz and his novel *Anton Reiser* (1785) proved to be a major point of orientation, supported in opposition to the linear Enlightenment that Goethe's *Bildungsroman* of the time suggested. For an extensive discussion of Karl Philipp Moritz's *Autonomieästhetik*, see Karl Philipp Moritz, *Die Signatur des Schönen und andere Schriften zur Begründung der Autonomieästhetik*, Hamburg: Philo Fine Arts, 2009.
  - 9 Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische und theoretische Schriften*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1978, p.84.
  - 10 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Werke*, vol. 7, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986, p.381.
  - 11 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Werke*, vol. 3, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1986, p.729.
  - 12 Karl Marx, afterword to *Das Kapital*, quoted in Louis Althusser, 'Contradiction and Overdetermination,' in *For Marx*, Ben Brewster (trans.), London: Pantheon, 1969, p.89.
  - 13 The distinction between 'work' and 'labour' that I am importing here denotes the difference between what Hegel characterises in his early 'Jenaer Realphilosophie': '*Arbeit selbst als solche ist nicht nur Tätigkeit, sondern in sich reflektierte, Hervor-/bringen, einseitige Form des Inhalts*' (Work in itself is not only activity but is reflected in itself, creation, one side form of the content). See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, 'Jenaer Realphilosophie,' in *Frühe politische Systeme*, Gerhard Göhler (ed.), Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1974, p.219; and what Karl Marx in 1857/58 distinguished as 'abstrakte Arbeit, die keine besondere Qualität besitzt und daher durch bloße Quantität meßbar ist' (Abstract labour, which carries no specific function and thus is measurable only by its sheer quantity); see Karl Marx, *Marx-Engels Werke*, vol.13, Berlin: Dietz, 1984, p.42. In the former, the individual uses tools to realise himself or herself in nature, while in the latter, the individual itself becomes the tool of the realisation of a value.

- 14 In *The Autonomy Project* (2011/12), a collaboration between the Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven) and different art study programmes, initiated by Charles Esche and Sven Lütticken, such distinctions between labour and work became equally central. See, for example, John Byrne, 'Use Value and the Contemporary Work of Art: Freeing Art from the Present Technocratic Framework', or Hito Steyerl, 'Art as Occupation: Claims for an Autonomy of Life', both in *Open*, no.23.
- 15 Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, in *Marx-Engels Werke*, vol.23, Berlin: Dietz, 1984, p.741.
- 16 Danny Hayward made me aware of the fact that the 'so-called' of the original German text was initially dropped, and only later restored, in the translation into English. A momentous omission, as it eradicates Marx distancing from the ideology of 'primitive accumulation' and renders it as an affirmative category.
- 17 Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, op. cit., p.531.
- 18 Steyerl, commenting on the passage mentioned in note 15, considers this as a 'refusal of the division of labour' on the part of art, which I find problematic in that the division of all other labour was indeed foundational for the autonomy of art and thus this allocation of agency presents us with a seemingly heroic but antisocial act.
- 19 See also Molly Nesbit, 'What Was an Author?,' *Yale French Studies*, no.73 (1987), pp.229-57.
- 20 An exemplary case of an art history beyond styles can be found in Justin Hoffman, *Destruktionskunst. Der Zerstörungsmythos in der Kunst der frühen sechziger Jahre*, Munich: Schreiber, 1992.
- 21 Juliane Rebentisch has made major contributions to the discussion around the contemporary relevance of a philosophical aesthetic and actualisations of autonomy in art. See, for example, Juliane Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art*, Berlin/New York: Sternberg Press, 2012 (German version, 2003) and *Die Kunst der Freiheit*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2012.
- 22 For an introduction to the history of autonomia, see Sylvère Lotringer and Christian Marazzi (eds.), *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics*, Los Angeles: semiotext(e), 1980; Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*, London: Pluto Press, 2002.
- 23 Mario Tronti, quoted in Dario Gentili, 'The Autonomy of the Political in the Italian Tradition (Tronti, Negri, Cacciari)', in Nathaniel Boyd, Michele Filippini, and Luisa Lorenza Corna (eds.),

- The Autonomy of the Political: Concept, Theory, Form*, Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Academie, 2012, p.13.
- 24 Mario Tronti, 'Fabrik und Gesellschaft [La fabbrica et la società]', *Quaderni Rossi*, no. 2, 1962, [http://www.wildcat-www.de/dossiers/operaismus/qtr2\\_tron.htm](http://www.wildcat-www.de/dossiers/operaismus/qtr2_tron.htm).
  - 25 Ibid.
  - 26 Speech by Helke Sander, 'Aktionsrat zur Befreiung der Frau', Frankfurt am Main, September 1968.
  - 27 Gisela Dischner, 'Sozialisationstheorie und materialistische Ästhetik', in *Das Unvermögen der Realität. Beiträge zu einem anderen materialistischen Ästhetikum*, Chris Bezzel (ed.), Berlin: Wagenbach, 1974, p.99.
  - 28 See Andrea Fraser's contribution to the *Autonomy Project*, suggesting that autonomy, understood in psychological terms, might be read as a 'defense function'. Andrea Fraser, 'Autonomy and Its Contradictions', in *Open*, no.23.
  - 29 For a systematic differentiation of modern and contemporary art see Juliane Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012.
  - 30 Yann Moulier Boutang, foreword to *Umherschweifende Produzenten. Immaterielle Arbeit und Subversion*, Thomas Atzert (ed.), Berlin: ID Verlag, 1998, p.17.
  - 31 Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, 'Intellectuals and Power: A Discussion between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze', in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, Daniel F. Bouchard (ed.), Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977, pp.206-7.
  - 32 Andrea Fraser, 'Creativity = Capital?', in *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser*, Alexander Alberro (ed.), Cambridge MA.: MIT Press, 2005, p.32.