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Sedimented Forms: Coming Back to Autonomy

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Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 22.3 (2020)**

Special Issue: **A Symposium on Nicholas Brown's *Autonomy*. Edited by Mathias Nilges.**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss3/>>

Marina VISHMIDT

Sedimented Forms: Coming Back to Autonomy

What does it mean either to affirm or deny that art is a commodity "like any other"? And why is this an ontological problem for art in a way it is not for any other commodity? Though not perhaps wholly unpredictable as a phenomenon given the resurgence of Marxist inquiries in the academy since at least the global financial crisis, though that momentum had been building since the turn of the century with Negri and Hardt's *Empire*, recent years have seen several approaches to these questions.

They have taken the form of disproving art's commodity status vis-à-vis the stipulations of neoclassical economics and Marxist theory alike (Beech), the downgrading of artistic autonomy as an interesting problem in the age of the "creative" and their "industries"

Can an object be autonomous when autonomy as a disposition or a relation becomes unavailable to its viewers? It could be argued that if there is no space left for an autonomy of the subject, the autonomy of the object becomes something akin to a Zen koan. The internal, unemphatic other to capitalist values becomes a talisman of another civilization or spacetime, not ours.

(Brouillette), the tracing of a tangled dialectic of political and artistic autonomy on its way to somewhere else (Stakemeier and Vishmidt) and finally, a number of sorties into the related problem of abstraction as a political-economic and conceptual condition for contemporary art (Lütticken; Ngai; Moreno). Theodor W. Adorno and Peter Bürger can be seen as anchoring some of these more recent contributions as they chart the relationship between the modern principle of artistic autonomy and its historical vicissitudes.

The volume under review can be said to depart from these projects in a number of significant ways. The difference in the path Brown takes can be seen immediately in the type of object he engages, which is generically promiscuous, encompassing the proverbial "culture industry" rather than a demarcated field of visual art, or the literary arts, in the case of Brouillette or Ngai above. In this, he is taking a cue in spirit if not in method from Adorno's autonomy thesis, which is often applied to parse modernist painting whereas it was actually concerned with modernist music and literary texts. If only to invert the spirit, however, because the generic promiscuity signals a bid that the "culture industry"/"art" dichotomy can be overcome if "autonomy" designates only the internal coherence of the object rather than its position in the market or the type of labor used to produce it. The autonomous artwork may be located in the market, but its autonomy is not determined by it, negatively or affirmatively. For Adorno, the market existence of an artwork was extraneous; it always came second, analytically speaking. For Brown, it is simply an unavoidable parameter, forming its condition of legibility as an artwork; thus, institutional definitions cease to have traction. This is why Brown can pursue an inquiry wholly indebted to Adorno, Kant and Hegel and discuss figures such as Ben Lerner, *The Wire*, and the White Stripes, a trajectory he has been working on for several years through essays published in *nonsite* journal and elsewhere. As with those philosophies of the aesthetic, for Brown the stakes of autonomy as a social ontology of art lies nearly exclusively on the side of reception, not production; or, perhaps more to the point, in the nature of the artwork that mediates reception and production. Thus the book juxtaposes one form of immanence with another: the historically unprecedented immanence of the market to artworks may be confronted or suspended when works succeed in realizing an *immanent* purposiveness, and thereby make their claims to aesthetic autonomy. One of the primary vehicles for this claim, in Brown's account, is genre, and the significant discussion on this is found in the chapters cited above.

Brown may not be talking about visual art as his referent for "art," but this is not only to demonstrate that autonomy can extend to artefacts of popular culture, but so can the category of "art," underlining Bürger's thesis that art and autonomy in modernity are different names for the same thing (Bürger). Autonomy is the ideological (de-historicized and essentialized) social fact of an exemption from the relations of capitalist production. Precisely because it is a social fact, or, more strongly, a social ontology, it cannot be transcended ethically, strategically or through any variant of "critical practice." This is a state of affairs whose disavowal has become consensual in contemporary art. But if the modernist commitment to autonomy is revealed as aesthetic ideology, i.e. an imaginary relationship to the real conditions of existence, that does not bring a contemporary commitment to heteronomy any closer to truth. Like modernist autonomy, it is a productive ideology, with autonomy ever ritually slain by those constituencies of the institution of art that are committed to extending art's capacities beyond its walls, or re-situating it as yet another managerial "competence" useful in any manner of predicaments. In this

regard, it is to be noted that the emphasis on experience and interaction in art that tends towards "social practice" as well as the spectacle economy of "mirror rooms" and ice cream museums, as has been critiqued by Claire Bishop and others in recent years, is taken up by Brown as an equation of experience with the heteronomy of the market, with "external contingent compulsion" rather than internally generated meaning, a meaning which is excess to the medium or the institutions that condition it.

For Brown, conversely, the designation of art/autonomy is along the axis of intention and internal coherence; it is an evaluative, or at best, structural and relational term rather than an institutional category. That means he is concerned with the "field of cultural production" as a whole when he talks about the art field, hence he can talk about "subfields", such as music, in the book, while still calibrating their degree of subsumption *at the level of the work*, which is how we are able to measure if a work falls into the category of art or culture industry. Internal coherence is key to the analysis, because if it is not present, the arbiter of the work's composition is anticipated consumer desire, or, the demands of the market rather than immanent ends. Since determination by immanent ends is, after all, the simple definition of "autonomy," it seems to be logical to conflate "autonomy" and "art" here. The argument is basically in accord with Adorno's division between art and the culture industry, albeit doing without Adorno's interest in the organization of the relations of production in the two spheres.

The artwork as the "internal unemphatic other to capitalist society," in one of the book's most concise formulations, has to be situated in a present where the relationship between culture industry and institutional or "contemporary" art, a gulf with many bridges thrown over it even in the days of *Aesthetic Theory*, is now of a character that reflects the unparalleled dominance of market logics in every sphere of existence. For this reason, the arguments made by, e.g., Adorno and Burger, for the critical traction of the principle of aesthetic autonomy, still hold, albeit for different reasons. For Burger, the failure of the pre- and inter-war avant-garde movement was parodically reflected in the institutionalization of dissent and attempts at art/life dismantling in the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s and 70s. The avant-garde failed in its initiative to overcome the social conditions of bourgeois society that hived off art to a passive condition of autonomy, failed to transform the whole of that society, in conjunction with revolutionary movements that also failed at this, and thus failed to sublimate itself in the process. Yet art could still critically mobilize this separation, just like all other "autonomous" institutions of a functionally differentiated civil society, to stamp its critique in the public sphere. For Brown, it is rather the "success" of the avant-garde—which is nothing but the other side of Burger's "failure"—at stamping its sensibility and methods on the offerings of the culture industry that has to be reckoned with. Further, there are no longer institutions whose relative autonomy lends them critical traction with respect to the administered whole, and there is no "organized social basis" which could mount a productive challenge to the financialized institutions that do exist. But this only exacerbates a situation that was arguably already the case in the era of the historical avant-gardes. Without a revolutionary impetus, the "heteronomization" of art, the attempt to overcome the division between art and life, would only ever result in more material for the culture industry or more assets for the financial markets, if life is always on course to merge with capitalist life, i.e. the market.

Given this vision of a tendentially all-engulfing capitalist *bios*, a question could be posed about whether the proposition is primarily an empirical or a logical one. It could be noted here that, *pace* Michel Foucault, Rosa Luxemburg or Jason W. Moore, universal heteronomy to the market is implausible as a claim since market rule requires nonmarket actors and institutions, which it in turn menaces or adapts to its ends. This can be seen in both doctrinaire neoliberalism, with its more or less salient authoritarian sides, in Foucault's story of both ordoliberalism and neoliberalism in the *Birth of Biopolitics* lectures, or in Luxemburg's, Moore's or social reproduction theory's emphasis on the need for non-commodified or non-valued "outsides" such as nature and gendered labor, to subsidize capitalist profit-making. The principle that primitive accumulation is ongoing rather than an originary moment would not necessarily clash with Brown's argument, with its emphasis on the constant saturation of more of the world by market logics. However, the omission of labor, or production processes in general, from his account of the social form of autonomy as a still-critical ontology of the artwork in the present, leaves the projection of autonomy exclusively onto the artwork looking like a one-sided pursuit, an issue which the above accounts can help cast in relief. I will return to this.

One of the more fascinating turns in the argument is its foray into a value-form theory spin on the determination of the artwork's autonomy as internal law vs. external demand. This is sketched out early on in the introduction although not developed elsewhere. Specifically, it is intended as the response to the question this review began with, in a paraphrase of the question of autonomy: why is the social ontology of art different from the social ontology of all other commodities? The Hegelian integration of the ontological and the dialectical is a template for inquiries in social ontology, so the recourse to value-form theory makes sense here. The difference is surprisingly simple, and this is because it is an

illustration of the thesis using Marx's circuits of c-m-c' and m-c-m'. In the first, the commodity is an end in itself and its exchange is mediated by money; this corresponds to use-value in the circuit. In the second, the telos is money, mediated by the commodity, and this corresponds to exchange-value. The difference, however, is set out in affective terms: "What we have arrived at is an entity that embodies, and must seek to compel, conviction and an entity that seeks to provoke interest in its beholder—or, perhaps, all kinds of different interest from different beholders." (Brown 6). Although the gulf here is seen to be an ontological one, the two circuits can also be seen, as they are in Marx, as different moments of the same process, or, as Brown puts it, the same process considered from different standpoints. Such dialectical agility shows the mediating hand of the "systematic dialectic" and the return to Hegel that has pervaded some corners of Anglophone Marxist theory since discussion and translation of the *wertkritik* publications started to emerge in roughly the past decade, a project that Brown has also been dedicated to (Brown, Larsen, Nilges and Robinson).

The political implications of Brown's account of the autonomy of art are both emphatic and elusive. Emphatic inasmuch as Brown is clear in his adherence to the politics of artistic autonomy as a necessary precondition to any emancipatory politics. Here there is a nod to the ethical universalism of Kant's reflective judgment as staged by aesthetic experience—if there is no training of the sensibility in gaining a distance from things as they are, prompted by the internal coherence of, e.g., an artwork, how can the possibility of social change ever arise? Further, this is understood as a more radical position than the Schillerian aesthetics that attempted to politicize the contemplative limits of Kant's position. Aesthetic education, in Schiller, can only exert a compensatory effect for the social barbarism of emergent commercial modernity; it cannot cultivate the critical distance enabling its overcoming in actuality. That is not what autonomy as a social ontology is intended to do. It is precisely as a vector towards emancipation on a political level that internal coherence as the commitment to internally generated laws is staked out as the core of the autonomy of the aesthetic. With this refusal of the pedagogical or the compensatory, autonomy's critical intervention folds back on the gesture of autonomy as promissory, in Adorno's sense of the term, that is, on the capacity to have or prefigure politics other than the shifting desires of the market. And maybe in our current conjuncture such an alignment of autonomy with negativity (a distinction Marcuse already drew in his writing on the affirmative character of art, that is, of autonomy) already takes us quite far, after the historical moment of autonomy as an ideology of the aesthetic and after the prospect of social autonomy beyond the market have both faded away.

But if it takes us some distance, the question might then be how much mileage is left. Brown shows a salutary reticence in making dramatic claims for autonomy as coextensive with, rather than evocative of, any form of practical politics or ethics; inasmuch as autonomy gives us a view on non-identity, it is as foreign as can be to immediate use-values. The close readings that comprise the substantive part of the book are each persuasive exercises "reading for autonomy" as the tracking of internal coherence in art works, whether in the visual arts, novels, television series, or albums, with respect to their participation in the social, historical and formal conditions of their "genre." The innovativeness of the approach, at heart is a classical one, is in the possibilities thrown up by bringing the autonomy thesis out from the hothouse of high modernist art into a much wider field and into the present. *Autonomy* is thus concerned to show there much life yet to be found in the approach. At the same time, there is a moment in the epilogue, which vies with the introduction in density and abundance of conceptual energy, where an opening towards a differently articulated notion of autonomy is made. This is the discussion of "purposiveness without purpose" as it reflects on Roberto Schwarz's renowned essay on Kafka's *Cares of a Family Man* (translated by Brown), and its uncanny homunculus, the spool-person Odradek. While the character may represent the impossible, phantom underside of the "bourgeois order," what is more interesting, according to Brown, is its evacuation of the punitive structures of bourgeois order: "a lumpenproletariat without hunger and without fear of the police" (181). As such, the figure of Odradek is an analogue to the 'internal, unemphatic other' of the artwork, in its purposelessness and its vague menace to all right-thinking, but what if its excess, its negativity were to be followed as worklessness, as the negativity of labor? Neither the dimension of labor as internal negativity to capitalist valorization, nor the art-adjacent psychology of "human capital" formation, are broached in the version of autonomy as strictly artwork-immanent here. But neither the market immanence of the contemporary artwork in the cultural market nor its institutionally enabled internal coherence can really be grasped when neither producers or consumers—the subjects for such objects—come into the picture. Can an object be autonomous when autonomy as a disposition or a relation becomes unavailable to its viewers, to take up Brown's contention that market saturation has now engulfed pretty much everything? As theorist Catherine Rottenberg notes, "Human beings are remade as specks of capital so that our relationship to ourselves and others becomes one of capital appreciation. Our relationships are perceived as forms of

capital that need to be invested wisely in order to enhance the self's overall value" (Kale). It could be argued that if there is no space left for an autonomy of the subject, the autonomy of the object becomes something akin to a Zen koan. The internal, unemphatic other to capitalist values becomes a talisman of another civilization or spacetime, not ours. This also casts a baleful light on the division made in the book between the powerlessness of autonomy as politics and the powerlessness of political art. The dimension of autonomy as social ontology of art that can emerge through a consideration of the decay of the social autonomy of labor would also, conversely, allow us to sketch out the possibilities of autonomy as *praxis*, that is, how the ontology of art in capital is one of an autonomy that cannot be (narcissistically) dissolved in politics but rather enables, with its conceptual and economic resources, other and transversal ways of doing politics: the internal other doing an inside job.

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