

**Towards a Justifiable Conception of  
‘the Autonomous Artwork’  
in Today’s Artworld**

**Filosofisk institutt, Universitet i Bergen**

**Hovedfagsoppgave**

**Arlyne Moi**

**Våren 2005**



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Lars Fr. H. Svendsen, Deirdre C. P. Smith, Kjetil Skjerve, Thomas E. Payne, Vibeke Tellmann, Anders Reiersgaard and Christer Swartz for reading portions of earlier drafts of this paper, and for commenting on aspects of them. Also thanks to Hanne Beate Ueland of Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo, for making available to me many of the artworks discussed here.

*In the time of writing, the work of writing can never be concluded: the work remains unfinished and unfinishable, as if beginning and beginning again in an eternal return of a present that endures without a future and from which there is no exit.*

*(Maurice Blanchot, The Step Not Beyond)*

*Stamp out, and eradicate, superfluous redundancy.*

*(Thomas E. Payne)*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS *ii*

CONTENTS *iii*

PROLOGUE *v*

**1. INTRODUCTION 1**

The autonomous artwork is a controversial issue 1; The autonomous artwork is a confused issue 4; Problemstilling and thesis statement 6; overview of chapters 6

**2. BACKGROUND AND ROOTS OF ‘THE AUTONOMOUS ARTWORK’ 8**

Nomos 8; Auto: The self 9; Autonomous combined with artwork-self 10

**3. KANT AND THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF AUTONOMY 11**

The four moments, the artist genius and the aesthetic idea 12; What are the building-blocks of autonomy? 16

**4. TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION OF ‘THE AUTONOMOUS ARTWORK’ 18**

SECTION I: CONCEPTIONS OF THE ‘AUTONOMOUS ARTWORK’ WITH WEAK ONTOLOGICAL COMMITMENTS 19

**A. The work’s autonomous status as being related to the artist 19**

**B. ‘The autonomous artwork’ understood in terms of its reception 23**

*i.* Attitude theories: The aesthetic attitude and the judgment of taste 23

*ii.* The artwork is free of moral liability because all moral obligation lies with the judge 29

*iii.* Reception of artworks as non-conceptual, as feeling only 30

*iv.* ‘Autonomous artwork’ understood in terms of reception being under-determined by the symbolic form of language 30

**C. The artwork’s autonomy understood in relation to the artworld’s separation from the rest of society, or the work’s separation from the artworld 32**

SECTION II. ONTOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO THE WORK’S AUTONOMY 37

**A. Aesthetic Realism 37**

*i.* The Aesthetic object 37; *ii.* Significant form 39; *iii.* Pure intentionality 40

**B. Views focusing on the aesthetically perceptible artwork 41**

*iv.* Formalism and Aestheticism: value is independent of meaning, reference and utility 41; *v.* A delimited world of forms and symbols, self-sufficient for its correct interpretation 47; *vi.* Essentialism’s autonomy 49; *vii.* No universal definition 51; *viii.* No definition at all 52; *ix.* Intuitive expression 52;

*x.* Purposiveness without determinate purpose 53; *xi.* The double character 55

SUMMARY 57

A synthesis of provisional moments of autonomy for the artwork 60

**5. HEIDEGGER, BLANCHOT AND DERRIDA on the AUTONOMOUS ARTWORK 61**

**A. Heidegger’s artwork: earth and world striving 62**

The workly character of the artwork 62; The work subsists in itself 65; The earth withdraws, occludes itself 65; The world is unknowable 67

**B. Blanchot’s double character 68**

The dead and the autonomous artwork 68; ‘The autonomous artwork’ as negator of artist, receiver and meaning 70; What is ‘the autonomous artwork’ for? 72; The relationship between the two slopes 72

## DISCUSSION PART 1: OF HEIDEGGER AND BLANCHOT'S 'AUTONOMOUS ARTWORK' 73

Ambiguity with the status of the earth and world, and the dead and autonomous slopes 73; Is the autonomous artwork prior, and thus the condition for signification and value? 74; A problem with Blanchot's fragmented consciousness *vis a vis* the zombifying artwork 75; Is ontological priority at all a relevant issue for contemporary artworks? 76; Ontological solitude 76; The artwork's fragmentary nature 77

### C. Derrida: The undecidable artwork 78

Derrida's deconstructive practice 79; 'The autonomous artwork' understood as having undecidable form 81; 'The autonomous artwork' understood as non-restorable to a corresponding truth 83; 'The autonomous artwork' understood as non-restorable to a purpose 87

## DISCUSSION PART 2: DERRIDA'S NARRATIVE OF THE AUTONOMOUS ARTWORK, WITH COMPARISON TO KANT, HEIDEGGER AND BLANCHOT 89

### 1. The work, the artist and the receiver in light of undecidability 89

Undecidability makes the subject fall apart 89

### 2. The undecidable artwork's separation from truth-as-correspondence 93

Derrida's scepticism 93; Demonstrating non-restitution: A secret and contradictory trust in truth-as-correspondence? 95

### 3. The undecidable purpose 96

Judgment of purpose: An art-religion? 97; The undecidable artwork and moral concerns: Is the artwork morally obligated? 98

### 4. How successful is Derrida's failure? 99

The usefulness of the undecidable artwork 100

SUMMARY: 'The HBD autonomous artwork' 100

## 6. A THIRD HYBRID 102

**The *PH* viewed through the tense of the *HBD* and vice versa** 103

**The artist's authenticity of expression in light of undecidability** 104

Law-likeness without a law: agency and product 105; 'Authenticity' as taking responsibility for one's artistic expression 105

**The receiver's responsibility in light of undecidability** 108

A THIRD HYBRID 110

## 7. CONCLUSION 112

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

## PROLOGUE

Bergen, 1994-1999:

“Never sell your work and never talk about your intentions,” they said, but no one would account for why. “Representation” and “mimesis” were dirty words. So was “theory”. I suppose that’s why there was no required reading, no theoretical discussion and no papers to write. All discussion was limited to technical and formal concerns. The good word was “tacit knowledge”. Why? Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* §7 was the answer:

What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.

After four years at art school, the newly employed theory teacher said in a low tone: “Make your artwork useless.” But art school clashed with the wider artworld. Contemporary international artists spoke out about their intentions, and their artworks were being judged for political and social import, even for truth claims. Maplethorpe was sued. ‘The autonomous artwork’ seemed to be a critical issue—and my artistic practice? How should it be? What are my artworks for?

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

Since the nineteenth-century, *the autonomous artwork*<sup>1</sup> has been one of the touchstones in the field of art. It is often baked into discussions about artistic creation, identity, interpretation, and value. When the expression is not specifically mentioned, it is implicitly present in other usage such as “the artist-genius”, “the work in itself”, “originality”, “the hermetic work”, “non-purposiveness”, “ineffectuality”, “art’s separation from epistemology and morality”, “the artworld’s play-logic”, ‘transgressive art’, and ‘Modern art’, etc. If interlocutors do not assume some version of the work’s autonomy, they are often reacting *against* it, challenging it.

*‘The autonomous artwork’ is a controversial issue*

Interpretations of Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*<sup>2</sup> §1-60 established ‘autonomy’ as pre-eminently relevant for thinking about ‘a field of art’, and throughout the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries of Modernism, its relation to the field—artworld<sup>3</sup>—complexified, culminating in a swamp of disparate conceptions, all vying for legitimacy. Under High Modernism, with the exception of directions such as Social Realism (e.g., Diego Rivera), most Western artists were pretty much on the political periphery;<sup>4</sup> as long as their expressions were confined to the art institutional setting, they received little political interference, at least on the face of things.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper I use Arthur Danto’s coinage “artwork”, with “work” as synonym.

<sup>2</sup> Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* will here to fore be referred to as CJ.

<sup>3</sup> By “artworld”, what I mean is a microcosm generally understood as the social, economic and political domain in which artists both work and find support. It is a domain made up of many people who cooperate by means of shared conventions that allow them to coordinate their activities. Through repeated cooperation by people who are similar enough in their function to be considered the same, we can speak of an artworld. (See, for example, Becker, 1998, p. 148.) According to some thinkers, it is qualitatively different than the rest of culture; according to others, it reflects the general culture and is overwhelmingly connected to it. Some thinkers would make a distinction between artists on the one hand, and the rest of the artworld on the other. In this paper, “the artworld”, “the art institution(s)” “the field of art” are treated as synonyms. Within the artworld there are many institutions (e.g., museums, art publishers, but there are also habitual practices which are institutionalized).

<sup>4</sup> By “political” I mean broadly “life in the polis”: political, religious and other everyday concerns.

<sup>5</sup> I allude to the CIA’s involvement in Modern Art during the Cold War, as addressed by Frances Stonor Saunders engaging book *Who Paid the Piper?* London: Granta Books, 1999. Saunders tells how the CIA heavily supported non-figurative visual art, abstract music, Modern Art theory and cultural activities that could fulfil Cold War propaganda purposes. Her chapter 16, “Yanqui Doodles” deals with the CIA’s involvement in MoMA.

Yet today's artworld experiences a transition: Now artists are leaving art-institutional settings and entering the everyday spaces where historical consequences, instrumentality, responsibility, personal ethics, relations of power and stated intentions are readily apparent. One pertinent Norwegian example of this transition is *Kunst Passasjen* located in the Oslo Metro, a typically commercial space [Illustration 1]<sup>6</sup> Other examples are *Bergen Kunstforening*, *Nasjonalmuseet* in Oslo and the *Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art*, Oslo. Bergen Kunstforening was, until a few years ago, the venue for artworks traditionally understood as autonomous; it has now been displaced with *Kunsthallen*, which mounts demonstratively politically enmeshed exhibitions.<sup>7</sup> Nasjonalmuseet in Oslo recently re-hung their "basis exhibition" according to themes, some of which are markedly morally enmeshed (*'the vulnerable human being'*). As for Astrup Fearnley Museum, they regularly mount exhibitions highlighting artworks relating to our common everyday life-world; expressions urgently engage with content such as *temporality, memory, commercialism, consumerism and social commentary*.<sup>8</sup> These four examples are instances of late modern ideology<sup>9</sup> attempting to dismantle the distinctions famously put in place by Kant, between the domains of aesthetics, epistemology and morality. Still, in spite of the dissolution of clear institutional boundaries and demonstrative instrumentality, many of the dogmas and dreams about *the autonomous artwork* continue—some of the basic assumptions of Kantian<sup>10</sup> (i.e. Modern) aesthetic theory are kept, Kant's "Copernican turn" in aesthetics<sup>11</sup>—but these assumptions are ever more critically crowded by questions concerning the social-political function of art, artist's moral responsibilities, the psychology of aesthetic perception, the sociological relations of art, gender or race-related issues, and the role of art in interpreting the needs and desires of the polis.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> It starts near the passageway between the lobbies at Jernbanetorget Metro Station.

<sup>7</sup> Spring 2005, the Bergen Kunsthall mounted *Time Suspended*, which deals with the theme *refugees and human rights: the challenge of longstanding conflicts*. This exhibition is a collaborative effort on behalf of video-artists and human rights organizations such as the Raftos Foundation. As well as viewing videos dealing with the Israel/Palestine conflict, the Kunsthall has "curated" a seminar series by non-art professionals (politicians, journalists, judges, human rights activists and researchers) to present their views to gallery-goers.

<sup>8</sup> A good example is *Everyday Aesthetics*, Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo, 27.09.03-30.11.03. Among the artists represented: Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, Jeff Koons and Charles Ray. For anyone familiar with contemporary art, these names will indicate Postmodern approaches.

<sup>9</sup> I use the term "late modern" rather than "Postmodern". By this, I refer to ideologues who might be considered Postmodern, in the sense that they want to deconstruct the distinction between the domains of art, morality and epistemology: Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, but also American authors writing in the October Book series, MIT Press, such as Douglas Crimp, Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss.

<sup>10</sup> By 'Kantian', what is referred to is the many interpretations of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, be they focused on the psychological aspects of aesthetic experience or the formal and expressive dimensions of aesthetic experience.

<sup>11</sup> What I mean by "Copernican turn" is the insight that *it is not what the artwork holds for a individual to discover, but what the individual brings to the work*, both a priori features and attitude that constitute and determine their aesthetic experience. (See chapter 2).

<sup>12</sup> A good example is the "Cultural Studies" movement, where the traditional study of Art History is augmented or displaced with Visual Cultural Studies, more akin to social science. Contrast, for example, Jonathan Harris' *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2001), with Ernst Gombrich's classic *The Story of Art*: Gombrich's chapters follow chronological history, while Harris' book is organized according to themes dealing with capitalist modernity, feminism, the subject's identity, sexuality, structures and meaning in art and society.

Furthermore, if one accepts, as I do, that ready-mades are art, one must accept that *anything can be art*.<sup>13</sup> Because of this, the late modern ideological trends that deny moral/epistemological independence of artworks seem to make good sense, because the Kantian *aesthetic point of view*—the view that swept moral and epistemological considerations aside—becomes increasingly difficult to maintain simultaneously as receivers experience it as incomprehensible and irrelevant. For example, formerly it was common to address AIDS in news media, law-courts, health-industry publications and from the pulpit, but now this theme is *directly* addressed in art. By changing the context in which AIDS is broached, a morass of moral concerns arise: Intuitively, it seems misguided to don a so-called disinterested attitude and restrict one's reception to "art-internal" concerns such as the golden mean, or to focus on taste, or the work's supposed indeterminate purposiveness. Can we assign AIDS-related artworks a separate sphere of value on account of some understanding of their autonomy? What makes them different from AIDS-related non-art? Andrew Bowie, for example, asserts that the significance of an artwork lies in its ability to reveal, by some special status, what nothing else can.<sup>14</sup> But hasn't the loss of an exclusive institutional setting, political and instrumental artworks, and the ready-made, made a mockery of that claimed special status? 'The autonomous artwork', in its many guises, is under redoubled attack. At one end of the spectrum of today's artworld, advocate of Modernism could say:

'The autonomous artwork' remains an important expression for the artworld; it denotes something beyond the threshold of determinate knowledge, if not moral constraints, and it is not directly instrumental. 'The autonomous artwork' is crucial for ensuring the artist's freedom of expression and art's contribution within advanced capitalist societies. Moreover, there are many justifiable ways of interpreting 'autonomous artwork', which share in traditional Kantian commitments.

At the other end of the spectrum, a dissenter could respond:

'The autonomous artwork', *in most of its interpretations*, is wishful thinking. It hides a multitude of deceit. If anything about the artwork were considered autonomous today, it would be to the detriment of cultural life generally. Artworks are directly instrumental and inter-relational with epistemological and moral concerns. Most aspects of the Kantian moments of aesthetic judgment are defunct.

One international example of these competing voices is Lucy Lippard and Hilton Kramer: When Lippard, in a catalogue text for the *Art & Ideology* exhibit (1990) at the *New Museum of Contemporary Art* in New York, stated: "All art is ideological and all art is used politically by the right or the left." Kramer replied: "[...] this movement toward the politicization of art in this country is an attempt to turn back the cultural political clock to the Stalinist social consciousness

---

<sup>13</sup> Here I am stating an important assumption. When Duchamp's ready-mades attained the status of art, a revolution in the artworld occurred: Either the artworld entered a new dispensation (something that before could not have been art now could be art), or something was realized about art that never before had been apparent, namely, that calling something *art* is the primary aesthetic judgment. And 'art' is increasingly understood as being, *in some respects*, a proper name like "George" (this will be discussed in chapter 4). Meanwhile, in asserting that *anything can be art*, I am also already assuming an important sort of autonomy for the artwork, and will throughout this paper—that *in being able to be anything, the work is independent from the necessity of being something*, as was traditionally understood as a criteria for art, prior to the advent of non-figuration. Accepting ready-mades as artworks entails already having accepted a modicum of autonomy for the artwork.

<sup>14</sup> Bowie, 1995, p. 34.

of the 1930's.<sup>15</sup> Yet these competing voices are also heard in Norway: In 2003, fifty-nine Norwegian artists and art-professionals were surveyed on the theme of autonomy.<sup>16</sup> To the question: "If art is autonomous, then what is it dependent on?" one participant answered "The magic of the night". Another replied "Itself", while a third answered "A whole lot of people, who are willing to make use of its physical potential". To the question "Why is art morally responsible?" answers varied: "Because art has to do with qualities, language, distinctions that involve communication between human beings." Contrariwise, "Art in itself has no moral responsibility". The participants were also asked about the work in relation to the artist, with the question: "Why is an artist not morally responsible?" Answers ranged from: "Because he is an artist" and "A morally responsible artist is no artist," to "I don't think it is possible to both call yourself an artist, or even a human being for that matter, and at the same time claim that this is not morally demanding." Hence, both internationally and locally, 'the autonomous artwork' is a controversial issue, ambulating from being something wanted and claimed, to being something contested or denied.

*'The autonomous artwork' is a confused issue*

There are a myriad of construals of 'the autonomous artwork' jumbled in the cacophony of the artworld: *the artist's private expression; ontological independence; the separate status of the artwork in society, its separation from truth and moral judgments; the receiver's disinterested reception; the work's radical ambiguity; its self-sufficiency for either interpretation or justification; under-determination by language; transcendental essence, transgression of norms, non-purposiveness; an empty game; powerlessness or infectivity; the fragment; absolutely un-reducible unit; non-defineability;* just to mention a few. One problem, as I see it, of what has been written on the theme of 'the autonomous artwork', is that writers tends towards "myopia"; there is a lack an appreciation of the enormity of different concurrent conceptions.<sup>17</sup> Indicative of this "myopia" is Atle Kittang's very useful essay, "*Til forsvar for autonomiestetikken—rett forstått*", where he only acknowledges one explication of 'autonomous artwork' as legitimate.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, many art-professional's practice seems to indicate that they have not reflected much over what they want 'autonomous artwork' to mean, and how the different conceptions can conflict, and how 'the autonomous work' may be distinct from instrumental works. Self-

---

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.uic.edu/classes/ad/ad382/sites/AEA/AEA\\_05/AEA\\_05a.html](http://www.uic.edu/classes/ad/ad382/sites/AEA/AEA_05/AEA_05a.html)

<sup>16</sup> Frigstad, 2003, pp.37-62.

<sup>17</sup> An important exception is Peter Bürger's excellent "Critique of Autonomy" in Kelly, vol. 1, 1994, pp. 175-178, where he mentions at least 8 different construals. Still, there are many he does not mention. This problem reveals Kant's wisdom in describing the autonomous field as having many moments. (See chapter 3).

<sup>18</sup> Translation: "In Defence of the Aesthetics of Autonomy—Correctly Understood". As far as I can see, what I call *the myopic problem* is perhaps a necessary evil, and perfectly understandable in relational to the Modern research-university scholars' in-depth focus on one small segment of a field, which begets the highly specialized 'fag idiot' or 'nerd' as we would say in English. I am not trying to knock Kittang, as I feel that his New Critical approach is one of the most valuable understandings of the work's autonomy; it is just too limited.

contradictions arise. For example, when Dror Feiler's *Snow White and the Madness of Truth* (2004) [Illustration 2] made international news, the art critic Yoram Kaniuk,<sup>19</sup> in his discussion of Feiler's work, did not seem to be expressing an Adornoesque duplicity when he said: "*Kunsten er ikke hellig. Kunsten forandrer ikke verden.*" (Art is not holy. Art cannot change [anything in] the world.) According to a reasonable interpretation, Kaniuk's assertion is problematic: The first sentence indicates that the artwork is not autonomous because it is not cut off from human moral and epistemological judgments. Therefore, we presume, it can be judged according to some standard of truth and morality. But the second sentence contradicts this: Art is ineffectual with regard to the daily activities of humans. Thus it is "holy" in the sense of blameless; we must assume the work is not able to encourage people to hate or kill, empathize or mourn; it is merely a goal unto itself, has no determinate significance for events in the world. Thus from the same mouth, the artwork is first criticized for wielding power (the instrumentalist position) and thereafter criticized for lacking power (an autonomist position). Another inconsistency about the Feiler incident was that Israel's ambassador Zvi Mazel, a significant political person, was invited to an *instrumental artworld* but thereafter scolded for not conforming to an *autonomous artworld's rules*. Yet it may be argued that Mazel himself defended his "demonstrating performance" by playing the role of autonomous "the artist-genius", claiming to act from feelings without cognitive deliberation: "I acted out of how I felt, I could not do things any other way."<sup>20</sup>

But are these just instances of inconsistency, or could the artwork's autonomy and its instrumentality—the touted *double character*—coherently co-exist? Here is, as I see it, the contemporary scenario: The artist ardently desires that *her works be instrumental* (useful, significant and valuable in the political, morally laden every-day world); *simultaneously she claims the work's autonomy* (it is free to address any theme via any media and be presented in any venue).<sup>21</sup> As soon as the consequences of the work's instrumentality come to bear, the artist runs for cover under various and sundry of Modernism's conceptions of autonomy. Then the whole *language game* of 'the autonomous artwork' is deployed.<sup>22</sup> This scenario poses a striking problem because most theories designed to account for the work's autonomy rely for their paradigmatic examples upon Modern artworks, preferably from the first half of the twentieth-century—Formalist and Abstract Expressionist works, poetry and literature by the likes of Joyce and

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.artdaily.com/links.asp?idl=28&id=322>; Nyberg, Jan, "Den uskjønne kunsten", *Bergens Tidende* 23 January, 2004; Rosenbergs, Göran, "Ambassadøren og antisemittismen", *Bergens Tidende*, 24 January, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> An excellent example was in 2003, when art-students, under the banner of "*kunstens viktig funksjon: å skape offentlig debatt*" (art's important function: to create public debate), broke into a private house (in disrepair) and started altering it. They admitted breaking the law, but "art's important function" was above the law (in this case, the function was to point out the inconsistency that, while it is unlawful to let one's car rot on the roadside, it is lawful let your house fall into disrepair). ("Protesterer med kunst", in *Bergens Tidende*, 22 October, 2003, p. 2.)

<sup>22</sup> 'Language game', in this context, means all the things expressed in phrases such as *purposiveness without purpose*, *taste*, the *powerlessness or ineffectuality of art*, the *incommensurability of aesthetic phenomena to concepts*, or the *autonomy of reception*, etc., the web of Modern notions used to defend and justify the artwork.

Mallarmé. These examples are invoked to justify the freedoms of late modern, demonstratively instrumental, political, and morally enmeshed works.<sup>23</sup> Insofar as contemporary artworks are defended from onslaughts by way of theories, arguments and examples from Modernism's hay day, 'the autonomous artwork' may denote a closed epoch; it was an important concept, but perhaps it is mostly irrelevant for contemporary works? In any case, if it is going to be dismissed, or if it is still a viable notion for today, the tangle of conceptions needs to be thought through carefully once again, and, as well as reflecting over how the various understandings intertwine, their claims and arguments should be tested in light of today's art.

### *Problemstilling and thesis statement*

Can the disparate understandings of 'the autonomous artwork' be laid out, discussed, reflected over, and a revitalized synthesis be constructed, which could be relevant for contemporary artworks?<sup>24</sup> My thesis-statement is that *in light of post-Duchampian and demonstratively political-instrumental artworks, the field of possibilities has narrowed for what 'autonomous artwork' should mean. With a narrowed meaning, the expression 'autonomous artwork' can regain relevance for today's artworld.* The narrowed meaning I suggest retains some sceptical insights as expressed by Kant himself, but also some insights from his many interpreters. Furthermore, the notion of 'an undecidable character' can help overcome some of the problems experienced with 'the double character' of artworks.

### *Overview of chapters*

Chapter 2 begins by looking backwards, at the roots of the expression 'autonomous artwork'. It also brings to light some of the assumptions inadvertently swallowed when the adjective 'autonomous' is joined with 'artwork'. The backwards glance resumes in chapter 3, with what 'autonomous artwork' meant in light of Kant's *judgment of taste*, which provided a veritable

---

<sup>23</sup> Examples are legion, but three famous examples suffice: Robert Rauschenberg's *X Portfolio* was defended against obscenity charges by reference to his use of the "golden mean" and formal compositional features, the autonomy of the institutional setting, "disinterested interest". (See Crimp, 1993, pp. 6-13) To this Arthur Danto exclaimed, "[These museum directors] are arrogant Kantians who treated these extraordinary images as formal exercises..." Arthur C. Danto, "Censorship and Subsidy in the Arts," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 47/1 (Oct. 1993), pp. 25-61. <http://projects.gsd.harvard.edu/appendx/dev/issue2/jarzombek/index1.htm>

André Serrano's *Piss Christ* defended by Lucy Lippard according to the dictates of "art-internal" criteria. <http://menthelp.net/books/books.php?type=de&id=1124>: "The work is a large colour print, 60 x 40 inches. It is a Cibachrome print. This means it is glossy with deeply saturated colours, and its surface is very delicate, easily ruined by a fingerprint or a slight speck of dust. The image is not recognizable as a crucifix floating in the artist's own urine. The jar cannot be read from the print. Rather, a crucifix is presented in a golden, rosy medium within which constellations of tiny bubbles have been frozen in space. For all we know the crucifix could be suspended in amber or polyurethane. The formal qualities of the work are, in fact, quite mysterious and beautiful." Lippard also used arguments based upon the title's ambiguity, the artist's private expression, the artist's stated intentions and the context of the autonomous art institution. [http://www.csulb.edu/~jvancamp/361\\_r7.html](http://www.csulb.edu/~jvancamp/361_r7.html) is a congressional transcript record.

When Sally Mann's *Immediate Family* was accused of paedophilic content, they were defended with the claim that all the receiver is doing is looking in a mirror of her own values. <http://www.sallymann.org/index-1.html> (See ch. 4).

<sup>24</sup> By 'contemporary artworks', I choose to limit my focus to works such as are found in the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo.

deluge of “building blocks” for establishing a whole field of autonomy for art. Chapter 4 follows up with an alternating account and discussion of the most prominent understandings of ‘autonomous artwork’ prevalent today. These understandings tend to selectively appropriate and build upon aspects of the Kantian synthesis of what ‘autonomous artwork’ entailed. Admittedly, the task of chapter 4 is overly ambitious; some of the discussions are sparse, yet I see no way around it if one is to overcome the *myopic problem* addressed on page 4. In order to comply with the limitations of 115 pages, I strategically choose to treat in a more cursory fashion the discussion of the artwork’s autonomy as being situated within the art institution; and choose instead to focus on the Kantian legacy, which entails that the work be viewed in light of the artist and the receiver, and the ontological approaches with both weak and strong commitments. The art institution will nevertheless be ubiquitous throughout this paper. The chapter concludes by constructing a provisional synthesis of the moments of autonomy for contemporary artworks. Meanwhile, some of these moments are still problematic. Chapter 5 examines and discusses some of the views of Heidegger, Blanchot and Derrida. The goal is not to exhaustively present and discuss the aesthetic philosophies of these three thinkers—115 pages do not provide the scope for that—but to examine how they understand the artwork as autonomous. This can shed more light on the problem-points of chapter 4: the assertion that *material and formal features are primary and thus grounds for asserting the work’s autonomy*; the assertion that *the artwork’s autonomy is based on the fundamental incommensurability between the artwork’s symbolic form and the symbolic forms of speech and language*; and the notion of the artwork’s *double character*. As the chapter wanes, a second tentative list of moments of autonomy is suggested, which is a synthesis of thoughts from these three thinkers. Where they disagree, Derrida’s undecidability thesis is given preference. Chapter 6 takes the two synthesis of moments from chapters 4 and 5, compares and discusses, and then hazards a third hybrid of moments of autonomy for the contemporary artwork. It is, I feel, a sober, careful and justifiable list that does not make large claims about the work’s autonomy, but what remains is highly significant. Chapter 6 concludes with the following question: Is the project—of constructing a conception of ‘autonomous artwork’ that would be justifiable for contemporary artworks—obsolete? I conclude in chapter 7 with a review of the main points.

Throughout the paper, I have tried to address the problem expressed by Friedrich von Schlegel, that in the so-called philosophy of art, one of two things is usually missing: either the philosophy or the art. Prompted by Schlegel, I have, where possible, integrated the matters under discussion with talk of specific artworks, many of which are in the Astrup Fearnley Collection, Oslo. My hope is that the works will not be reduced to “mere illustrations”, but that they can be occasions for thinking through the problems of ‘the autonomous artwork’.

# 2

## BACKGROUND AND ROOTS OF THE EXPRESSION 'AUTONOMOUS ARTWORK'

*Auto*, self, and *nomos*, law: *Autonomos* occurs in ancient Greek prose and poetry, meaning *living under one's own laws*.<sup>25</sup> From this it is easy to understand why 'autonomy' in every-day English is synonymous with *independent, self-governing, free or not being controlled by external forces*. These notions are preserved in Kantian moral philosophy, which contrasts 'autonomous' with 'heteronymous' as follows: Heteronymous actions are determined by conditions, goals and values, while autonomous actions follow the inner law (the categorical imperative), which determines our status as rational beings, and therefore is the foundation for human freedom (the hallmark of humanity). I, by contrast, imagine the word "autonomous" as a homunculus with bulbous protrusions stretching out in numerous directions; never reposed, restlessly it moves about, stretching one arm towards one concept, another arm towards another, and a third limb out towards something else. Perhaps it has no essential aspects and is just a malleable shell, but near to its heart remains some fairly stable cognates, pinned by constant use.

### *Nomos*

The Perseus website<sup>26</sup> presents *nomos* as *that which is in habitual practice*. Its first interpretation leans towards *usage, custom, what is the custom in a certain city-state*. *Custom* implies that things are according to it; the *nomos* is something already established and other things either follow or are contrary to it. Things may be done for no other apparent reason than to follow the custom. In that case, the act is done for sake of *tradition* and to fulfil a *formal requirement*. For tradition, there is a focus upon fulfilling an entrenched schema, as reflected in: "But we have to go to mass because we always go to mass." As formal requirement, we bend the knee, even without a contrite heart. From the homunculus analogy, at the centre of *nomos* is *custom*, and close at hand is *law*,

---

<sup>25</sup> Liddell and Scott Greek-English Lexicon for Internet.

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?layout.reflang=greek;layout.refdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057;layout.reflookup=au%29tonomous;layout.refcit=:doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3D%2317832>

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3D%2371006>

*ordinance, statute, and decrees. Authority.* But the malleable *nomos* bears negation in its luggage: *a-nomos, anomaly, no law, no habitual practice.* For the artisan, *ignorance of the rules of art, failure to conform to them, unsystematic, inaccurate, unskilful:* as such, the artisan would be *without art, uncreative and has no trade or profession.* The Greeks found this term particularly useful when judging artisans; it would have been impossible to imagine artists creating without rules. But more than this, without *nomos*, the art or artisan could not even be recognized.

In ancient Greek literature, *nomos* personified is *Orpheus*. This stretches the arms of *nomos* out to enfold *melody* or *strain*, for *nomos* was used to refer to early melodies created for the lyre, as an accompaniment to epic texts. The terms *harmonikos, harmozô* are close by: tuning instruments, *a thing in harmony with itself or other objects.* Adapting instruments—or, for that matter, adapting anything to anything else entails harmony; the shoe must harmonize with the user. So *adaptation* rubs against *nomos*: Things have to be able to *fit on or to or be according to*, to be adaptable. The thing suits another figure. *Suiting* or *accommodation* now are formally joined with *betrothal*, making a troth between, setting in order one's marital situation; a regulated relation. It seems to indicate that the Greek term *archô* (rule, ruled) is near to the heart of *nomos*. The husband rules, the wife accommodates, and the person with the soul of a slave is naturally suited for taking orders. Moreover, the tool used by carpenters—the ruler—is an embodiment of *nomos*. So also is the despot, for as soon as *nomos* is set in place, the self has only two choices: It is either in violation of, or is in subjection to *nomos*, for it is, in this traditional understanding, *the other* of the self.

#### *Auto: The self*

The *self* is a question never resolved, and I will not attempt to resolve it here, but it seems useful to think of the self as a subject constituted through choices and actions that have become the object of reflective activity. Traditionally construed as a consciousness of being in the world, of being differentiated from the rest of nature and God, while yet in a relationship with them, a self was thought important to ground experience and action in, inasmuch as it functions as the witness of experience, or the witness of reflection grounded in or constituting consciousness. As such, the self's ability to reflect over itself shows it is already involved in a dialectic of normativity, hence it would be a relation of actions grounded in material processes. Plato made the self/soul out to be the seer or knower of Truth, Beauty and Goodness (Phaedrus 246; 248d), and he readily admitted that it is impossible to say what the self/soul is, so all we can do is to say what it *is like*.<sup>27</sup> Like Plato, Kant noted that *the self* cannot be experienced empirically, but it can be thought or assumed and justified through the indirect evidence of the empirical self.

---

<sup>27</sup> Even materialistic theories might agree, for although the self is a mix of biological material processes, when we examine the materials of our bodies, do they reveal all the workings of the self? Although the self might not exist without material activity, it is perhaps still not *the same as* material processes.

*'Autonomous'* combined with the *artwork-self*

When the adjective under scrutiny joins with 'artwork', *auto* or *self* refers to the artwork. This is trivial, but significant because, when autonomy is predicated of the artwork, it immediately acquires honorary personhood. Yet in the same manoeuvre, 'autonomous artwork' is revealed as mysterious because what applies to the self of a person would also have to apply to an artwork. But how can a thing we intuitively assume is not endowed with life or spirit, lacking consciousness or self-volition, become *more* than a material object? It would have to have a soul or at least something non-tangible about it. The artwork thus becomes a fetish-object in the sense of 'an object possessed by a spirit'. When the notion of *self* refers to the artwork, the empirical artwork becomes indirect evidence for the work's transcendental self.<sup>28</sup> The mysterious, non-tangible self of the artwork—its honorary personhood and self-consciousness—can perhaps be more understandable (even if still objectionable) if we recall that, when 'autonomous' and 'artwork' were first lumped together in the nineteenth-century, this was the Romantic era, which generally rejected neo-classical ideals of rationality; the goal was to cultivate non-rational aspects of human thought. It is also worth noting that by attributing personhood to artworks, this may actually be a device for denoting something in the receiver's mental activity, which when verbalized, is transposed onto objects and reified.

Meanwhile, the consequences of predicating autonomy for the artwork is that what was formerly understood as *other* than the artwork—general rules found in symbols systems or in other selves—now becomes internalized. The artwork-self sets up its own *nomos*, its own *other*, to which it *internally* subjects itself. So autonomy does not imply no law, anarchy or 'anything-goes'; rather, the laws simply are not given from outside.

Since the artwork is a historical, timely event, its "self" has opportunities for change and re-creation contingent upon what it experiences, and upon the synthesis of its thoughts and actions, as it were. It would be *a situation* in which various activities occur, and where a will can be expressed or suppressed. The work that is autonomous is *both* sovereign and subject; bound by laws, but only those it has itself made, derived through habitual, integral practices.

The antithesis of the autonomous artwork would be the *heteronymous artwork*: Something produced through adherence to external laws, and accomplishing external purposes. It would not be independent from other institutions of society—e.g., traditional folk art, applied artworks like advertising jingles, or contemporary popular art.

From this initial "dip" into 'autonomous artwork', let us look backwards, to Kant, who is an important philosophical starting point for establishing the various concepts of the work's

---

<sup>28</sup> See chapter 4, "Aesthetic Realism", pp. 37-41.

autonomy used in today's artworld. It is to Kant's *judgment of taste* we now turn, to understand the "building blocks" of these conceptions.

# 3

## KANT AND THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF AUTONOMY

The goal of this chapter is to give an account of the central aspects of Kant's understanding of an autonomous field of art, which have functioned as the "building blocks"—the main ideas—from which Kant's initial interpreters and many subsequent thinkers have conceived of 'the autonomous artwork'. My goal here is not to take issue with Kant's judgment of taste.<sup>29</sup>

It is first worthwhile recalling that the notion of an autonomous field for art arose in response to the universalised instrumentalist view, recorded as far back as Plato, that *artworks are for teaching moral precepts*. For this reason it was (and again is thought to be) appropriate to evaluate art from moral and epistemological perspectives.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, the artwork is under the jurisdiction of the philosopher, the state, the clergy, or the intelligentsia—those who have "true knowledge". But there is also another universalised view—that *all artworks are moral*. Norman Rosenthal, Royal Academy Exhibition Secretary for the exhibition *Sensation*, 1997, exemplarily espoused this view. When protesters physically attacked Marcus Harvey's monumental portrait *Myra* (1997),<sup>31</sup> Rosenthal claimed: "There is no such thing as art that is immoral. All art is moral in my opinion."<sup>32</sup> If this is correct, we must assume that only good moral

---

<sup>29</sup> Criticizing Kant's judgment of taste has been done thousands of times, and of course, I do criticize it too, but more indirectly, via the views presented in chapters 4, 5 and 6. While a few pertinent problems will be mentioned in this chapter's footnotes, my respect for Kant's judgment of taste is immense.

<sup>30</sup> See for example Plato's Republic X, Aristotle's Poetics. The same view is strikingly re-expressed this year, in 2005, by Vibeke Petersen, curator at the National Museum, Oslo, in connection with the re-mounting of the museum's "basis exhibition". Petersen said in a lecture given in Bergen, 8 April 2005: "At the National Museum in Oslo, our job is to discipline people, teach them how to behave."

<sup>31</sup> Myra Hendly, serial sex-murderer involving several children, during the 1960's. The portrait is a collage of hundreds of child's handprints, also resembling Princess Diana. For picture:

<http://www.smb.spk-berlin.de/d/exhibition/sensation/harvey.html>

<sup>32</sup> Norman Rosenthal interview by Nigel Reynolds, Arts Correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph*, Wednesday, September 17, 1997, p. 4. For Rosenthal, in asserting that art is moral, he has to have something non-moral, in order for the distinction of what is moral to be possible. His non-moral category is 'pornography', which cannot, by definition, coincide with artworks. Norman Rosenthal discusses the censorship of *Myra* and other works at:

<http://216.239.59.104/search?q=cache:svC4xFzD->

[boJ:www.artquest.org.uk/artlaw/pdf/Sensation.pdf+Rosenthal+Myra&hl=en](http://www.artquest.org.uk/artlaw/pdf/Sensation.pdf+Rosenthal+Myra&hl=en)

ends result from artworks. Kant's CJ§1-60 can be understood as primarily focused on assailing views such as those of Plato, Petersen (see footnote 30) and Rosenthal.

It is possible to argue that Kant created the autonomous field of aesthetics by *word* and *division*. It is as if he said 'Let there be taste' and there was taste, and he divided aesthetic judgments from agreeable and good judgments, the autonomous field of Modern art from the moral and epistemological domains of applied art:

Let us call what must always remain merely subjective and cannot possibly be the presentation of an object by its other customary name: feeling. The green colour of meadows belongs to objective sensation, the perception of an object of sense, but the colour's agreeableness belongs to subjective sensation, to feeling, through which no object is presented. But through which the object is regarded as an object of our liking, which is not a cognition of it. (CJ§3)

Indeed, the judgment can be called aesthetic precisely because the basis determining it is not a concept but the feeling (of the inner sense) of that accordance in the play of the mental powers insofar as it can only be sensed. (CJ§15, 229)

But Kant could not create out of nothing, so in CJ§1-60, he consolidates ideas about philosophical aesthetics from other thinkers such as Shaftsbury, Burke, Addison, Hutcheson, Hume, Rousseau, Diderot, Moritz, Baumgarten and Lessing, to name a few.<sup>33</sup> The primary insight gleaned from CJ§1-60 has to do with the constructive role of the subject in constituting her aesthetic experience, *how subjective processes determine the artwork*.<sup>34</sup> The peculiar *taste* is a feeling within the judge, giving no cognition of the object itself. Kant takes great pains to distinguish taste by contrasting it with two other kinds of judgments: first of what is *agreeable* and secondly, of judgments made *via the concept of good*. What follows is how *the four moments*<sup>35</sup>—(1) quality of *disinterest*, (3) relation of *formal purposiveness (in contrast to final purpose)*, (2 and 4) modality and quantity: *subjective yet universal communicability without a determinate concept on the part of all disinterested judges*—involved in making the judgment of beauty (taste), are distinguished from agreeable and moral judgments, for it is via these "moments", together with the *artist-genius* and the *aesthetic idea*, that the autonomous (independent) domain for artworks was established in the artworld's consciousness.

#### *The four moments, the artist genius and the aesthetic idea*

1. The *quality* of beauty is that of a *liking that is disinterested pleasure*. To be disinterested means that the judge cares minimally or not at all about the object existing *for her*. The judge must have all relevant needs fulfilled: "*Only when their need has been satisfied can we tell who in a multitude of people has taste.*" (CJ§5, 210) For example, if the object is something that could be

---

<sup>33</sup> For a general overview of Kant's precursors, see Beardsley, 1966. Ch. 7-8.

<sup>34</sup> I said introductorily that it is not my intention to criticize Kant's judgment of taste. Nevertheless, it may be worth holding in mind that there are lots of problems with it, and here is one: Kant's explication of the subjective process that determines the work is circular: Aesthetic pleasure is engendered by the beautiful object, but simultaneously this aesthetic pleasure defines the object as beautiful.

<sup>35</sup> I present these in the order 1, 3, 2 and 4.

sat upon, the judge must already own all the chairs she desires, and be so chipper that she does not need to sit down when judging. By contrast, if the judge is desirous, her likings are agreeable. If her desire is satisfied (gratified) through some sensation, she may not even be making a judgment, for that would be mere sensation. The liking for the agreeable entails that the existence of the object directly affects her state of being in the world and gratifies by satisfying her desire.

Kant also contrasts beauty's quality of disinterest with that quality involved in judgments via the concept of the good. Here the judge always knows the object's purpose (CJ§4). Consequently, the judge cannot be indifferent but is compelled, by reason, first to care about the thing's existence, second, to be interested in it, and third, to look ahead to the consequences of the object's use. This also differentiates the good from the agreeable liking, for if one knows that the object will gratify, but that in the end, it is detrimental (e.g., financial ruin, addiction, cancer), then while it may be agreeable, it will not be good. On the other hand, if the liking results in some respectable, endorsable end, then it can be both agreeable and good. Hence beauty's quality is distinguished twofold; disinterest renders a peculiar sort of pleasure stemming from the mere contemplation of objects,<sup>36</sup> caring neither for how it may provide sensual satisfaction nor for what the consequence of the objects' use could be.

3. The third moment of Taste's judgment of beauty is its *relation of non-purposiveness*, that is, that the object is judged to be purposive in form but to have no final purpose. This can be viewed in light of Aristotle's *final cause*, which logically entailed that the telos of an object, what it is for, is the cause of the effect (the object), because—why should a person ever even start making an object if they were not going to use it for something specific? For Aristotle, the object (effect) can only be explained and understood with regard to its purpose (cause), “*on a will that would have arranged them according to a certain rule.*” (CJ§10, 220) Kant maintains, however, that this does not apply for the judgment of beauty. Beauty's judge looks at objects as though they were for something, yet that something is indeterminable. Just as objects in nature seem purposefully designed, we nevertheless cannot establish their definitive purpose. Is copper *finally* for making coins or the tree *finally* for shelter? No, they must merely be judged purposive in their form, for if they were deemed according to use, we could not judge disinterestedly (CJ§11, 221). Objects judged beautiful have no use other than for indeterminate reflection, mere contemplation. Is there a “knife” that divides the aesthetic domain from epistemological, moral and agreeable judgments? It is the *imagination*, when it is loosed from determinate concepts, which always force it to conform to a law. Freed from law, the imagination spontaneously produces whatever it wills. The power of imagination becomes *a law unto itself* (CJ§22, 241). Nevertheless, the play of the faculties is *purposive* since it exercises the cognitive faculties in general. Strictly speaking then,

---

<sup>36</sup> As Archibald Addison put it, the pleasures of the imagination do not lead the mind to sink into sensual delight.

for Kant, *purpose without a purpose* **does not mean** that the object is totally without purpose or useless:<sup>37</sup> In CJ§44: 306, Kant states that beautiful art should “advance the culture of mental powers in the interest of social communication”. *Thus the work is purposive for aculturation*. This is ‘without purpose’ in the sense that it does not say anything specific about our direct goal-oriented relations to phenomena in the everyday world, but with the free play of the imagination and understanding, independent of all pragmatic purposes, the work is able to organize a myriad of sense-impressions or perceptions into aesthetic ideas, such that maximal activity of thought is engendered. The artwork *strengthens and develops the ability* to have knowledge and be moral, yet without producing knowledge. As such, the artwork is indispensable for acculturating free, rational and autonomous (independent) political beings. Beauty is the sensible manifestation of morality, says Kant (CJ§59-60), therefore art indirectly serves justice, for justice is only achieved through reflection, being aware of one’s own autonomous aesthetic faculty of taste.

The *relational moment* of beauty’s judgment is divided from the agreeable judgment because the latter is impure, corrupted with charm or emotion. (Kant calls ‘pure’ a “simple kind of sensation, it is uniformity undisturbed and uninterrupted by alien sensation” (CJ§14, 225). Design is what is essential, “dry liking”.) Beauty’s judgment stops short—at purposive form—by subtracting colours, smell or touch. “Not what glorifies us in sensation but merely what we like because of its form.” (CJ§14, 225) Consider three judgments of a flower: beauty’s judge reflects on the elliptical shapes at the one end of a thin cylindrical form; the agreeable judge gushes over the delightful scent, the velvety feel of its lush ruby petals; the good judge determines that such should be given to Mother.

2&4. Kant’s second moment, quantity, and his fourth moment of modality, are difficult to distinguish from each other, therefore I treat them more or less together. The beautiful judgment’s quantity is *universal*. It is divided from the universality of epistemology and morality because it is based upon a feeling, not a concept. It is also divided from agreeable judgment, which reside solely in the singular subjects’ feeling (no point arguing about which ice cream tastes best—it is a singular subjective matter). The judgment of beauty could not occur without the singular subject’s sensations, but it is not grounded there because mental powers *transpose into reflection* the aesthetic phenomenon. So the aesthetic judgment is a judgment of reflection, not of external sensation, but of an inner sensation where the cognitive powers of *understanding* and *imagination* are activated (CJ§9, 217; §15, 229; §20, 238). But how is it a universal feeling? Kant’s fourth

---

<sup>37</sup> Purposiveness without a purpose is *free play* of the mental faculties. An analogy can clarify this: It is like starting a car engine on a cold morning: the gears are in neutral, the pistons, manifolds, spark plugs fire, the fan belt rotates, various components move back and forth, but the engine is not in gear (there’s no determinate concept) so it cannot fulfil its final cause, to move. The engine likes this idling mode because it is prepared and conditioned for performing well. Analogous to the car engine idling in order to enhance or condition performance, the powers of reason are exercised for cognitive function. Thus the aesthetic judgment is purposive, but indirectly so.

moment of modality—*sensus communis*, is an inner sensibility common to everyone. This means that when a subject's cognitive powers of imagination and understanding partake freely in reflective play, they harmonize with each other, in relation to the object being judged, and there should arise *the exact same* inner sensation of pleasure, which *ought* to be common for all who judge the same phenomenon disinterestedly. Not that everyone *will* agree, but that each subject *has the right to assume and demand* that everyone *should* agree, because if everyone's "dial" is tuned disinterestedly, then everyone's mental powers are adjusted in the same way *vis a vis* the same aesthetic phenomena. "The subjective conditions for judging we presuppose in all people, since they are required for cognition in general, therefore we may a priori assume that a presentation's harmony is valid for all persons." (CJ§38, 290) Hence this is a judgment the individual subject makes alone,<sup>38</sup> but she makes it in agreement with everyone else who judges disinterestedly. This, claims Kant, is universal communicability. It has no logical force grounded in determinate concepts leading to distinct ends, such that, if we know what the object is for, then we logically must all agree. In contrast to moral judgments, the notion of *subjective yet universal communicability without a determinate concept* is a transcendental idea; it cannot be proved, but it is regulative, the condition of possibility for making intra-subjective universally valid aesthetic judgments and for distinguishing the aesthetic sphere of value from the agreeable singular-subjective-sensory domain on the one hand, and the universal field of moral judgments through a determinate concept on the other.

Going beyond the "four moments" of taste, Kant's story tells of an artist endowed by Nature with peculiar abilities for making art. This artist is a *genius* because she has done nothing to achieve the abilities herself. It is as if Nature provides the *rule* used by the artist to create a cultural product.<sup>39</sup> But it is not an external rule; it is *law-like without being law*, for there are no consciously devised principles or written norms the genius follows. Importantly, Kant's genius is not under the influence of a *daimon* or some muse whispering instructions in the artist's subconscious ear. More precisely, genius consists of the mental powers of imagination and understanding, and these are combined in a peculiar way: The imagination is free, i.e., not subservient to the understanding. It supplies a wealth of undeveloped material to the understanding, which the latter cannot regard as conceptual; it allows the artist to discover *aesthetic ideas*: "By aesthetic idea I mean a presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e. no determinate concept can be adequate, so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it."(CJ§49) The

---

<sup>38</sup> Problematic for many of Kant's readers is his assumption that the subject's inner, reflective, transcendental self can be unaffected by its social and historical context.

<sup>39</sup> Although endowed by nature, the genius still needs academic training, for Kant is keen on avoiding "original nonsense" (§46).

genius devises ways of expressing the idea and communicating it to a judge, who produces a feeling of beauty (harmony of the mental powers). Kant's genius has a natural ability to express, and make universally communicable the ineffable idea, yet without constraint by rules of conventional communication. Since her understanding is subjective, it results in no determinate cognition. For this reason, genius cannot be learned through science or diligent practice.

As mentioned, the artist-genius uses the *aesthetic idea* to make the work of art. An aesthetic idea is a presentation of the imagination conjoined with such a multiplicity of "partial presentations" (figures made by the artist) that no expression standing for a determinate concept can be found for it. It allows much ineffable thought; no matter how much language we expend in trying to be precise about what this idea entails, we will never be able to fully account for it. Aesthetic ideas strive for something that lies beyond the bounds of experience and therefore no determinate linguistic expression can accommodate them. Kant's examples of such are *heaven, the creation, death, envy, all the vices and love*. These prompt the imagination to spread over a multitude of kindred presentations that arouse more thought than can be expressed in words. They quicken the mind by opening up for it a view into an immense realm.<sup>40</sup>

*So what are the building blocks of autonomy?*

In CJ§1-60, Kant instigates a conceptual deluge of presumed freedom/autonomy for the artist, the receiver and the institution, and all this autonomy comes to bear upon the artwork. The artist is perceived as autonomous in the sense that she is a (1) *genius* (nature gives the rule) using (2) *aesthetic ideas* to make "partial presentations", which open up more scope for reflection than determinate concepts can wholly make sense of. Because the aesthetic ideas are not determinate concepts, no knowledge occurs. Thus the artwork is autonomous in the sense of being (3) *independent from truth*. It is also autonomous in the sense of being (3) *law-like without following any law* because no formula or convention is followed in producing it. In other words, the way in which an original production makes sense cannot have been known before the production is achieved (unlike the directions for baking a cake) (§32). Hence a prime aspect of the autonomous artwork is (4) *originality*. The artwork is also autonomous in the sense of being (5) *independent from the domain of morality* because it is independent of final cause; it is merely (6) *formally purposive*, i.e., it has the form of being finally purposive but lacks an external telos. Kant calls this (7) *purposive, yet without determinate purpose*: He treats artworks as if they are *agents with their own purposes*, in the same way as he thought persons to be (8). The receiver's attitude is also a condition for the artwork's autonomy: An (9) *attitude of disinterest* focuses on (10) *formal features, design, dry liking*. From this mode of attention, the work finds (11) *completion in itself*. Kant seems to contradict himself however, given that he also says the aesthetic judgment is (12)

---

<sup>40</sup> Aesthetic ideas can easily lead into a discussion on Kant's sublime; this will be addressed in ch. 5, on Derrida.

*purposive for the receiver's self-reflection*: The receiver becomes aware of her powers of imagination, understanding and reason, and how these faculties harmoniously work together. The field of non-teleological reflective reception is thus established, where there can only be indirect interest or secondary purposiveness, e.g., for the sake of reflection. (13) *This field is marginal in relation to the rest of society* because of the non-interest in using the artwork as a tool for anything beyond reflection. Finally, there are Kant's quantitative and modal moments (which are difficult to distinguish from each other): (14) *subjective yet universal communicability without a determinate concept* (although often transgressed through the inordinate amount of theory produced to prop up the notion) entails that (15) *each judge makes the judgment alone*; individual judges cannot discuss or argue about art but nevertheless must all agree. *Sensus communis* is the common sentiment we supposedly all share. It is a transcendental idea—it cannot be proved—yet Kant deems it necessary (it is a regulative idea) in order to postulate universal agreement obtaining without a determinate concept. Nevertheless, it is unclear why the transcendental regulative idea of *sensus communis* is needed *if* it is the case that everyone's mental faculties are tuned alike.

Two final points: First, Kant's account is under-girded by *the container metaphor*, which assumes that there are some things that are rightfully internal to the field of art, and other things that are external to it. As we shall see, this has wide ramifications. Secondly, in light of CJ§1-60, examining claims about the artwork's autonomy cannot be understood as an inquiry independent from how it is created by the artist, how it is experienced by the judge (and we could add—how it is situated within the art institution). Kant would not inquire into the artwork as a distinct, independently existing *thing in itself*. It is for this reason that chapter 4 starts out by examining the artwork's autonomy in relation to the artist and the receiver.

# 4

## TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION OF 'THE AUTONOMOUS ARTWORK'

From the “building blocks” chapter, it is clear that Kant set up numerous features that make up the autonomous domain of art. This synthetic position has functioned as a palimpsest from which other thinkers have written, twisting and interpreting the various aspects consolidated in Kant’s paragraphs, some quite radically so. Hence, when people refer to ‘the autonomy of art’, a whole range of things automatically receive the autonomous label: artists, materials, receivers, curators, and the artworld as a whole, even down to the gallery owner.<sup>41</sup> Yet for the purpose of this paper, it is *the artwork’s autonomy* that is in focus, and if the work cannot be addressed as the centre of attention, it is in relation to the artist and receiver.

Ever since ‘autonomous’ was joined with ‘artwork’, the expression has been a series of tropes. I think of Wittgenstein’s metaphor of the “enclosure with holes”,<sup>42</sup> like a room where the door is locked but the window is open, the expression has been continuously replenished with additional meaning, even as content is slipping out. In order to venture a conception of the expression that could be relevant for today’s artworld, the goal now is to get an overview of the most common ways the phrase is *already* being used, and what the main benefits and disadvantages of these are. The following account will therefore alternate with an ongoing discussion between an autonomist and a dissenter (tempter). These two abstractions are used as a means to dialogically react to various positions; they are not intended as two unified positions but as means by which to pit views against each other in a more direct and forceful way.

The reader may wonder why I do not call the dissenter a “heteronomist”, assuming that this term expresses the antithesis of an autonomist. I have refrained from this usage because “heteronomist” would easily be interpreted in the sense of “the type of person who holds that the

---

<sup>41</sup> For materials, Sigmar Polk’s works problematized this issue (see p. 91). As far as gallery owners are concerned, “Charles [Saatchi] hates being governed by committee and answering to other people, what you get with him is a collection built on free spirit,” says Mr Miller, “The Saatchi Gallery says it wants the freedom to be autonomous, something not possible at the Tate, which has a remit to fulfil.”

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/2939875.stm>

<sup>42</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1958, §99.

laws pertaining to the artwork—either with regard to its creation or reception, formal or especially its final purpose—are external to the artwork proper”. The problem with this is that it is *too narrow* an explication of what non-autonomy means today. The dissenter is legion, but most often a moral-instrumentalist, either directly (as was Plato), or indirectly as some late-modernists are. Meanwhile, the reader might also object at the usage “autonomist”, since there are so many sorts. I choose to use “autonomist” because it is a useful abstraction for instantiating the current problems in the quarrel between autonomist and instrumentalist positions. The “autonomist” and “dissenter” present claims and arguments oft heard in the contemporary artworld.

Although I do not hold that positions are “owned” by any particular author, since we all gather and repeat thoughts from others, nevertheless, fragments of ideology and reasoning sometimes have exemplary advocates and the lineage of ideas can often be traced. Therefore, where appropriate, names will be mentioned. The following survey and discussion of conceptions is not meant to be exhaustive. I want to present the most prevalent views and to discuss them to the point where I feel they are irreparably weakened or strengthened, so as to be able to be included or rejected in a synthesis of moments for ‘the contemporary autonomous artwork’. I realize that messiness will, at times, rear up in the course of the discussion; what is classified under one description may also be tangled into others—what one thinker holds to be a core feature of the work’s autonomy, another thinker will deem is a core feature of why it is not autonomous! Perhaps this messiness arises from the Kantian-style practice of “not putting all the eggs in one basket”; it is seldom just one feature that describes the artwork’s autonomy. This notwithstanding, what is common for all conceptions is that they are rich descriptions of the core features, either of the artwork’s context or of the artwork itself.



## SECTION I: CONCEPTIONS OF THE ‘AUTONOMOUS ARTWORK’ WITH WEAK ONTOLOGICAL COMMITMENTS

The following discussion between the autonomist and the dissenter examines understandings of ‘the autonomous artwork’, which share in common that they do not focus on a *real being* or nature of the artwork. They focus on external aspects that render the work independent or free, either *the artist*, *the receiver* or *something about the work’s institutional setting*.

### **A. The work’s autonomous status as being related to the artist**

**Autonomist:** *An artwork is autonomous in the sense that it is made by an artist-genius who creates without following external rules, or without consciously deliberating about what to do to make the work, or without having conceptualized intentions for it.* By contrast, the non-artist-genius would be someone like George Bernard Shaw, who admitted that he always consciously

used a formula to produce his dramas.<sup>43</sup> As far as conscious deliberation or conceptualized intentions are concerned, both Plato and Kantians conjectured that artworks are created by someone who does not cognitively deliberate during the act of creation. For Plato this was not considered autonomous art however, because the work was intended by a *daimon*, a being distinct from the artisan or poet. Hence the artisan or poet is a mere conduit. For Kantians however, ‘genius’ takes on a different meaning since as the artist herself is the genius. The Kantian genius is a person naturally favoured or endowed in a certain way to create *as if* she were nature creating—without concepts. There is a close connection between *non-deliberation/spontaneous creation* and the *absence of concepts*. The artist Jackson Pollock is a good example of someone claimed to be a Kantian-style genius: He made art by *automatic gestures* [Illustration 3] he tried to abandon conscious control—in order to allow unconscious areas of his mind to guide his hand. The primary result of such genius is *originality of expression*. The following was said of him, which is indicative of this view:

Autonomy and self-reliance were Pollock's Holy Grail, in his head and in his career. Since he experienced such misery trying to submit to disciplines of learning for which he had no aptitude, the godsend, liberating idea for him was the one he got simultaneously from looking at modern art and listening to his therapists: The principle that art could ultimately depend not on acquired talents but on inner resources, no matter how disturbed that inner life was.<sup>44</sup>

‘The autonomous artwork’ is thus the result of the free employment of the mind’s power’s to produce an *original creation*.

**Dissenter:** ‘Pure psychic automatism’ was rife in 1940’s New York City—it derived from the creativity espoused by André Breton and his Surrealist followers beginning in the 1920’s. I agree with Plato that the artwork made by an artist possessed by a *daimon* would not be autonomous, since the muse could be following a rule. But surely artists follow rules they are not aware of; e.g., rules embedded in the culture that are so ubiquitous to the point where one is not consciously aware of them. Therefore the Kantian’s close connection between spontaneous creation and non-conceptuality could be re-described as inattentiveness to or ignorance of the rules one actually is following. Moreover, the Pollock example sounds quite contradictory: Pollock *tried* to create unconsciously? If he was trying then he must have deliberated. Getting into a drunken stupor was his conscious choice. Furthermore, in Pollock’s interviews, he shows clearly that he thought a lot about what he is doing, and that he practiced, much as a calligrapher does before drawing the dexterous line. Admittedly, he did not make preliminary drawings, but he said, “I do have a general notion of what I’m about and what the results will be.”<sup>45</sup> When Pollock was asked if it

---

<sup>43</sup> Shaw said his formula was to always write what would cause the greatest consternation and outrage amongst conservatives. For pictorial art, formulas are exceedingly diverse. They encumbered history painting: the scene in a narrative that should be depicted is “the point of no return”; figures should be painted first in grisaille, afterwards add only unmixed colours, etc. Formulas are also prevalent in Modern painting, e.g., for outdoor scenes with lots of greenery, Impressionists grounded the support with red, the complimentary colour against which green vibrates most.

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.thecityreview.com/pollock.html>

<sup>45</sup> Pollock, 1992, p. 577.

was difficult to control his work, he answered, “No, I don’t think so. I don’t—with experience—it seems to be possible to control the flow of the paint...”<sup>46</sup> All this makes me doubt the Kantian artist-genius because—how can an artist create without conceptual thought of some sort? How can a person have their reason disengaged without being mentally ill? Furthermore, the claim of genius could be a ploy to hoodwink us all into thinking that some artist’s work is better than it actually is, a means to invest artworks with more value than they rightfully deserve. But, lest I be criticized for bad faith, I repeat, how can an artist create without conceptual thought?

**Autonomist:** O.K., what if we say the autonomous artwork is when *the artist exercises the freedom to address any issue, etc, use any means, break any taboo or transgress any rule regardless of the consequences*. This could be an extension of Kant’s notion of the artwork being ‘a law unto itself’. ‘The autonomous artwork’, under this description, exchanges the non-purposiveness or indirect purposiveness of artworks with that of serving a direct purpose: Artworks should transgress established norms in order to, e.g., promote social change. The precondition for being able to transgress is the existing norm the work can negate, and the artwork’s freedom is achieved the moment the work transgresses some norm: The nineteenth and twentieth-centuries are rife with examples of transgressing law—material selection, taboo themes, etc.: A ruckus is created and a new limitation of what is acceptable is established in the culture. Then, in order for subsequent artists to create autonomous works, they must push beyond the newly established limit and the cycle repeats. Hence the limit of what is considered autonomous is constantly stretched, until there comes the point where anything goes. This seems to be where we are at today, or perhaps actual child molestation might be the limit.<sup>47</sup>

**Dissenter:** This makes for an artwork at odds with itself: The artwork is supposed to be free and self-legislating, but there are really only two choices available, neither of which present it as free. First, if the only way an artwork can be free is by breaking a rule, then to do so is to follow a rule. There is no freedom to choose whether or not to transgress: If it follows the rule and transgresses then it is not free, and if it does not transgress then it is still following rules found in the culture. Secondly, the notion of transgressive artworks fulfilling some heroic duty of expanding the boundaries of art and crushing bourgeois morality is highly problematic. Times have changed. It is difficult to claim that contemporary artworks represent a counter-culture. As Sarah Arrhenius puts it, “the art market is the perfect little sister of the Market, and digests most things quite elegantly”.<sup>48</sup> The artist wants to be noticed, gain recognition from peers, the art-institution and the public at large. In order to be recognized, she *has to* perform acts that will be noticed and

---

<sup>46</sup> Op cit., p. 576.

<sup>47</sup> Of particular note for the Norwegian artworld is Bjarne Melgaard, who has created what many would deem are speculative works dealing with, among other things, issues of child abuse, suicide, HIV-AIDS and the use of steroids.

<sup>48</sup> Arrhenius, Sarah, “The art of making a scene in a room which is no longer there”. <http://www.anthology-of-art.net/generatio/02/arrh.html>

perceived as relevant for the contemporary artworld. Therefore the artist picks up on trends within the institution, themes or concerns in the public arena. She binds herself to creating artworks that will engage with the mindset of a specific public. If she aims at communicating anything at all, her works necessarily must adapt to some communicative mode with conventions. And these conventions lie within the culture, are copied from it; they are not exuded exclusively out from the artist. It may be that the image of artworks and the artist as transgressors and scandalmongers fulfils a purely nostalgic function. As such, Arrhenius suggests that the artist is transgressing in a room that is “no longer there”.

**Autonomist:** Well, there are other ways of thinking the work’s autonomy in relation to the artist. A view enjoying great popularity with romantics is that the autonomous work is *the private expression of the artist, some thing or style one person alone expresses*. Exemplarily, the Norwegian translators of Heidegger’s “*Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*” write in their afterword: “At one point in European cultural history when art almost exclusively was understood as the artist’s “private” expression (autonomy)...”<sup>49</sup> This view exemplarily reverberates in the following claims about Jackson Pollock:

Late in 1943 or early in 1944, Pollock painted his first wall-size work, called “Mural”. This painting is his breakthrough into *a totally personal style*.<sup>50</sup>

The ‘private expression’ view is also echoed by the prominent contemporary art critic Robert C. Morgan, who discriminates what is “significant in art” as being “...*an expression of individual thought and feeling* within a new global, and potentially intercultural situation...”<sup>51</sup> Hence, on the one hand, there is the private, personal expression of the artist; on the other hand there is the artwork as an original expression. For the latter, it would be a sign of *inauthenticity* for one artist to create in a style previously adopted by another. For example, it is said that in the years when Pollock experimented widely, he contemplated using a cartoon style, but since Roy Lichtenstein had already appropriated it, it was off limits. According to the *private expression* view, the style must *originate* with the artist.

**Dissenter:** I can agree that an artist may *feel* that what they create is 100% heart-felt private expression. After all, I can say something and really mean it in spite of it being a general conceptualization. But these are inherited means of expression I have found in the culture and then *made my own*. The Surrealist Max Ernst drip-painted, maybe Pollock saw them, but the drips give no impression of being copied or second-hand. Even so, can that ensure his expression is unique? Visual expressions found in one place have also been found elsewhere, independent of mutual influence. Therefore, to claim an expression is unique to an individual seems unsustainable. Of course, I do not deny that artists can develop a signatory style, but this is a

---

<sup>49</sup> Øverenget, Einar and Mathisen, Steinar, 2000, p. 135.

<sup>50</sup> <http://www.globalgallery.com/artist.bio.asp?nm=jackson+pollock> My italics.

<sup>51</sup> Morgan, 1998, p. 3. My italics.

synthesis, oft achieved through marketing strategy rather than individually developed expression. Moreover, striving after a personal artistic expression has become a convention, a rule. It seems like everyone is forced to go out and try to be unique. And that is quite ironic: If artists are *compelled to be original* then this is external rule following.

Perhaps the best way to understand the work's *law-likeness without following a law* is that the work's abstract laws are *secreted through the process of creation, like the oyster shell*. Virginia Woolf envisioned it as follows:

Dissatisfied [with the form of fiction] the writer may have been; but her dissatisfaction was primarily with nature for giving an idea, without providing a house for it to live in...The novel was the obvious lodging, but the novel it seemed was built on the wrong plan. Thus rebuked the idea started as the oyster starts or the snail to secrete a house for itself. And this it did without any conscious direction. The little note-book in which an attempt was made to forecast a plan was soon abandoned, and the book grew day by day, week by week, without any plan at all, *except that which was dictated each morning in the act of writing*. The other way, to make a house and then inhabit it, to develop a theory and then apply it, as Wordsworth did and Coleridge, is, it need not be said, equally good and much more philosophic. But in the present case [Mrs. Dalloway] it was necessary to write the book and to invent a theory afterwards.<sup>52</sup>

The very act of writing or creating is shown to dictate its own laws. Even so, Woolf's experience does not preclude there being external laws at work, and these laws can be as mundane as the habitual style for holding a pencil.

Finally, there is, as I see it, only one way the artist can really ensure that the work is autonomous; that is that she never exhibits it.

## **B. 'The autonomous artwork' understood in terms of its reception**

Reception-oriented approaches to the work's autonomy entail a psychological approach to art, and rely heavily on Kantian aesthetics. In the interest of brevity, I discuss only three approaches: *aesthetic attitude*, reception as *non-conceptual feeling* and the artwork as *underdetermined by the language we use in our dealing with artworks*.

*i. Attitude theories: The aesthetic attitude, the judgment of taste.*

**Autonomist:** The attitudinal approach to the artwork's autonomy is that *the work is autonomous because the judge is devoid of private interest with regard to it*. According to this position, there is thought to be a faculty or 'inner sense' termed *taste*, and although Kant's version is paramount, he was in no way the first to theorize it. (The earl of Shaftsbury in the early eighteenth-century seems to be the first.) The attitude of another of Kant's precursors, Karl Philippe Moritz, is a good example of an 'aesthetic attitude', which produces a judgment of taste:

In contemplating a beautiful object [...] I roll the purpose back into the object itself: I regard it as something that finds completion not in me but in itself and thus constitutes a whole in itself and gives me pleasure for its own sake [...] Thus the beautiful object yields a higher and more disinterested pleasure than the merely useful object.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Woolf, 1994, pp. 549-550. My italics.

<sup>53</sup> Moritz, Karl Philippe, *Anton Reiser: A Psychological Novel*, Translated by John R. Russell, Columbia, S. D., 1996.

Thus the aesthetic attitude has a negative meaning in the sense of not being motivated by self-concern or personal advantage. Meanwhile, this does not mean that the aesthetic attitude is *un*-interested. Disinterest only excludes private interest; by being disinterested, the agent assumes that she is judging just as any other person would.

For the Earl of Shaftsbury, a Neoplatonist,<sup>54</sup> taste is a moral judgment because it compares the object with an a priori concept of harmony. For Kant however, taste is not a moral judgment because it is not a concept but a *feeling*, and it serves no determinate purpose but is *for itself*. Nevertheless, whether the judgment of taste is moral or a-moral, this sort of position generally holds the insight that although the artwork's *autonomy has to do with its self-contained nature*, if that nature is to be countenanced, or even if we are forever barred from countenancing it, the result—let us call it the *aesthetic object*—is conditioned by the subjective processes of the receiver's attitude. Why? Because our subjective interest molds the way we perceive things and our judgment of them. The ensuing relativity or relationality is therefore seen as a roadblock, either for experiencing the artwork itself, or, as Kant thought, for experiencing a pure aesthetic judgment of taste. Schopenhauer, one of Kant's prime interpreters on this point, held that through disinterested judgment, the work—in an absolute sense—could become available to the receiver. (This is not to say that Schopenhauer actually meant that the work *would* be countenanced absolutely, rather that disinterest opens up the possibility.) It is important to note that the Schopenhaurian understanding of disinterest is not Kant's.

Meanwhile, *Disinterested Attitude theory* has persisted throughout the twentieth-century in various forms, and today, it broadly implies simply that *there is no purpose governing the experience other than the purpose of having the experience*. In so doing, an indifferent, non-egoistic and non-moral attitude is adopted so that will and desire are held at bay. As such, we become totally aware and attentive to an entity's whole being, nature and character for its own sake alone. Accordingly, 'disinterested' aesthetic perception is characterized by a 'pointed mindfulness', alert and vigorous rather than distant and detached. It is the opposite of looking at things from the outside, but a way of *seeing things as they are*. 'Disinterest' provides the basis for recognizing the intrinsic value of all living beings; lived experience as a way of knowing and of being in the world, and; the right of existence of all entities for their own sake alone.<sup>55</sup>

**Dissenter:** There seem to be two general conceptions of the 'disinterested attitude' at work in this broad interpretation: First, the notion that *there must be no interests operative in the activity of contemplation of artworks*. Secondly, the conflicting view that the first notion is too restrictive

---

<sup>54</sup> By 'neo-Platonist', what I mean is that Shaftsbury held that there are extra-mental, extra-natural absolutes and the epistemological access to these is through adopting an attitude of disinterest.

<sup>55</sup> This last sentence is a view expressed by a writer "Susan" on this aesthetics blog. <http://www.aesthetics-online.org/aesthetics-l/aesthetics.1997-1.txt>

and only allows for examining the formal properties, divorced from original purposes, functions and contexts. In that case, *while certain sorts of interests are still disallowed, some interests are necessary*. A pertinent example of this second view would be Jerome Stolnitz, who proposes that in order to appreciate an artwork, it must be accepted “sympathetically”, attentively, and on its own terms. The active receiver must willingly attend to the phenomenal characteristics in a serious, consistent way. Stolnitz defines aesthetic perception as “the disinterested and sympathetic attention to and contemplation of any object of awareness whatever, for its own sake alone”.<sup>56</sup>

There is, of course, a certain sense in which disinterest and art meet, and it is in the artist’s attitude to life: For example, the artist *sublimates* her lust for life in the artwork; rather than actually commit murder, she can play-act a murder. I also agree with attitude theorists who preserve insights about what the receiver brings to the artwork, she bears responsibility for reception and interpretation. However, the problem with attitude theories generally, is that they assume access to *the work itself* is possible, that the receiver can know what it entails to receive a work “on its own terms”, unadulterated by the receiver’s attitude.

As far as the *judgment of taste* is concerned—and here I criticize the Kantian aesthetic attitude presented in chapter 2 as well—just for starters, there are problems with the following claims: of disinterest, the immediacy of the judgment, that it is non-conceptual but only a feeling, that it is an attitude one must don from the outset, that there is such a thing as *in-itself-ness*, and the notion of *pleasure for its own sake*. For brevity sake, I will address one issue, *disinterest*, and these other problems will be addressed indirectly, by way of addressing disinterest. I will address it with two claims: First, that *it is highly doubtful whether disinterest is anything worth having*; secondly, *even if we wanted to achieve a disinterested attitude, we could not*.<sup>57</sup>

As to the first claim—that it is highly doubtful whether a disinterested attitude is anything worth having—this is because *disinterest expresses a lack of solidarity*; it disenfranchises a wide range of people. It may well be that when aesthetics was cordoned off as a separate domain or discipline in the eighteenth-century, the quality of *disinterest* became a central tenant because of economic and social conditions; the public’s desire for entertainment threatened the status of neoclassical art, which focused on “fine”, idealized imitations of nature. Of course theorists thought the pleasures of the masses were vulgar and undesirable. They therefore promoted a notion of *high culture* where the artwork is seen as self-contained and independent, only able to be appreciated by the more refined audiences for which the necessities of life are already fulfilled. Only the upper class would be capable of putting aside particular feelings and interests in order to contemplate objects in a purely disinterested fashion. Under the banner of *refined taste*, the upper class may have just been legitimating and entrenching its power and authority over the masses. As

---

<sup>56</sup> Stolnitz quoted in Kneller, 1998, p. 62-63.

<sup>57</sup> Reams of literature have been written on this topic, and my objective here is not to be exhaustive, but to present, as I see it, the most pertinent problems with the notion of disinterest, as it has come to be understood.

Elizabeth A. Bohls claims: “An aesthetic paradigm of perception thus becomes a cultural means toward the ultimately political end of homogeneity and solidarity among England’s governing classes”.<sup>58</sup> In practice therefore, *a disinterested attitude for aesthetic experience* means that the receiver relates the artwork to their effort to create a distinction between themselves and others. The artwork is used for the external goal of legitimating one’s social and political control. Thus it is revealed as political, social and economic in nature. Pierre Bourdieu puts it forcefully: “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier”.<sup>59</sup> He goes on to state:

Kant’s analysis of the judgment of taste finds its real basis in a set of aesthetic principles which are the universalization of the dispositions associated with a particular social and economic position.<sup>60</sup>

Interest enters into the composition of the most disinterested pleasures of pure taste, because the principle of the pleasure derived from these refined games for refined players lies, in the last analysis, in the denied experience of a social relationship of membership and exclusion.<sup>61</sup>

But there is more: Through disinterest, the receiver ignores the instrumental value of artworks and consequently elevates non-functional artworks over functional works typically belonging to the domain of women, applied artists and “mere” craftsmen. Consequently, those who create useful objects are not deemed artists. In the final analysis, the notion of disinterest disenfranchises a wide range of people.

**Autonomist:** The dissenter makes it seem as though the *aesthetic attitude*, which includes aspects of disinterest or distancing oneself from the aesthetic object, serves no good purpose, that it is a means for exploitation or distinguishing oneself. Granted, today some highly placed actors in the artworld treat artworks primarily as social tools and elitist investments. But it is needful to distinguish between dubious elitist activities of some members of the artworld,<sup>62</sup> and other members, who try seriously to come to terms with artworks. If that sets up a distinction that happens sometimes to follow class distinction, then so be it. Bourdieu makes the mistake of assuming that the ‘popular’ approach to artworks, with a view towards either sensual pleasure or moral content, is the “natural” attitude towards art.<sup>63</sup> In fact, members of the privileged social class in his own country have also championed these attitudes.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> Bohls, Elizabeth A. “Disinterestedness and the Denial of the Particular: Locke, Adam Smith and the Subject of Aesthetics”. In *Eighteenth Century Aesthetics and the Reconstruction of Art*, Paul Mattick, Jr. (editor), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 16-51.

<sup>59</sup> Bourdieu, 1984, p. 6.

<sup>60</sup> Op cit., p. 493.

<sup>61</sup> Op cit., p. 499.

<sup>62</sup> The prime example of a dubious player, according to many art-professionals, is Charles Saatchi. He “revitalized” the market value of his art-holdings by changing the location of the gallery, staging it in an art-palace within walking distance from the Tate Modern. Saatchi donates artworks to the Tate; is this just a tactical bid for social distinction?

<sup>63</sup> Christensen, 1995, pp. 129-130; 139. Christensen exposes Bourdieu’s equivocality: On the one hand, he claims that the judge’s *habitus* (class-specific attitudes and the schema that generate attitudes engendered in each actor’s psyche) determines her attitude toward artworks, but on the other hand, he valorizes popular taste as “natural”.

<sup>64</sup> Op cit., pp. 139-140. Christensen singles out Abbé Dubos, who defended mankind’s sensual and “animal” aspects, against Lord Shaftsbury’s disinterested attitude. Also Voltaire and Montesquieu held a sensualist position. Christensen’s main goal is to show that the distinction between a disinterested judgments on the one hand, and agreeable, sensual and moral judgments on the other, cannot be reduced or tied to social class distinction.

There is a sort of *purposeful disinterestedness* that can dislocate the cliché's of ordinary perception, free the receiver from every-day concerns long enough to countenance things in an un-ordinary, fresh way. As Robert C. Morgan says, "Artists with the ability to produce significant work require an educated audience—an audience with the patience to come to terms with the art through intelligence and feeling".<sup>65</sup>

Serious art requires a certain preparation of the mind, a relaxed synthesis whereby the mind comes into contact with the body, where there is a rejuvenation of seeing, and where thought is required to pull the act of seeing into the sensorium of feeling—to formulate ideas that are powerfully felt. It is time to understand the difference between what is symptomatic in such a mediated culture as ours, and what is truly significant. The distinction is crucial in coming to terms with a new criterion in dealing with art.<sup>66</sup>

**Dissenter:** But what Morgan calls "purposeful disinterestedness" is *interest!* It sounds like what the disinterest-advocate is doing is just replacing one set of interests with another. Actually, Morgan does not seem to be all that off the mark; his problem is that he cannot admit his interest. Interest is all there is, and if the receiver admits it, she can focus on the artwork in ways that seriously come to terms with it. For example, if the various functions of portraits are taken into consideration, they can be appreciated differently than, say, just according to the inner harmony of forms, or for the insight such contemplation gives about one's own powers of reason. If the receiver is aware of her already-interested agency, her attention can be constructively focused.

Finally, it is instructive to examine why Nietzsche insisted upon *interest*. His view of *disinterest*—what he called Kant's "fat worm of error"<sup>67</sup>—stems perhaps from his misunderstanding of it as ascetic, nihilistic, will-less and a total depreciation of life: The artwork, far from serving "the ascetic ideal", is its fundamental opponent because art is essentially life-affirming, willed and interested.<sup>68</sup> Nietzsche was mostly attacking Schopenhauer's attitude and did not fully understand Kant, for, although Kant's attitude indeed focuses on the appearance rather than the existence of its object (CJ§2), it does this in such a way that the powers of imagination and understanding are "enlivened" without the use of any particular concept (CJ§9). Nevertheless, Nietzsche's criticism does address Kant's aesthetic attitude insofar as it entails things like 'dry liking', 'pleasure for its own sake', indeterminate purposiveness, and attending only to the form of the work, ignoring the harmony of colour or sound. (CJ§14) In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche depicts the disinterested judge ruminating aloud:

For me, the highest thing would be to gaze at life without desire and not, as a dog does, with tongue hanging out'...To be happy in gazing, with benumbed will, without the grasping and greed of egotism...For me, the dearest thing would be to love the earth as the moon loves it, and to touch its beauty with the eyes alone...And let this be called by me *immaculate* perception of all things: that I desire nothing of things, except that I may lie down before them like a mirror with a hundred eyes.<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> Morgan, Robert C., 1998, p. XXII.

<sup>66</sup> Op cit., p. XXI.

<sup>67</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (GM), Essay III "What Do Ascetic Ideals Mean?" §6. <http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/Nietzsche/genealogy3.htm>

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Nietzsche, 1969, p. 145.

To this Zarathustra responds: “Oh, you sentimental hypocrites, you lustful men! You lack innocence in desire: and therefore you now slander desiring!”<sup>70</sup> Disinterest “lacks innocence” because even if we wanted to achieve a disinterested attitude, we could not. The notion of disinterest can be traced back to Plato’s views about the state of mind necessary for contemplating the Forms.<sup>71</sup> This was completely non-aesthetically directed. But what was first reserved for contemplating the Ideal Forms—and in the Middle Ages, for contemplating God—was turned on the physical world when Aristotle proposed that humans have an ability—an inner sense—to discriminate the objects revealed to the five outward senses. This is a capacity for making basic perceptual judgments and it makes coherent sense-experience possible. But there was never any proof that this inner sense existed, and there have been numerous ways of explaining how sense experience is possible.

The criteria for disinterest would be that the humans’ interest and intending is negated. As Heidegger has pointed out in “Being and Time”<sup>72</sup>, *interest* is always engaged. By virtue of merely being alive, we think of things in terms of equipment and cannot avoid doing this interpretive act. Being-in-the-world, *Da-sein* (Heidegger uses *Da-sein* to displace the Cartesian ‘self’ or ‘subject’; we humans are *geworfenor Entwurf*, “thrown projection” and essentially temporal) does not understand herself as an object present in the world at a single isolated moment; rather, she interprets herself in terms of her relation to her own future possibilities in light of her given historical context. For this reason, *Da-sein* projects her interest and intentions on things; she cannot countenance a thing isolated from contexts of use, not even when there is a breakdown of use. As Heidegger says: “Handiness is the ontological categorical definition of beings as they are ‘in themselves’...Handiness proves to be the kind of being of beings first discovered within the world.”<sup>73</sup> Moreover, “Modes of *taking care* belong to the everydayness of being-in-the-world, modes which let the beings taken care of be encountered in such a way that the worldly quality of innerworldly beings appears.”<sup>74</sup> Perhaps if an instance of pure disinterest occurred in a human, it would really be agnosia.<sup>75</sup> Heidegger’s view of the necessity of interest follows Nietzsche, albeit the later uses an entirely different way of explaining the necessity: Artworks come about through

---

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Plato, Letter VII 344 says “...but if his nature is defective, as is that of most men, for the acquisition of knowledge and the so-called virtues, and if the qualities he has have been corrupted, then not even Lynceus could make such a man see. In short, neither quickness of learning nor a good memory can make a man see when his nature is not akin to the object, for this knowledge never takes root in an alien nature; so that no man who is not naturally inclined and akin to justice and all other forms of excellence, even though he be quick at learning...will ever attain the truth that is attainable about virtue.”

<sup>72</sup> Heidegger, 1996, §14-17.

<sup>73</sup> Op cit., p. 67.

<sup>74</sup> Op cit., p. 68.

<sup>75</sup> See also discussion on page 75. Agnosia (a-gnosis, “non-knowledge”) is a loss of ability to recognize objects, persons, sounds, shapes or smells while the specific sense is not defective nor is there any significant memory loss. It is usually due to temporal lobe injury in the brain. For an easily accessible discussion on this, see Oliver Sacks: “*The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*” (book with same title, New York: Touchstone, 1985.)

a psychological condition that is a heightened Dionysian state.<sup>76</sup> And in the same way as artworks are created, so also are they received; rather than needing a disinterested attitude for the artwork to appear, the receiver needs interest, because they could not even identify the artwork from a state of detached, isolated attention.

**Autonomist:** I can concede that some interest is present; Morgan's patience to come to terms with artworks presupposes it, as you show. However, in light of the phenomenological experiences of Pater, Whistler, and countless others, it cannot be denied that a sort of disinterest can obtain. Even Bourdieu says he is "completely and fully ready to admit that Kant's aesthetics is true, but only as a phenomenology for the aesthetic experience of persons who are a product of *schooling*."<sup>77</sup>

ii. *The artwork is free of moral liability because all moral obligation lies with the judge*

**Autonomist:** What about explaining the artwork's autonomy in the sense of the complete obligation lying with the judge? An example of this could be to claim that the receiver is *solely* responsible—when we judge an artwork, all we do is look in the mirror at our own values; we never broach the artwork itself. Richard Posner holds such a view,<sup>78</sup> and James Kincaid, in his defence of Sally Mann's *Immediate Family* [Illustration 4], agrees: The work is autonomous in the sense of not being morally obligated because the "agent" is seen as endowing objects with psychological content; those objects are experienced as bringing out ones' inner psychic life:

*If the photographs are upsetting, one should look for the cause of the disturbance on the inside. Works of art—even works of non-art—do not and cannot dictate the way they are read or viewed. They are subject to interpretive codes and practices current in the culture, codes and practices works of art neither control nor contain. These photographs are, in themselves, neither pernicious nor positive, innocuous nor poisonous, beautiful nor repellent. The way we respond to them, what we say they mean and do, says everything about us and the way we have been taught to look; it says nothing about the works. This is true always, but it is most obviously true when we are most anxious to take our response and put it "into" (i.e. blame it on) the work: if we feel queasy, the work is sick; if we feel exalted, the work is fine; if we feel aroused, the work is pornographic (or purchased, depending on our politics); if we can't make heads or tails of it, the work is muddled.<sup>79</sup>*

**Dissenter:** The problem with this view is that it avoids making a decision about the artwork, and thereby, in a protracted way, it dismantles the project of critical judgment and opens up for a totally uncritical acceptance of all aesthetic expression. Moreover, this is a radically sceptical position, untenable because it entertains a relativism that can only be theorized; no one can practically conduct his or her aesthetic judgments according to it.

---

<sup>76</sup> Many artists agree: In a personal e-mail interview with California artist Christer Swartz, 2005, the artist relates that his task of creating is "usually a very primal activity", best done in spurts of passion. Little is planned ahead of time.

<sup>77</sup> Gebauer, Günther and Wulf, Christoph, "Über die 'scholastische Ansicht'", in *Praxis und Ästhetik*, Frankfurt am Main, 1993. Quoted from Østerberg, 1995, p. 157.

<sup>78</sup> Posner, 1997.

<sup>79</sup> "Politicizing Puberty: The zoning of child sexuality in Art, advertising and the American household" debate with Michael Medved Stephen Schiff, Naomi Wolf, Judith Levine, James Kincaid.

<http://www.nerve.com/dispatches/voicebox/puberty/main.asp#Question1>

Overview of articles on Sally Mann's art: <http://www.dazereader.com/sallymann.htm> In 2004 Mann's *Immediate Family* series was on the Internet but not any more. Some of what remains is linked with subscription "adult" sites.

*iii. Reception of artworks as non-conceptual, as feeling only*

**Autonomist:** It could be that the ‘autonomous artwork’ primarily should be understood as meaning that it *appeals directly to feelings and/or the unconscious, bypassing cognitions*. This, we recall, was important for Kant. Here ‘autonomy’ would refer to *independence from concepts and consequently also from true/false judgments about the work*, inasmuch as true/false applies to propositions awarded the status of *bona fide* knowledge. Such a non-conceptual approach to ‘autonomous artwork’ could be supported by our awareness that infants react to aesthetic stimuli before they have developed language. If so, then it seems possible that this sort of reaction to artworks is also possible. Take for example colour: It affects our mood without us being consciously aware of it. The aesthetic appeal of materials—steel, burlap, plastic, syrup—also wakes immediate responses. And we react to sounds, the origin of which we do not recognize.

**Dissenter:** I agree that reception of artworks may partly be non-conceptual, that they appeal to feelings and the unconscious, perhaps most of all music, but not entirely. After all, for babies there is no such thing as an artwork; as soon as we call something *art*, it is on account of us having a number of other conceptual categories in place. We use general concepts all the time in broaching artworks and it seems foolhardy to claim that reception of art is non-conceptually determined because we experience that we do conceptually coordinate our art-related activities. Surely this would indicate that at least some of our concepts reach their mark, or that the use of general concepts in relation to artworks reaches them *enough*, albeit not exhaustively so. Nelson Goodman argued that it is *impossible* to make a distinction between cognition and emotion<sup>80</sup> because our feelings are used cognitively to help us determine and understand the artwork, and to integrate it in with the rest of our experiences of the world. According to Goodman, we cannot distinguish between aesthetic and scientific experience by saying that the one concerns feelings or pleasure for its own sake, and that everyday cognitive or scientific experience is of another sort. Aesthetics and science both consist of trafficking in symbols: in creation, use, interpretation, and re-forming and manipulating the symbols.

*iv. ‘Autonomous artwork’ understood in terms of reception being underdetermined by the symbolic form of language*

**Autonomist:** Referring to artworks as autonomous may imply that the artwork is a *sensuous symbolic form under-determined by other symbolic forms such as speech and language, and the consequently endless deferral of determinate meaning*. According to this view, the artwork is autonomous in the sense that there is a difference between *presentational* and *discursive* symbolism (the artwork as a medium of sensuous forms differs from the symbolic forms of verbal and conceptual representation necessary for creating meaning), this reveals the artwork as always

---

<sup>80</sup> Goodman, 1984, pp.107-129.

underdetermined, and thus independent, of discursive symbolism—language. Susan Langer and some semiotic theories point out that forming the world in terms of sensuous symbols (artworks), frees humans from the bonds of the immediacy of pure sense-experience.

For Cassirer,<sup>81</sup> the artwork is seen as a *formal and expressive* dimension of aesthetic consciousness—a symbolic representation of sensory experience affording rich possibilities for meaning. It may either modify an existing form or create a new form of artistic expression. Perhaps a good example of this is, again, Jackson Pollock: When asked what the meaning of modern art was, Pollock replied, “Modern art to me is nothing more than the expression of contemporary aims of the age that we’re living in.”<sup>82</sup> Thus Pollock understood himself as having created new symbolic forms for his age. But the meaning of the sensuous symbolic form must also somehow be constituted symbolically, through the various systems of symbols that make up conventional language. The receiver must convert aesthetic elements into symbols and this entails negating or removing the singular materiality of the object and subsuming it under general abstract categories. Since the abstract categories are not in isometric relation to the singular material, the material remains unaccounted for and meaning is endlessly deferred.

Semiotic theory<sup>83</sup> echoes this aspect of *symbolic forms*: First, there is a something—whatever—which is displaced by a perceptible sign; secondly, there is the mental image formed by the receiver, and thirdly, the thing for which the sign stands. Both Cassirer and the Semiotic theorists such as Peirce rely upon the Kantian insight that *the object for which the artwork stands is an object formed in the mind, but that the artwork is also always something mediated and fundamentally reception-determined*. Yet in contrast to Kant’s view that reception is universal (*sensus communis*), the artwork’s subjective basis entails that it can be different for each receiver. For example, one person might experience an expressive object having contrasts of light and dark and suggesting a certain mood, another experiences scintillating colour-harmony, someone with cubist commitments might comprehend it as representing a geometrical law, another will experience a still life, philistines will experience a good investment, a Christian might experience a meditation on death, etc. And the same person could even experience all these comprehensions jumbled together. Hence, according to this approach, ‘autonomous artwork’ is interpreted as *independence from fixed or final meaning*. This could be somehow similar to Kant’s *aesthetic ideas*, which produce more thought than determinate concepts can hold.

**Dissenter:** It is not necessarily the case that the object formed in the mind is different for each receiver; because people are socialized into language groups, they share cultural symbols. Most people will see several shared aspects, probably not exactly alike, but there is nothing to bar

---

<sup>81</sup> See for example, Cassirer, Ernst, *Symbol, Myth and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer*, 1935-45, Verene (ed.), New Haven, 1979. Cassirer’s point is also addressed in chapter 5 and 6,

<sup>82</sup> Pollock, 1992, p. 575.

<sup>83</sup> An example of such a view is derived from Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotics.

sufficient overlapping of aesthetic experience for adequate communication about aesthetic objects. Shared experience of artworks helps unite people in mutual understanding and respect. As far as Kant's *aesthetic ideas* are concerned, it seems more likely that these are just very general concepts. We cannot make one aesthetic representation that will exhaust such a concept, so we make due with partial representations.

**Autonomist:** I at least agree with your last point and, as we shall see, this is an important aspect of the institutional approach to artworks. Nevertheless, the cleft persists between sensuous symbolic forms and the language we use in relation to them. What the dissenter calls "adequately overlapping aesthetic experience" is based upon convention, it is nominal, local and it has no real power to point to the sensuous material. (This is a key problem Theodore Adorno called *non-identity*, and it will also recur in chapter 5.)

### **C. The artwork's autonomy understood in relation to the artworld's separation from the rest of society, or the work's separation from the artworld<sup>84</sup>**

**Institutional autonomist:** When a speaker asserts that artworks are autonomous, she sometimes means that *the work is situated in a relatively independent social situation*, a situation marginal enough that it eschews political, religious or other interference. The phenomenon of the art museum would be a good example of such an institution. The independent situation arose through a general diversification of society (a supposed hallmark that distinguishes the Modern era from earlier eras),<sup>85</sup> so it is a social-historical phenomenon and it is a function of the bourgeois consciousness of freedom.<sup>86</sup> On this view, Fine Art (autonomous) arose *as the antithesis* to a decadent, mass popular culture. An additional way of describing the art institution's relative independence, which goes a long way in accounting for the artwork's autonomy in relation to it, is expressed by Stein Haugom Olsen.<sup>87</sup> He uses the economic system as an analogy for the social institution literature is:

[Literature is] a social practice or institution defined by a normative structure of concepts and conventions. The conventions which make up this normative structure not only regulate social behaviour but also create the possibility for identifying, and thus for engaging in, the behaviour which they regulate. These constitutive conventions specify the characteristics of and label certain types of behaviour, objects, and events, and assign a function to these facts in relation to some purpose which the practice defines, thus constituting them [as] institutional facts. The logical status of the constitutive conventions can be highlighted by comparing them with summary or regulative rules. These regulate behaviour, which can be recognized and described without reference to these conventions.<sup>88</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> The reader will recall from the introduction, that the relation between the artwork and its institutional setting is treated in a more cursory manner. This is, first of all, because I feel it is an issue that puts the focus primarily upon the institution's autonomy. Secondly, I limit my presentation and discussion of it in order to limit my paper.

<sup>85</sup> A biological-evolutionary metaphor under-girds the notion of reason having diversified and various domains within culture being established.

<sup>86</sup> Adorno, 1997, section on "Society", starting from p. 225. See also Sveen, 1995, p. 41; Østerberg, 1995, pp. 143.

<sup>87</sup> Olsen, 1984, pp. 1-19.

<sup>88</sup> Olsen, 1984, pp. 10-11.

The artworld's institutions are relatively independent from the rest of culture on the basis of agreements between actors concerning how to cooperate, and these agreements undergo modification. Without this background agreement, 'the autonomous artwork' would not exist. It is a convention that is part of a normative structure regulating behaviour. Extrapolating from Olsen's view of literature, to try to give an account of the artwork's autonomy just with reference to individual artworks, would be like trying to give an account of money "with reference only to individual transactions, without mentioning the framework of concepts and conventions which makes the transaction possible".<sup>89</sup> <sup>90</sup> The moments of autonomy for the artwork, in light of its institutional setting, which I choose to address, are as follows: 1) *The work's autonomy would be established by convention, which in turn, relies on political choice, relational to certain practical concerns.* 2) *What the artwork refers to is kept within the confines of the art-institution. Or, the artwork may criticize the society but not directly. Because of its marginal situation, it remains free from social obligations.* 4) *The artwork communicates according to, or is situated in the context of, a peculiar artworld logic.* The reason I choose to address these and not many other issues, is that these seem to still focus primarily on the artwork.

First, the *conditions* for institutional autonomy cause the artwork's independence to be relative to political decision by governments. It is understood not as a priori; but as an idea of freedom formed by an elite.<sup>91</sup> If an art-institution is taxpayer-funded, this is reason to doubt much institutional autonomy for the artwork.<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, such autonomy could increase if professionals are hired, and if politicians adopt a deliberate hands-off policy.<sup>93</sup> Premises such as museum buildings and galleries, rather than churches or government palaces, might also indicate greater independence from other spheres of interest, but not necessarily.

Secondly, the work has been seen as needing to be self-referential, or reference must be confined to the art institution. For example, the work can be a comment upon other works<sup>94</sup> or

---

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Art-institutional autonomy and its relation to the artwork is a huge topic. As I stipulated in my introduction, I choose not to address it in depth. For discussions about the origin of a distinct art institution, see Sveen, 1995 and Østerberg, 1995; Habermas, in his *Theory of Communicative Action* (vol. 1, Boston, MIT, 1984, not listed in the bibliography) defends relative autonomous status. Adorno and Horkheimer, 1998 present important criticisms concerning the relation between the artwork and the art institution; Bourdieu, 1984 is critical of the distinction between popular and bourgeois class distinction, which he claims the art institution enforces; Crimp, 1993 can be said to be exemplary for the Postmodern attempt to deconstruct the institution.

<sup>91</sup> Adorno, 2004, p. 40.

<sup>92</sup> For example, the Bergen Art Museum is municipally owned and its director, although an art professional, is politically appointed. At present the museum is geared towards tourism and education. Since the municipality owns many choice works by, e.g., Edward Munch, then by all means, the municipality does not allow these paintings merely to have their being as autonomous artworks, but makes them *do some work*: Municipally owned holdings are treated as a lending-library, sent around the globe and function as Norwegian ambassadors. They are "swapped" with other museums and used as bargaining chips so that Bergen can mount temporary international exhibitions.

<sup>93</sup> Sveen, op.cit. p. 40, footnote 74.

<sup>94</sup> For object artworld-internal referentiality, Rita Marhaug's "menstruation video", officially titled *13 + 35*, has been interpreted as a comment upon Knut Åsdam's video *Pissing* (Veronica Diesen, "Det performative i relasjon til kjønn, identitet og makt", in *Rita Marhaug: Fortrolighetens geografi*, (artist catalogue for Haugesund Billedgalleri), 2001). In other reviews *Pissing*, in its turn, is interpreted as a comment on Andy Warhol's video *Blow Job*.

take part in a critique of institutional practices,<sup>95</sup> e.g., the funding of exhibitions;<sup>96</sup> the theme of the work is artworld-internal (an interpretation of ‘autonomous’). Conversely, if an artwork refers *specifically* or *primarily* to, say, a political conflict,<sup>97</sup> institutional protagonists could argue that, since these are not art-internal issues, the work can claim no protection from the art institution if it comes under political attack. But if a non-artworld figure has somehow embroiled himself in artworld-issues, such as the artist’s freedom of expression or censorship, as did NYC Mayor Giuliani, then his portrait could be an internal artworld issue.<sup>98</sup>

A third important way of describing autonomy in relation to its institutional position is the claim that there is a type of logic—call it a *play-logic*—that makes the institution distinct from other domains of life, where objective standards of evaluation should obtain: It is claimed that the artworld follows a *unique thought pattern* not shared by science, law, morality etc. It has an independent value system, hybrid forms of knowing, and ways of communicating inter-subjective

---

<sup>95</sup> Louise Lawler’s art [Illustration 5] consists, to a large degree, of photographs of other artist’s works in art-institutional contexts such as museum magazines, Sotheby’s auction show room, etc. As such, they are intended to take part in a discourse about the artwork as a commodity and to problematize aspects of the art-institution, such as its care-taker function, its treating artworks as commodities, its marketing strategies, etc.

<sup>96</sup> Hans Haacke’s *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*. Haacke combines materials, words and images in order to critique advertising, industry and political life in their relation to the art world. [Illustration 6] *Shapolsky* attempts to expose the business operations of a slum landlord with ties to the Guggenheim Museum. Because of this artworld-internal connection, the work is judged internal.

<sup>97</sup> An excellent recent example of non-autonomous art is the exhibition *Time Suspended*, Bergen Kunsthall, January 2005, which deals with the theme *refugees and human rights: the challenge of longstanding conflicts*. This exhibition is a collaborative effort on behalf of video-artists and human rights organizations such as the Raftos Foundation. As well as viewing videos dealing with the Israel/Palestine conflict, the Kunsthall has “curated” a seminar series by non-art professionals (politicians, journalists, judges, human rights activists and researchers) to present their views to gallery-goers.

<sup>98</sup> Hans Haacke’s *Sanitation* (2000), <http://mbhs.bergtraum.k12.ny.us/cybereng/nyt/whitney-art.html>). *Sanitation* intends to draw an analogy with the *Sensation* exhibitions, first mounted in 1997 in London. It portrays former New York Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani in the company of Nazis, with quotations by him written in the Fraktur script favoured by the Third Reich, and the sound of jackboots marching in the background. It seems to depend entirely on the good will of the interpreter: Can a link be found to the artworld that would render the work internal to it? The museum’s director, Maxwell L Anderson, admitted the artwork is deliberately intended by the artist to provoke the mayor and the public. But because of the history surrounding *Sensation* exhibitions, it is an internal provocation, since the Whitney museum receives funding from the municipality.

A work that is more undecidable, if not impossible to claim art-internal status for, is Haacke’s portrait of Ronald Reagan in *Oelgemaelde, Hommage à Marcel Broodthaers* (1982). Despite its title, it seems mostly to be a claim about the fascism of conservative politics more than anything internal to the art institution. (I am open to the possibility of my own ineptitude in not seeing the connection here with art-internal themes. It may be argued that one of Broodthaer’s axioms was that installation art has no autonomous existence, since the work is assembled on sight, and its essence is spectator participation. In such case, the art-internal theme would be the lack of an internal theme.) Anyway, the portrait, a symbol of power, seems to exude passive arrogance. From behind stanchions and a velvet rope, Reagan faces a photograph of anti-war protesters. Haacke’s portrait of Margaret Thatcher in *Taking Stock* (1982) could however be more easily understood as artworld-internal, since there is a strong link between Thatcher and the art-patron Saatchi Brothers. Although both the Reagan and Thatcher portraits extend from local and world events, *Taking Stock* presents Thatcher in the costume and artifice of regal décor. Yet her library setting exposes the source of her power: The book spines name her collaborators, all clients of the Saatchi and Saatchi advertising conglomerate – British Airways, the Arts Council of Great Britain, the British Museum, Conservative-British Elections, and the South Africa Nationalist Party, etc. Porcelain plates in the bookcase contain the faces of brothers Maurice and Charles Saatchi, alluding to their spirited collecting of plate-breaking painter Julian Schnabel. The Saatchi’s collecting contemporary art coincides with their advertising company’s theory of global marketing, which was responsible for Thatcher’s election campaigns. According to Haacke’s statements about the work, as patrons of the arts, the Saatchis donate contemporary art to the Tate Gallery in order to gain power and prestige. In this sort of convoluted way, Thatcher’s portrait could be deemed artworld-internal through means of association with such powerful artworld players as the Saatchi brothers. <http://www.ccca.ca/c/writing/h/hassan/hass002t.html>

agreement without laws.<sup>99</sup> The notion of *peculiar artworld logic* can be bolstered in light of the Kantian notion of *inter-subjective agreement without laws*, Kant's *sensus communis*.<sup>100</sup> Recall from chapter 2 that each receiver is autonomous inasmuch as she makes the aesthetic judgment *for herself*. But she assumes her judgment is universally valid because, since everyone supposedly has the same cognitive faculties, if everyone judges disinterestedly, everyone should agree. But since the aesthetic judgment is not subject to the usual way of generating assent (i.e., the judgment is non-conceptual, a subjective feeling), she seeks confirmation for her putatively universally valid judgment through agreement from other judges. But this agreement cannot be legislated. The individual's autonomous judgment is always in search of a warrant from the community, which develops through the assent of its members. In this way, claims about the artwork are inter-subjective and communal in structure even while they are autonomous (the subject makes the judgment independently and for herself alone). By this means, confirmation of the validity of one's own judgment is achieved. Confirmation from the larger community warrants the subject's aesthetic experience.

**Dissenter:** I agree with the institutional autonomist's first point that political choice governs the degree of freedom from the dominant culture. I also accept, to a certain degree, that self-referentiality and internal subject matter is good grounds for denying external interference, that the artworld is marginal, which goes a long way in explaining why acts deemed unlawful in other spheres of society, are justified insofar as they are deemed artworks. But, as the autonomist herself shows in footnote 98, determining what is internal subject matter is highly problematic and may be a matter of the judge's good will. Also problematic is the autonomist's claim that there are forms of communication specific for the fields of art, not shared by other domains of culture. This would indeed be a premise for institutional autonomy, but what are these independent ways? Aesthetic material? Non-intentionality? Non-purposiveness? Such are also present in other fields. Are there any concepts only applicable to the art institution? The autonomist is unable to point to one single instance of something unique for the art institution. With all respect to Adorno, artworks that exercise resistance are some of the ones *most* embraced by the art market. The artworld primarily functions along the lines of the corporate world, with a few people producing and a majority dealing in marketing, selling, publicity, publication and conservation. Moreover, since artists need to provide themselves with food and shelter, they cannot be "pure". Claiming emphatic resistance or negativity fails as soon as the artist tries to show or sell their work.

Finally, what we nowadays agree to call an artwork cannot be definitively separated from aesthetic experience at large. Since the art institution accepted ready-mades, it is recognized that the rules delimiting art's legitimate domain are bereft of criteria other than the individual judges'

---

<sup>99</sup> Sveen, op. cit., p.45.

<sup>100</sup> CJ§19-22.

will to enunciate a limitation, and then to garner agreement for it from other judges. This is what *sensus communis* boils down to: Some agents, such as curators, wield the greatest privileged, and the best that can be hoped for of *sensus communis* is that some pocket of the artworld will agree with the curator's choice.

**Institutional autonomist:** Indeed, the status of the artwork hinges on one's own judgment and whether one will find agreement from others for it. The artworld operates on the Humpty Dumpty principle:<sup>101</sup>

'I don't know what you mean by "glory" [art]' Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. 'Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant "there's a nice knock-down argument for you!"'

But "glory" [art] doesn't mean "a nice knock-down argument,"' Alice objected.

'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you *can* make words [the word 'artwork' or 'autonomous artwork' for that matter] mean so many different things.'

'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master—that is all.'<sup>102</sup>

**Dissenter:** Intuitively, it seems like if 'the autonomous artwork' is to remain a viable expression in the contemporary artworld, it should be something *more* than Humpty Dumpty private stipulation, followed by a power struggle for public agreement. From the discussion thus far, trying to explain the work's autonomy in terms of something external—the artist, the receiver or the institution—is not very satisfactory, not least because these approaches pretty much ignore *the artwork itself*. If there is such a thing. Perhaps 'autonomy' can apply to *the nature or the being of the artwork itself*?

**Autonomist:** It is possible to wrest another understanding of the work's autonomy out of the institutional approach, which does just what you suggest. Theodore Adorno asserted that the artwork is independent from art institutions/the artworld. Thus it would be a social fact, embedded in society, but in a marginal position to the "total-exchange" or "totally administered" society (Adorno's phrasing). In its separated domain, the artwork resists external interest. It is at odds with the institution that tries to mediate between it and receivers. Adorno makes a sharp two-fold distinction: first between the work and the "total-exchange" society from which it has arisen and is embedded, and secondly, from the "culture industry", of which the artworld is a part.<sup>103</sup> The distinction arises from the work's *monadic, functionless* state within the dominant culture; it

---

<sup>101</sup> "Humpty-Dumptying" means to stipulate a meaning of a word when there is no apparent metaphorical or analogous connection. Successful Humpty-Dumptying is when your stipulation eventually wins acceptance from a larger community. The software terminology *vampire tap* comes to mind. It means: "A cable connection used to connect transceivers to a Thicknet coaxial cable in an Ethernet network in a bus topology. Instead of cutting the cable and attaching connectors to both ends of the severed coaxial cable, a vampire tap pierces through (hence the name vampire) the insulating layer of the cable and makes direct contact with the cable's conducting core."

[http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/V/vampire\\_tap.html](http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/V/vampire_tap.html) As I see it, this is akin to the Humpty-Dumptying of some ready-mades. You have to have good will to find Gonzales-Torres *Placebo* has any analogy with AIDS research. For a discussion of Humpty Dumpty in relation to other thinkers such as Vico, Wolf and Grimm, see <http://web.udl.es/usuaris/s2430206/pumby/abstract.htm>.

<sup>102</sup> Carroll, Lewis, *Through the Looking Glass*, New York: Puffin Books, 1976, p. 274.

<sup>103</sup> Adorno, 1997, p. 225-226.

*criticizes, opposes and resists* becoming a commodity. It also resists the artworld-infrastructure put in place to “take care of” (i.e. *use*) it. Because of its self-imposed marginal position, it thwarts social obligations: “Insofar as a social function can be predicated for artworks, it is their functionlessness”.<sup>104</sup> The artwork is the “determinate negation of the determinate society”. On this view, the work is non-reducible to the requirements of society, which needs its products to be consumable. Interest and power cannot meddle with the work; criticism from external sources (politics, formal philosophy or religion) is illegitimate. This is why, within the art-institution, one can do things that otherwise would be grounds for being fined.<sup>105</sup>

**Dissenter:** But how does the artwork resist? Why is it a monad?

**Autonomist:** Because of its aesthetic qualities. Because of aspects about *the work itself*, not just its relation to the artist, receiver and the institution. We will return to Adorno on page 55. For now, let us examine what has been claimed about *the work itself* and why, on account of its own nature, it may be autonomous.



## SECTION II. ONTOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO THE WORK'S AUTONOMY

What kind of existence does the *artwork itself* have that might render it autonomous? Any view that focuses on the being of the artwork can fall under the rubric *ontological approaches to the work's autonomy*.<sup>106</sup>

### A. Aesthetic Realism

‘Aesthetic realism’ generally pertains to what the real being of a thing is thought to be. For some thinkers, the real nature of the artwork is metaphysical, for others, what is real can be sensed empirically. First mentioned are three approaches that treat the ‘true autonomous being’ of the artwork in metaphysical terms: *the aesthetic object*, *significant form*, and *pure intentionality*.

#### *i. The Aesthetic Object*

**Autonomist:** As we have already discovered, two of the most prominent ways of using the phrase ‘autonomous artwork’ are in the senses of the work being *independent* and *distinct from other things*. Independence and distinctness can be established either by being constituted independently of contexts, or through the receiver’s attitude. For Monroe Beardsley, what he calls “the aesthetic object” is *an independent and distinct unity with perceivable properties*<sup>107</sup> and it entails both

---

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 227.

<sup>105</sup> The recent *Dual Art Performance* at Bergen Kunsthallen, 1 February, 2005, featuring the artists Robert Alda, Kurt Johanessen, Rita Marhaug, Joan Casellas, Erika and Angel Pastor, was in instance of breaking common social taboos.

<sup>106</sup> For my purposes, *ontology* refers to positions focusing upon extensional aspects of works, as well as those positions focusing on aspects that transcend physical phenomena.

<sup>107</sup> Beardsley, 1981, p. 17.

aspects. Once created, the work stubbornly possesses whatever descriptive, interpretative and evaluative properties it has, across all contexts, cultural and otherwise. It is a nameable entity that can be talked about, that characteristics can be positively attributed to. Secondly, it is *independent from the intentions* of both creators and receivers. But how does Beardsley's aesthetic object end up being metaphysical? The independent and distinct nature is what must be identified in order to have an objective, justifiable investigation about aesthetic objects; word usage must address *the work itself* and nothing more. Thus the goal is to discover the properties and report the truth about the independent and distinct artwork. For this task, the judge must don an aesthetic attitude (a sort of disinterested attention), use precise language, what Beardsley calls "critical statements", to identify and address the artwork. In practice then, the judge must distinguish between words that point to the aesthetic object, and those pointing to other things like the artist's or the judge's own intentions or feelings, because such are irrelevant and get in the way of comprehending the work itself.<sup>108</sup> A problem arises however, if the words must also avoid reference to the physical object (e.g., canvas, paint, stone, sound waves), for that is not part of the distinct aesthetic object.<sup>109</sup> For example, if one were talking about a Pollock picture, 'dripped paint' would not address the aesthetic object, since such a term has to do with the method and material. Nevertheless, even though the critic is barred from pointing to the physical object in deference for the aesthetic object, the latter is a real extensional phenomenon, claims Beardsley, and is present regardless of the receiver's capabilities of identifying it. Meanwhile, even though he agrees that there is a causal relation between them, insofar as nothing about the physical object is included in the aesthetic object,<sup>110</sup> this is metaphysical aesthetic realism.

**Dissenter:** There is much of value in Beardsley's approach, and I laude his effort to identify the artwork (aesthetic object). Yet in spite of tremendous care in selecting words that will just pick out the aesthetic object, Beardsley's standard is arbitrary; it remains unclear if the work has been addressed. For example, Beardsley has decided that statements about the cause or effect of the aesthetic object are "external", i.e., irrelevant to the artwork itself. Case in point: Rembrandt's *Girl Sleeping* [[Illustration 7](#)]. Beardsley claims that the following sentence is external and thus does not point to the work:

In Rembrandt's drawing *Girl Sleeping*, the end has been attained by very economical means.<sup>111</sup>

Conversely, statements about the work's blueness, meaning and beauty are internal, and point to the object directly.<sup>112</sup> The following is claimed internal:

---

<sup>108</sup> Op cit., pp. 18-21.

<sup>109</sup> Op cit., pp. 29-34.

<sup>110</sup> Op cit., p. 31. Interestingly, Beardsley makes a distinction between music and visual arts: We do not need sound waves to experience music, we can sing silently in our minds, but we do need the physical base for experiencing pictures.

<sup>111</sup> Op cit., p. 78.

<sup>112</sup> Op cit., p. 64.

The brush strokes outlining the girl's body and the folds of her garment are few and have a casual air, yet the body stands out with an amazing soft solidarity, and there is a great deal of tenderness...<sup>113</sup>

Problem is, how can Beardsley be sure that the “amazing softness”, “casual air” or “tenderness” are not read into the object? They could have more to do with the receiver's feelings. Beardsley baffles us further by stating that external statements can be taken into account *if* they verify internal statements. So how external are external statements? Beardsley sets up the two domains but then needs to demolish the distinction. And he himself admits there is a problem: “Some of the distinctions will be more difficult than others, and all of them will, of course, be somewhat vague, since general usage draws no sharp lines.”<sup>114</sup> “[...] what I have called two objects are really two aspects of the same object.”<sup>115</sup> It seems like Beardsley's ontologically independent and distinct aesthetic object is ontologically unstable, undecidable. (See ch. 5 and 6)

## *ii. Significant Form*

**Autonomist:** Clive Bell is also a metaphysical realist. His theory of Significant Form radicalizes the work's ontological autonomy in the sense that *the real artwork is spirit*. For Bell, *significant form* arises from relations between formal elements and supervenes upon them. It elicits *aesthetic experience*, something distinct from ordinary experience.<sup>116</sup> The relationships holding between the various elements of significant form are the only locus of aesthetic value because they are the ultimate reality lying behind appearances. Ahistorical, they give to the artwork another sort of autonomy—its *individual significance distinct from the significance of other things*. The emphasis is on imperceptible elements lying behind the perceptible. Independent from both receivers' and artists' intentions, only the disinterested attitude reveals them.

**Dissenter:** Bell's conception of the artwork's autonomy is heavily fraught,<sup>117</sup> but I will limit myself to its metaphysical problem: Plato's *Forms* readily come to mind here,<sup>118</sup> but also the fairytale “The Emperor's New Cloths”: Because no one has seen the cloths (the significant form), we seriously doubt their existence. Since the artwork supervenes upon material, it is not completely free but neither is it tied down. We cannot know this but must accept Bell's words with a religious-like faith. The autonomous artwork is unaccounted for, un-pin-down-able. This could have been a good understanding of the expression ‘autonomous artwork’ but, because it leads to doubt concerning the very existence of the work, it seems untenable.

---

<sup>113</sup> Op cit., p. 79.

<sup>114</sup> Op cit., p. 64.

<sup>115</sup> Op cit., p. 33.

<sup>116</sup> See e.g., Gould, 1998, p. 252.

<sup>117</sup> For a more lengthy discussion of problems with Bell's theory, see, e.g., Carroll, 1999, pp. 115-125, p. 118.

<sup>118</sup> Timaeus 51c-d: “...Do all these things of which we always say that each of them is something “by itself” really exist? Or are the things we see, and whatever else we perceive through the body, the only things that possess this kind of actuality, so that there is absolutely nothing else besides them at all? Is our perpetual claim that there exists an intelligible Form for each thing a vacuous gesture, in the end nothing but mere talk? [...] these “by themselves” things definitely exist—these Forms, the objects not of our sense perception, but of our understanding only.”

### iii. *Pure Intentionality*

**Autonomist:** Well, if you don't like Bell's version, what about the aesthetic realism expressed by Jan Mukařovský's radicalised notion of aesthetic realism:

The work of art is nothing but a particular set of extra-aesthetic values...mere conductors of energy. Where does aesthetic value lie? It has dissolved into extra-aesthetic values and is nothing but a general term for the dynamic totality of their interrelations.<sup>119</sup>

While Mukařovský, Bell and Beardsley would agree on the work's autonomy as '*pure intentionality*' (i.e., the work has its own intentions, independent and distinct from those of the artist and receiver), Mukařovský differs from Bell and Beardsley concerning the possibility of discovering truth about the work: Because the artwork does not have a theme and the sign is thoroughly self-centred (it focuses inwardly upon itself), the work transcends the receiver's life-world and refers to existence as a whole; there are no bonds to anything specific or external limiting what the work *could* mean. Only as a whole can it establish a relation to any number of the receiver's experiences. Hence the artwork paradoxically *means* the receiver's life experience or their spiritual world, and it is impossible to determine the truth about the meaning of the work itself. From Mukařovský's description, it is possible to see how Kant's sense of 'autonomy' as *cut of from truth* is re-interpreted.

**Dissenter:** For Mukařovský, the work is totally cut loose, unsullied by material and human intentionality; independence and distinctness are at their most radical. But once again, such an account is circular. On the one hand, Mukařovský describes how non-intentionality plays itself out in the work and its reception; on the other hand, the receiver must rise to a pure vista in order to countenance the pure work. This is a task only God could achieve. Perhaps Mukařovský would seek refuge in a Kantian-style transcendental argument—that we must just postulate the pure artwork arising from pure intentionality, but that it is something for which we can have no criteria.

Inasmuch as the *aesthetic objects*, *significant form* and *pure intentionality* are not perceptible, but require a purified receiver, these instances of metaphysical realism seem to be a cross between the Hegelianistic view of art, where the work has gone over to being spirit,<sup>120</sup> and a Kantian view, where the work is only accessible via the disinterested aesthetic attitude. When the materiality of the artwork is jettisoned, it gains freedom and independence, but then its very existence also comes into question and the artwork becomes a mere postulate. Why don't we look

---

<sup>119</sup> Mukařovský, 1970; Mukařovský, 1991.

<sup>120</sup> What is meant by 'Hegelianistic' is that the *real work of art* is a non-sensuous expression. Hegel maintained that art is the sensuous appearance of *Geist* (Spirit) to itself. For him, Classical Greek art afforded the most perfectly balanced self-expression possible. In contrast, Romantic (Christian) art holds so much truth that the sensuous expression cannot contain it anymore. So, for Hegel, art in its highest determination is a thing of the past, and as far as Hegelianism is concerned, art has gone over to being spirit. See, for example, Hegel's introduction to his *Aesthetics*.

at some views of the ‘autonomous artwork’ that attempt to solve these problems by focusing on aesthetically perceptible features?

## **B. Views focusing on the aesthetically perceptible artwork**

*iv. Formalism and Aestheticism: The independent value of the formal properties and the relations holding between them; value is independent of meaning, reference and utility.*

**Autonomist:** For Formalism and Aestheticism (of which *l’art pour l’art* is a prime example), the perceptually given aesthetic aspects of artworks and the relations holding between them are understood as real (i.e., the real being of the artwork is at least partly material) and thought to be the locus of aesthetic value: rhythm, weight, mass, shape, the trail of pigment, the harmony of sound or colour, etc; emphasis is *on* physical formal properties and the artwork is *valued for its formal properties*. As Clive Bell stated, “It matters not a straw whether this statue [Epstein’s *Christ*, (1919)], considered as a work of art, represents Jesus Christ or John Smith.”<sup>121</sup> As Adorno would say, it is as if the aesthetic picture is under ‘an iconoclast regime’.<sup>122</sup> Such a view extrapolates from one particular Kant passage:

In painting, in sculpture, indeed in all the visual arts, including architecture and horticulture insofar as they are fine arts, *design* is what is essential; in design the basis for any involvement of taste is not what gratifies in sensation, but merely what we like because of its form [...] All form of objects of the senses (the outer senses or, indirectly, the inner sense as well) is wither *shape* or *play*; if the latter, it is either play of shapes (in space, namely, mimetic art and dance), or mere play of sensations (in time). The *charm* of colours or of the agreeable tone of an instrument may be added, but it is the *design* in the first case and the *composition* in the second that constitute the proper object of a pure judgment of taste [...]<sup>123</sup>

The well-known proponent of *Aestheticism/l’art pour l’art*, Oscar Wilde, laid out a concise exposition of his understanding of the work’s independent value:

There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all. [...] The moral life of man forms part of the subject matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium. No artist desires to prove anything...No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style. [...] Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril. It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors. [...] All art is quite useless.<sup>124</sup>

Aestheticism and Formalist understandings of autonomy do not deny that artworks may have moral side effects, but it would never be proper to take these into account when evaluating the work. Independence from other domains of value such as religion, politics, cognitive inquiry and morality, entails that there are *canons of evaluation* that preclude *external* assessment. Such independent value was championed by Walter Pater, one of Wilde’s mentors at Oxford. He accounted for why this could be so, when he gave a phenomenological description of what happens to human perception when close attention is paid to aesthetic phenomena:

---

<sup>121</sup> Bell, Clive, *Since Cézanne*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1922, p.94.

<sup>122</sup> ”De estetiske bildene er underlagt bildeforbud.” Adorno, 1998, p. 187.

<sup>123</sup> CJ§14, 225-6.

<sup>124</sup> Wilde, Oscar, 1998, pp. 861-862.

At first sight experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects, pressing upon us with a sharp and importunate reality, calling us out of ourselves in a thousand forms of action. But when reflection begins to play upon those objects, they are dissipated under its influence; the cohesive force seems suspended like some trick of magic; each object is loosed into a group of impressions—colour, odour, texture—in the mind of the observer...<sup>125</sup>

Pater's phenomenological experience rings true for anyone paying close attention to aesthetic phenomena through, e.g., life-drawing; they can experience that the nude model does not remain intact, but becomes a series of overlapping cylinders, abstract voluminous shapes inscribed in space and described in light and shadow. Many artists will corroborate this. Pater famously concluded: "art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake".<sup>126</sup> Jonathan Loesberg, a Pater scholar, interprets Pater's 'experience of art for its own sake' as embodying "a primary value" to which philosophy, either religious or political, can only refer back to, in a secondary way. It simply describes what all art does, what all aesthetic experience is. It does not refer to the content of art but to the way it is experienced. In other words, the artwork is a primary form of perception among all forms of perception.<sup>127</sup>

**Dissenter:** Some of the problems already addressed with *disinterest*, also affect Formalism's and Aestheticism's conception of autonomy, namely, the problem of ignoring utility. Maybe the aesthetic (sensible) features of artworks do come first, such that the aesthetic object is neither right nor wrong, hence not morally liable. As Einar Økland says: "Artworks are expansive, testing, searching and often begin without any moral preconceptions on a low, amoral, non-ethical, perceptive level, or on an elevated abstract level without social control."<sup>128</sup> But Økland adds: "Nevertheless, the moral aspect comes into the picture when the work is made public; in the finishing stages, in the orchestration and administration of the art product or act".<sup>129</sup> Beardsley would agree, adding that "the act of producing, performing, acting, presenting, exhibiting, publishing, or selling that object is an act that must, like all acts, be judged by its social ends, for its is an act with consequences."<sup>130</sup>

**Autonomist:** Notwithstanding, if the aesthetic features of an artwork exist *first*, before moral relations, then the artwork is intrinsically independent of moral considerations.

**Dissenter:** I agree that Pater's phenomenological experience can be valid for the artist during creation, and some receivers—mostly other artists—can have such experiences too, but Pater describes a mode of experience that *suppresses* the artwork. The level of mere materials is not an artwork. To maintain moral neutrality, the autonomist must give up 'artwork', which requires a

---

<sup>125</sup> Pater, Walter, 1998, pp.829-830.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Loesberg, 1991, p. 12-14.

<sup>128</sup> Økland, Einar, quoted in Frigstad, 2003, p. 57.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Beardsley, op. cit. p. 577.

public, social situation, and make due with some expression like ‘material synthesis’. But then, the autonomist cannot secretly trust in ‘art’ to prop up ‘material synthesis’ or whatever they choose to call it.<sup>131</sup> As an artwork, how can the phenomenon’s value refrain from being externally relational *if* receivers are even to get their eye on the work *as art*? Maybe if the receiver *first* views the aesthetic phenomena as an artwork, then *brackets out* bits of knowledge, enters a level of aesthetic experience beyond other domains of value—but how can the receiver remain on this level, or while there, still call it an artwork? One of the conditions for calling something an artwork is that it stands in relation to not-artworks. What conceivable satisfaction could there be, or why should anyone want to care about experiencing an artwork that was not *interdependent* with other things in this way? I guess the stickler is that Pater’s experience is not on an artwork level; when he wrote his conclusion to *The Renaissance*, he did not limit his objects to artworks, but spoke about physical phenomena generally. On the level of ‘material synthesis’, there is no distinction between artworks and other aesthetic phenomena. If we choose to understand ‘the autonomous artwork’ as *an aesthetic phenomena technically irreducible to general concepts*, then we must also accept that all other aesthetic phenomena must also be autonomous in this sense too. As such, there would be nothing to distinguish autonomous artworks from other things.

**Autonomist:** I think you misunderstand Pater. He did not mean that all aesthetic phenomena is, in the final analysis, irreducible to general concepts, but he was trying to make the same point James McNeal Whistler so eloquently made, namely, that *instrumentality is not intrinsic to the artwork’s nature*. The artwork is “selfishly occupied with her own perfection only” and seeks no other audience than “the artist alone”.<sup>132</sup> People have acquired the habit of looking, not *at* the artwork, but *through* it, for some social point of view that will better their mental or moral state. This makes for sterile art, foolishly confounded with education.<sup>133</sup>

**Dissenter:** Since artists are social beings, they are engaged and integrated into the society. Hence they are laden with responsibility just like everyone else. Whistler’s lecture may have been an important corrective for John Ruskin’s over-moralization, but if Whistler is claiming his position in an absolute sense, then he lives in denial. I am not saying that artworks *should* be directly instrumental, but that artworks always already *are* instrumental and take part in the continued formation of society. Whistler’s *Nocturnes*, [[Illustration 8](#)] supposedly “for the artist alone”, he nevertheless publicly exhibited, sold, and they have been influential in the way people have learned to experience and valued atmospheric conditions in nature and art. Whistler contradicts himself: If the works were only for himself, why did he exhibit them?

---

<sup>131</sup> See the discussion below concerning Minimalism.

<sup>132</sup> Whistler, 1998, pp. 838-847.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

Nowadays, artists are usually aware of the work's efficacy. For example, with *Placebo*,<sup>134</sup> [Illustration 9] a seemingly minimalist expression, Felix Gonzales-Torres makes a claim about AIDS research: If it develops in relation to swings in the stock market instead of in relation to the needs of AIDS sufferers, then we all bear responsibility for the deaths of AIDS sufferers. Gonzales-Torres installation is such that, when we take a piece of candy, we get a guilty feeling (we steal part of the artwork!). In the same move, we immediately implicate ourselves with keeping the junk-food industry afloat. In an analogous way, when we use medicines, buy shares, or even refrain from such, we implicate our responsibility for the pharmaceutical industry's development. We can discuss the artist's claims about his work and evaluate whether or not they are justified: Do we all share responsibility for the death of Gonzales-Torres' lover to AIDS because there was no cure? (Gonzales-Torres also died of AIDS about a year after creating *Placebo*.) Nevertheless, justifying the artist's stated intentions is not the goal; rather, that a discussion be created which raises people's awareness and understanding for the humanity of AIDS sufferers. We reflect over the possibility that *also we* are our neighbour's keeper. In this and a multitude of other ways, even the most minimalist-looking artwork is instrumental.

**Autonomist:** With all respect to the memory of Gonzales-Torres, the artwork's value lies not in its effectuality. If Adorno were here, he would complain that Gonzales-Torres' work might fall into the clutches of the total-exchange society:<sup>135</sup> It could encourage receivers to buy stocks in pharmaceuticals. This would line the pockets of market speculators more than help the sick.<sup>136</sup>

Meanwhile, *it is highly doubtful that artworks have moral impact on society*. Just think of the Nazi officers who cultivated all manner of art forms; if artworks had the ability to be morally effectual, then surely the officers would have behaved humanely to Jews and Gypsies. As Adorno suggests, if the artwork does "intervene", it is peripheral and detrimental to the quality of the work. The autonomous work's influence is due to an "extremely indirect participation in spirit, that by way of subterranean processes [reflection, remembrance] contributes to social transformation".<sup>137</sup> Hence there is no immediate correspondence between the artworks Nazis experienced and the way they behaved.

**Dissenter:** I agree that the influence can happen through "subterranean processes", but these are hardly "extremely indirect"; as Martha Nussbaum relates, Jews were invariably portrayed in Nazi-era works as either non-humans—insects or vermin, evil, threatening parasites—praying on the German society. Many novels of this era are considered so dangerous in today's Germany that

---

<sup>134</sup> <http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/FelixGT/FelixGallery.html>

<sup>135</sup> The "total-exchange society": Briefly, what is alluded to is Adorno's thesis that contemporary society is dominated by instrumental reason thought processes that cohere with commodity-exchange and administration through quantification. If an artwork "falls into the clutches of" the "total-exchange society", this means they will not be valued for their distinctive and subjective qualities.

<sup>136</sup> Adorno, 1997, p. 225-227. Artworks must resist society and are "kept alive" through their social force of resistance. This theme will return at the end of this chapter.

<sup>137</sup> Adorno, 1997, p. 242.

they can be accessed in research collections only by special arrangement, and may never be copied.<sup>138</sup> Obviously such works were not inert in political affairs. If Nazis (and Muslims) were brought up on compassionate portrayals of Jews, then claiming *art makes nothing happen* would at least have a running chance, but this is not the case.

**Autonomist:** As Richard Posner argues, there is *no logically necessary connection between artworks and attitudes*. No one's character or behaviour *logically has to be* affected by an artwork; any change in a person's attitude after experiencing an artwork probably already was latently present in the person before they experienced the artwork.<sup>139</sup> And the latent attitude would have been derived from, e.g., advertisements, or friends. Just because I experience a work that *seems to advocate* some evil—to infect someone with HIV, as does Bjarne Melgaard's painting *Infect Your Friends*<sup>140</sup>—this does not mean I must do so. Visitors to Melgaard's exhibition *SKAM* were invited to create their own T-shirt as part of their gallery experience. Many children copied onto their shirts texts from Melgaard's works, including "Infect Your Friends". But even though school children write a text on their shirt, which first appears in this context, in other contexts, 'to infect someone' could be a good thing: e.g., to have a positive, infectious attitude. As such, it is up to the receiver to determine what the text means according to the context they choose to view it in. Melgaard can be interpreted as trying to make the same point as Posner, that there is no logical necessity between artworks and behaviour.

**Dissenter:** I agree with Posner that *there is no logically necessary connection between artworks and moral acts*, but there is great evidence that artworks *are* instrumental in attitude-formation. As Richard Rorty himself says about the relation of the literary culture to politics: "The quarrel between those who see the rise of the literary culture as a good thing and those who see it as a bad thing is largely a quarrel about what sort of high culture will do most to create and sustain the climate of tolerance that flourishes best in democratic societies."<sup>141</sup> If it is the case that literary culture promotes tolerance in democracies, then surely it would be *immoral*, not *amoral*, to ignore the pragmatic role of artworks and make a distinction between aesthetic and instrumental/moral evaluation, or to think that the undesirable side effects of art do not really matter in valuing a work. In spite of the horror of *9/11*, and the inappropriateness of viewing it *solely* as an artwork, it was a really successful artwork on many levels.<sup>142</sup> Of course, the autonomist will object: *9/11* was

---

<sup>138</sup> Nussbaum, 1998.

<sup>139</sup> Posner, 1997.

<sup>140</sup> <http://www.bt.no/kultur/article164993> Bergen Festspill exhibition *SKAM*, 2003.

<sup>141</sup> <http://onegoodmove.org/1gm/1gmarchive/000517.html> is a transcript of Rorty's essay: *The Decline of Redemptive Truth and the Rise of a Literary Culture*.

<sup>142</sup> This is my perspective, but there are other who agree that as well as a great evil, *9/11* was a highly successful artwork, e.g. Damian Hurst <http://dh.ryoshuu.com/press/2002alliso.html>, and Karl-Heinz Stockhausen, who called it "the greatest work of art imaginable for the whole cosmos." "Minds achieving something in an act that we couldn't even dream of in music, people rehearsing like mad for 10 years, preparing fanatically for a concert, and then dying, just imagine what happened there. You have people who are that focused on a performance and then 5,000 people are dispatched to the afterlife, in a single moment. I couldn't do that. By comparison, we composers are nothing. Artists,

not an artwork; it was an act intended to kill; if it had been an artwork the killing would have been simulated. But the problem with this is that making a distinction between art and non-art according to the maker's intentions of efficacy would disallow quite a number of generally accepted works by Dada, Fluxus, Surrealism, De Stijl and Russian Formalists. Hence ignoring the moral efficacy of artworks is to ignore the obvious, and it stands in the way of social progress. Artworks can and do renew life's practices; indeed life is revolutionized by them.

**Autonomist:** *This instrumentalist perspective reduces all aesthetic evaluation to moral evaluation.* It is dangerous to determine the value of works in terms of their instrumental, moral impact, since that would severely curtail the prospect of human freedom. Does the instrumentalist want to regress to a pre-modern, external-rule-encumbered artistic practice? Think of the problems Molière has with *Tartuffe*, or Rodchenko, whose photographs did not serve state interests—he lost the wherewithal for practicing his art. So also Andrei Tarkovsky, after he made his masterful film *Andrei Rublev*. Countless examples: the Nazi burning of Kirtchner's "degenerate" art, and Savonarola's bonfires. Stanley Kubrick had to withdraw *Clockwork Orange*, due to death threats. Artists may not be imprisoned or thrown out of the polis,<sup>143</sup> but their ability to work is severely curtailed. Thus it is dangerous to leap from *there is no logically necessary connection between artworks and moral concerns*, to *artworks are always already instrumental*, to *artworks should have a certain sort of moral efficacy*. The consequences of these leaps will, in the end, collapse the freedom of expression we who live in democracies enjoy.

**Dissenter:** I am NOT claiming that great efficacy is the criteria for value. Nor am I reducing all evaluation to moral evaluation. As Adorno would say, it is foolishly one-sided to either evaluate a work strictly in terms of its artistic merit, or in terms of its political tenets.<sup>144</sup> I readily acknowledge that artists have been vanguard fighters for greater freedom of expression for us all, but their doing so is premised upon the artwork's intrinsic moral efficacy, not its lack of such. Moral concerns always already are present. Like other experiences in life, experiencing art is an ongoing process of judgment, which exercises our moral understanding. To the degree the artwork is intelligible, it involves the receiver's powers of understanding and this is a moral domain.

I will try to show, by example, how this is the case: Receivers have always tried to interpret Pollock's drip paintings. Over the years there have been many attempts, none conclusive. Nevertheless, if we accept Hans-Georg Gadamer's thesis that *being that can be understood is*

---

too, sometimes try to go beyond the limits of what is feasible and conceivable, so that we wake up, so that we open ourselves to another world." (Tape transcript from public broadcaster Norddeutscher Rundfunk.) [http://www.osborne-conant.org/documentation\\_stockhausen.htm](http://www.osborne-conant.org/documentation_stockhausen.htm) (Thanks to Lars Svendsen for informing me of Stockhausen, who I have never heard of before.)

<sup>143</sup> I refer to Plato's exiling the poet from the ideal republic, *Republic X*.

<sup>144</sup> "Whoever would attempt an assessment of Brecht exclusively on the basis of the artistic merit of his works would fail him no less than one who judges his meaning according to his theses." Adorno, Theodore, op cit. p. 232.

*language*,<sup>145</sup> Pollock's works can be approached as language, which is always morally enmeshed, not least because it always involves choices. One such attempt at interpreting the drip-painting is that it is a true mimesis of nature<sup>146</sup>: it parallels nature's fractals, entail nature's gravity, the painting-process parallels nature's chaotic behaviour, as scientifically demonstrated by the chaotic drip of kicked pendulums. This interpretation is entirely in accord with Gadamer's argument that modern works are "mimesis in its most original sense as the presentation of order".<sup>147</sup> Therefore, Pollock's work can be understood as: "[a testimony] to that spiritual ordering energy that makes our life what it is. The artwork provides a perfect example of that universal characteristic of human existence—the never-ending process of building a world. In the midst of a world in which everything familiar is dissolving, the work of art stands as a pledge of order."<sup>148</sup> Pollock's drip-work, rather than being independent from other domains of value, ends up engaging the receiver's will to understand it inter-dependently with that universal characteristic of human existence—our moral will. For this reason, there can be no independent value of the formal properties of an artwork. Value is inter-dependent with meaning, reference and utility, albeit these are not fixed.

*v. A delimited world of forms and symbols, self-sufficient for its correct interpretation*

**Autonomist:** Maybe the following *New Critical* position can be a better explication: Some thinkers would not go so far as Aestheticism in deeming the artwork totally divorced from moral or epistemological value, since just such may be internal to the artwork's being. For example, if the artwork directly addresses a moral issue as its theme. Hence content would join with sensuous form as what is rightfully internal to the artwork. Its autonomy would be described as a *delimited world of forms and symbols, self-sufficient for its correct interpretation*; it creates *its own reality*, based on the unique means by which it is made.<sup>149</sup> This "world" may include things we do not generally understand as internal. Therefore a careful inspection of the artwork is necessary, using a specific method called "close reading," to identify what is internal to the work itself. The work's proper evaluation is first and foremost focused on its sensible, aesthetic-form; receivers have a responsibility to do an analysis of this *first*, before doing any other sort of inquiry into the object. Then the analysis can proceed to other internal forms, overlooking nothing, in order to understand it on its own terms. The great benefit of having a *self-sufficient world of symbols* is that it provides the "friction" needed to evaluate an interpretation. 'Autonomy' in this sense, is the condition of possibility for correct understanding, upon which justifiable interpretations are

---

<sup>145</sup> Gadamer, 1989, p. 474.

<sup>146</sup> Thanks to artist Christer Swartz for the following link: [www.physics.hku.hk/~tboyce/ap/topics/pollock.html](http://www.physics.hku.hk/~tboyce/ap/topics/pollock.html)

<sup>147</sup> Gadamer, 1966, pp. 103-4.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Kittang, 2004, p. 139-149; Kittang, 2001, pp. 35-53; Burgin, 1995, p. 913.

constructed. Without paying close attention to the internal form, interpretations will be hearsay. But after this formal analysis, it can be interpreted in other external and instrumental ways.

**Dissenter:** Just as was the case for Aestheticism and Formalism, this position relies on the *container* metaphor; if something is judged internal, it has priority over all other contexts from which the work can be viewed. The internal characteristics are *essential*, while the otherwise-contextualized work is *accidental*. From this, the autonomist concludes that some interpretations are irrelevant to ‘the work itself’. Meanwhile, the notion of the ‘priority of internal features’ is fraught, and for at least three reasons.

First, as was the problem for Beardsley, (and therefore it will not be dwelt upon again here), there is the intractable ambiguity concerning what the internal form is. Secondly, there is a problem of it being an ethical duty to prioritize the formalistic theory tradition over the hermeneutic tradition: How can one avoid already being in the hermeneutic tradition when doing the formal analysis?<sup>150</sup> How can the receiver be sure she is not reading aspects *into* the artwork? If we have ethical responsibility to do aesthetic-formal analysis first, this necessarily presupposes that our intentions are active in interpretation. This contradicts the claim of self-sufficiency for correct interpretation. Secondly, as to the claim that formal aspects are internal and thus have favoured status (also discussed in chapter 5): Artworks have to be spawned from somewhere—at least the life-world of the artist—so surely some external context is prior to artworks, and could therefore also demand priority of consideration in constructing correct understanding. Often artists have special intentions in mind before creating; these can obtain after the work is publicly launched. In that case, there are considerable contexts of thought prior and simultaneous to the works’ internal form.

Thirdly, it is worth reflecting that ‘*the artwork alone*’ echoes Martin Luther’s ‘*Sola scriptura*’ (by the Bible alone)—the slogan that the Bible is self-sufficient for its own interpretation. As such, historical and scientific data, the early church fathers, church tradition, is irrelevant. With regard to both Biblical interpretation and artworks, this seems naïve; even the most ardent of Modernism’s protagonists are unable to examine artworks without being biased by their education and theories of how to interpret artworks. The story is told of the senior curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and his method for deciding whether to purchase a Greek amphora dated ca. 800 B.C. Conservators mounted the amphora on a pedestal, set the lighting but then turned it off; the curator was brought in blindfolded. When he was ready he

---

<sup>150</sup> Kittang, 2001, p. 47: “[Det er] viktig å holde ved like interesse for det som er eigenarta og særprega ved den type gjenstandar ein studerer. I dag [...] er dette viktigare enn nokosinne. Dette er bade ei etisk og ei teoretisk forplikting, og den formalistiske teoritradisjonen er viktigere enn den hermeneutiske når ein skal finne måtar å innfri denne forpliktinga på.” (My translation: It is important to maintain interest for what is unique/the hallmarks of the sort of object one is studying. Today [...] it is more important than ever before. It is both an ethical and a theoretical obligation, and the Formalist theory-tradition is more important than the hermeneutic, if one is to find ways of fulfilling this obligation.)

removed his blindfold. “Hit me!” he exclaimed. The light went on, and in the twinkling of an eye he decided to purchase the amphora. Speed notwithstanding; the seemingly immediate judgment is conditioned upon his breadth of art-historical and aesthetic education and experience. Admittedly, however, the judge may not bring all this to bear in each act of reception. But to conclude, if the artwork is self-sufficient for its own interpretation, then why is New Criticism practiced? Isn’t this an external?

Extending beyond interpretation to justification of artworks, Jan Brockmann, former director of Samtids Museet, Oslo, claims the artwork is self-sufficient inasmuch as it provides its own evidence for justification.<sup>151</sup> From this we must assume that no explanation a theorist, critic or catalogue essay presents can justify an artwork—it defends itself by providing its own evidence. But if this is the case, then why did Brockmann, as museum director, employ a critical apparatus of theorists, historians and curators? Brockmann appears inconsistent.

*vi. Essentialism’s autonomy: The artwork’s witness to its own necessary and sufficient conditions for its distinct identity*

**Autonomist:** Maybe Clement Greenberg’s *essentialism* would be a satisfactory explication of what is rightfully internal to artworks. Essentialism claims that the artwork interrogates its own<sup>152</sup> essential nature—the thing that makes it distinct and independent from other things. By doing this, it explicitly demonstrates that the sort of experience it provides is valuable in its own right and not obtained from any other kind of activity. Each art form is rendered *pure*, and in its purity, it finds the guarantee of its own standard of quality, as well as of its independence. The artworks’ task of self-criticism is to eliminate any effect borrowed from any other art form. For example, by reducing what painting essentially is to “*the ineluctable flatness of the support*”, painting’s area of competence is drastically narrowed but more secure, so that painting cannot be confused with entertainment or co-modification, etc., but will reveal its *distinct and independent value*. Since the work uses its own means to interrogate itself, this is a “criticism from within”,<sup>153</sup> thus essentialism also understands the work’s autonomy as *not needing to* turn to anything external in order to perform its self-critical interrogation;<sup>154</sup> the work is *self-referential, pointing to its formal nature*; when the receiver examines the work, it is as if we look at the mirror rather than what it reflects.

---

<sup>151</sup> Sandberg, 2003, p. 31.

<sup>152</sup> Greenberg, 1992, pp. 754-760. The romantic habit of attributing personhood to the artwork is readily apparent in Greenberg’s essay, in modes of expression such as “the painting divests itself of”, “the work interrogates itself”. Browsing the internet, this way of talking about the artwork as a person persists: “In this sense, the paintings appear to stand before us as if inscribed by the narrative of their own coming into being, their own physical and conceptual process, their own manner, as it were, of working through. And their “mood” is perhaps less one of self-justification, assertion and conviction than the now inevitable ways in which the work assumes for itself-recognizes, displays and demonstrates-the measure of its own contingency.” [http://www.mickfinch.com/in\\_the\\_image\\_eng.htm](http://www.mickfinch.com/in_the_image_eng.htm)

<sup>153</sup> Greenberg, 1992, p. 755.

<sup>154</sup> Greenberg, 1992, pp. 754-760.

**Dissenter:** The essentialist perspective denies that crucial criteria of one art form can overlap with that of other art forms or cultural products. But then “ineluctable flatness of the support”—wouldn’t that be the essential nature of the wall the work hangs on, even more than the essential nature of painting? Moving further, essentialism denies autonomous status to many of the works we want to call autonomous—we want to claim that even ready-mades can claim some sort of autonomy—and it ignores too many of the tasks we want artworks to accomplish nowadays.

**Autonomist:** A ready-made is not art. It lacks some necessary and sufficient feature to set it apart from other things. It has to have an independent value, which will be there regardless of the receiver’s capability, and no matter how they choose to let the work effect them politically.

**Dissenter:** Of course ready-mades are art; *anything can be art*<sup>155</sup> because all artworks are interdependent upon the relation of being received *as art*. Perhaps what makes a thing an artwork is something non-essential, not constant and historical? Perhaps it lies outside of the artwork, in a theory, or in the idea-base of society. The glaring problem with essentialism is that it depends on art having an essence, but no one has as yet been able to satisfyingly say what that is. So the essentialist never answers the question about the nature of art, and of particular sub-sets of art.<sup>156</sup>

But even if we broach the readymade from the perspective of essentialism, Thierry de Duve shows it is possible to argue for the ready-made (and therefore anything) as *bona fide* Modern art according to the essentialist paradigm.<sup>157</sup> A true Modernist artwork ala Greenberg takes its own conditions of possibility for its subject matter, testing the conventions of the practice it belongs to. In so doing, it renders them explicit. Duchamp’s *Fountain* does just this: It invites a self-critical, self-referential reading that tests its conditions of possibility. Hence the Greenbergian doctrine is at the root of a new category—art in general—that originated with Duchamp. But the ready-made pushes Modernism beyond the limits of Greenberg’s doctrine because it points to an artistic practice not dependent on a specific medium-based category; it isolates the nature of *art in general*, namely—that ‘art’ is *like* a proper name.<sup>158</sup> *Fountain* challenges the technical-aesthetic conventions deemed necessary and sufficient to identify a given thing as an artwork by revealing that the history of Modern Art is the history of an ongoing *test of willingness*. It radicalizes this willingness to the point where “x is art” is the foremost aesthetic judgment. de Duve claims it reveals that artworks are shown primarily in order to be judged as art. *Fountain* explicates the distinction between art and non-art by showing that each time a convention is broken, the pact concerning a technical-aesthetic rule of the discipline is broken and another one needs to be

---

<sup>155</sup> Quote from Gunnar Kvaran, director of Astrup Fearnley Museum, in a personal e-mail interview, January 2004.

<sup>156</sup> Rosalind Kraus’ essay “Sculpture in the Expanding Field” is a possible exception, but the problem with Kraus’ definition of sculpture is that it entails that there be a multitude of new categories created for artworks. This is a very messy solution. See Kraus, 1998, pp. 281-298.

<sup>157</sup> de Duve, 1998, pp. 374-385.

<sup>158</sup> Wittgenstein’s concept of *family resemblance* (Wittgenstein, 1958, §67) and Putnam’s *natural kind semantics* captures this point without assimilating general terms with personal names. I thank Kjetil Skjerven for pointing out that the expression ‘art’ shares few other semantic features with proper names.

negotiated to legitimate breaking the first.<sup>159</sup> *Fountain* can be said to reduce *art in general* to its one necessary and sufficient condition: The willingness to say, “This is art”.

Nevertheless, essentialism after Duchamp is disappointing because it, once again, reduces the sole criteria for x being an artwork to the individual judges’ will, followed by a power struggle and subsequent institutionalized agreement. This leaves us in scepticism. Surely there must be something more substantial to distinguish artworks from other things?

*vii. No universal definition*

**Autonomist:** What about when the ‘autonomous artwork’ is interpreted as meaning that *it is impossible to universally define what art is*, thus no universal theory is possible. If no theory is possible, all artworks float free of final determination. Moritz Weitz<sup>160</sup> has done a good job of explaining how no universal theory applies to all artworks, by using Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘games’: Just as there are no rules all games share in common, neither are there any conditions which all artworks fulfil.

**Dissenter:** This is a weak explication of ‘autonomous artwork’ because the artwork can still be defined and theorized quite well through non-universal theories. No theory need encompass all artworks. In practice, artistic disciplines are distinguished by their conventions and conditions, so the autonomist, in her idealistic demand for a universal essential definition, fails to examine any of the practices of the various art forms, and leaps to the assumption that a work “floats free” just because it lacks final definition. This is not the case: Rosalind Kraus<sup>161</sup> demonstrates that the various fields of art can have their own rules, which can be applied to a variety of situations without needing to be constantly modified. As the artworld changes, new fields for art open up and new definitions are established through friction with the already-established fields of art. A good example of this is the definition of *Land Art*: It was established in the 1970’s through a process of negativity; Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (1969-70) was neither sculpture, landscape or architecture, but it seemed to share aspects of all three. What was it? People tried out new terms—*marked site art*, *site-specific art*, *site construction*, *land art*— one term proved eventually to be more used. And through the course of time, conventions developed that became the conditions for using the term.

**Autonomist:** That sounds like Humpty Dumpty.

**Dissenter:** No: ‘Land Art’ was not established by enunciation, (“christening”), but through creating a hybrid of already established art forms. Re-describing ‘the autonomous artwork’ in terms of its lack of universal definition invites us to ask an important question: What is the value of a universal definition? If there were a category that could accommodate everything we call art,

---

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p. 380.

<sup>160</sup> Weitz, 1956, pp. 27-35.

<sup>161</sup> Kraus, 1998, pp. 281-298.

then it would be too broad to provide any useful knowledge. A lot of not-art would also fall into it. Then we could just as well say that the artwork floats free, given that it remains indistinct. This is ironic, since the goal of having a universal definition was to find the similarities between things that were *Other*, foreign and strange. So would it not be better to have definitions that are historically limited rather than universal? My point is simply that the ‘autonomous artwork’ understood in terms of the lack of universal definition is a lost cause because a universal definition is not anything worth having.

#### *viii. No definition at all*

**Autonomist:** But what if we radicalize non-definability, the work’s autonomy can mean *unclassifiability*, even to the point of *an ardent denial of ‘art’ status*. Tony Smith said: “There is no way to frame the experience...no way to make *art* of it...you just have to experience it—as it *happens*, as it merely *is*.”<sup>162</sup> The Minimalists are exemplary for this—artists like Donald Judd, Carl André and Robert Morris. For Morris, since all relationships between elements in a work are rejected (a clear rejection of Formalism), ‘autonomous artwork’ means *the unitary, non-subdivided unclassifiable entity—one solitary unit*.<sup>163</sup>

**Dissenter:** Such an interpretation of ‘autonomous art’ fails because what the Minimalists ended up calling their works “2-D”, “3-D”, “specific objects”, and their exhibition practices, are conditioned on there already having been established a practical understanding of what artworks are, and an art-institution to accommodate and preserve these objects. The minimalist understanding depends upon a highly educated receiver, well versed in art theory. (Minimalist works tend to be so boring that they need to be surrounded with lots of theory to prop them up, make them interesting.) So the minimalist secretly trusts in the concept of art while claiming to reject it, secretly trusts in the contextualization and theorization of the work while claiming unclassifiability. In Michael Fried’s article, he called the bluff by calling minimalism’s ‘autonomy’ “the theatricality of objecthood”; he exposed its institutionally staged conditions.

#### *ix. Intuitive expression*

**Autonomist:** In stark contrast to New Critical and Essentialist conceptions is the following understanding of ‘autonomous artwork’: *There is no body of rules for how to make, identify, exhibit, interpret, or evaluate the artwork*.<sup>164</sup> Furthermore, *there is no law steering the way the field of art develops*. Matisse or Benedetto Croce could exemplify this view:<sup>165</sup> An artwork is simply identified as the activity of unique intuitive expression, *sui generis*: a class unto itself, the

---

<sup>162</sup> Michael Fried is quoting Tony Smith: Fried, 1992, pp. 822-834.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., see also: Judd, 1992, pp. 809-813; Morris, 1992, pp. 813-822.

<sup>164</sup> Sveen, 1995, p. 37.

<sup>165</sup> Matisse, 1973, pp. 32-40; Lyas, 1998, p. 474-476.

grasping of it is also unique, particular and outside conceptualization. This notion of the work's autonomy also understands it as independent of moral constraints because morality presupposes that the artist could have chosen between already-existing alternatives for how to make the work, something the work as intuitive expression would disallow.

**Dissenter:** There may be no logically necessary or sufficient conditions dictating the way artworks are, but this is not to say that there are no patterns of habitual behaviour we can examine and extract abstract rules from. Of course these are not universal; they are historical and changing. The conditions that generally apply for the way art develops are the art market, corporate investment, politically legislated and administered stipend-arrangements, political situations, religion, health, war, the weather, technical restraint or innovation, the artist's self-understanding, tradition, and then, of course, artists purposefully trying to steer clear of what they perceive of as taboo at whatever point in time. Literary theory: Intellectuals and their publishers manipulate the way theory is written and what gets published in prestige-bearing journals and catalogues, curators control what is given exhibition space. Then there are personal connections between artists and theorists, e.g., theorists have their favoured artists, who function as paradigmatic examples of their theories. One contemporary instance of this is the artist Mike Bidlo and the art-philosopher Arthur Danto.<sup>166</sup> The two have appeared together at Bidlo's exhibition openings. Just because there are no necessary or sufficient conditions to dictate how art changes, this does not mean that there is no body of contingent rules for how to make, identify, exhibit, interpret, or evaluate the artwork, or that there are no laws steering the way the field of art develops. As was the problem with the essentialist view, this view is too idealistic, either demanding that there be universal rules or none at all.

#### *x. Purposiveness without determinate purpose*

**Autonomist:** This surely is the best meaning of the expression 'the autonomous artwork': *That the work is purposive but with no final purpose.* Many thinkers have followed Kant's second moment,<sup>167</sup> describing it in new ways: Victor Sjklovskij<sup>168</sup> said the purpose of art was to defamiliarize us from those things we know all too well, the banal or so automatically recognized we no longer take note of them. Artworks stimulate us to engender a fresh perspective and renewed appreciation of the world. We reawaken impoverished and worn-out language. Similarly, New Criticism's Cleanth Brooks says that, because autonomous artworks resist homogeneous interpretation, *it is through them we recognize what it is to be human, and to exist in a world of contradiction and conflict.* This sort of purpose denies the value of the work in relation to whether it actually has instrumental impact measured in empirical terms. Such would be to value art in

---

<sup>166</sup> <http://www.paolocurti.com/bidlo/bidlobook.htm>; [http://www.barokkminimalist.com/aarg2/nr1/BM01\\_art03.html](http://www.barokkminimalist.com/aarg2/nr1/BM01_art03.html)

<sup>167</sup> The relation of *purposiveness without determinate purpose*.

<sup>168</sup> Sjklovskij, 1970.

relation to *receivers' abilities*, and this would end in scepticism. Furthermore, evaluations of the instrumental telos that obtains at any given time is never logically sufficient for passing a valid judgment over the value of the work as a whole.

**Dissenter:** Kant's *purposiveness without purpose* (a formal finality that produces no knowledge or moral telos), while leading to many useful insights, is highly problematic. Despite all his claims to the contrary, Kant never managed to separate aesthetic judgments from moral judgments. This is because in the concluding sections of the dialectic of aesthetic judgment (CJ§59), Kant argues that the judgment of the beautiful serves as a symbol of the morally good, because there is an analogy between the freedom of the imagination inherent in the experience of beauty, and the freedom of the will that is the essence of morality, but which can never be directly experienced. Since it is impossible to directly experience the will's freedom, in order to become aware of it, the aesthetic judgment is a necessary, not an optional symbol. If this were the only way the self could become aware of its freedom, then the necessary connection would seem to bind aesthetic judgments and morality tightly together. If an artist or receiver is free to exercise their will at all, then the will is morally enmeshed.

Indeed, humans vary in competence, and it is true we can never have full grasp of the artwork's effects. Nevertheless, it is possible to argue that a mediocre judge can, *in most cases*, still have *sufficient* information to judge a work's purposiveness. For example, Bjarne Melgaard's video *All Gym Queens Deserve to Die* (2000): In the video, we see a man sucking a little girl's arm, after which we see him sucking a dog. It forces the receiver to imaginatively complete a structure that the work partially supplies. It is like with a melody: Even though you hear one you have never heard before, you still have a pretty good idea which note the musical phrase will end on. Therefore such works do not remain at the level of indeterminacy. Moreover, to claim the artwork is autonomous because it lacks a final telos is a knock down argument that wins under every circumstance because of human finitude. Yet in winning, the *no final telos* position ignores the *sufficiency of telos*, which finite humans actually operate with, and upon which we make our daily judgments. But more than this, it is hard to understand how Sjklovskij's "renewed appreciation of the world", or Brook's "recognizing what it is to be human, and to exist in a world of contradiction and conflict" are not determinate ends, since they entail "external" general cognitions about the world. And Kant's "strengthening of the mental faculties",<sup>169</sup> we do this for a multitude of purposes. Therefore 'without purpose' would be more accurately described as *indirectly multi-purposive*—an embarrassment of the riches of final purposes. Hence calling it "purpose without purpose" sounds like *purpose laundering*.

**Autonomist:** The dissenter would have it that the judge controls the telos of the artwork, yet a simple Freudian lesson instructs us that no single instance is fully in control of it. The

---

<sup>169</sup> See p. 14.

contingencies of reception cause the work's telos to remain indeterminate. Take André Serrano's *Dark Supper* (1990): The impression of this work is that it is sacrilegious—a kitsch copy of Leonardo's *Last Supper* submerged in the artist's sperm. Shouldn't the verdict be easily to make? The perfect Renaissance geometry of space is displaced with a dark, empty room; rising air-bubbles in the sperm fluid can be reminiscent of sinking snowflakes in kitschy tourist-shop snow-bubbles. But through Serrano's unorthodox means, religious kitsch becomes beautiful shadow-theatre. Linking a religious picture with bodily fluids is provocative, yet it also revitalizes the banal motif: In the dark stillness we recognize Christ's loneliness in the foreknowledge of his betrayal. Hence, *if* it is possible to interpret the use of the male's life-giving substance as a metaphor for one of the central tenets of Christianity—That God, in Christ, became man<sup>170</sup>—, if what seems, on the face of it, to be sacrilege, can equally well be interpreted as a metaphor for the central tenet of Christianity, *then* who can give the final verdict?

*xi. The artwork's double character*

**Autonomist:** What if we say that the artwork has a double character, one side of which is autonomous? This would **not** be an attempt to reconcile the instrumental and autonomist positions, but, with the '*two sides of the same coin*' metaphor, it tries to understand the artwork as having an intrinsically paradoxical character.

According to Adorno, who thought of artworks in terms of a double character, the artwork is at its most useful when it is useless, because it resists being an object for the total-exchange society. On the one hand, the work is (autonomous) *powerless* to be effective in society. The necessary condition of the work's autonomy is thus that it be *non-communicative, useless, non-identical, a negative mimesis*: This is what distinguishes it from the rest of the world. On the other hand, it is a *social fact*, a product of the social labour of spirit.<sup>171</sup> "Artworks communicate by taking up a determinate attitude to what they seal themselves off from—empirical reality and its constraining spell."<sup>172</sup> Adorno describes the artwork as "a windowless monad",<sup>173</sup> from its internal dynamism it seems as though it should be effectual, but nothing can go out or come into it. 'Windowless' can be thought of as the antithesis of Alberti's 'window on the world'. Adorno's work is a social product that has discarded the *illusion* of being-for-society, which other commodities have retained.<sup>174</sup> Why is it an illusion to be *for* society? Because, says Adorno, the artwork merely becomes a *tool* of the total-exchange society, which "ingests all that comes its way". When the artwork tries to be the antithesis of society in a directly purposive, agitative,

---

<sup>170</sup> Daatland, 2005.

<sup>171</sup> Adorno, 1997, p. 225.

<sup>172</sup> Op cit., p. 5.

<sup>173</sup> Op cit., p. 178. Adorno borrowed this from Benjamin, who borrowed it from Leibnitz. Whether or not Adorno himself thought of the 'windowless monad' as the antithesis of Alberti, is unclear.

<sup>174</sup> Op cit., pp. 236-238.

consciousness-raising way (e.g., Haacke's *Shapolski et al* or Gonzales-Torres' *Placebo*), nevertheless, it is ineffective, perhaps mostly because of the artworld's marginal position within the dominant society—a field of activity most people could care less about. Adorno rightly admits a dilemma: On the one hand, the work risks becoming “committed”, i.e., selling out and becoming fully instrumental. On the other hand, it risks lapsing into *l'art pour l'art*. Neither is acceptable, he says. But he does not provide a solution: For Adorno, the artwork has a double character, an unresolved dialectical tension that responds to socio-historical conditions.<sup>175</sup>

**Dissenter:** I will just address two issues: the problem of *radical polarity*, and the problem of *making works tightly connected to a specific project out to be autonomous*. First, Adorno's explication of the double character *undermines itself through its radical polarity*: The work is both independent and dependent on society; it is internally consistent as well as inconsistent; it both has and lacks its own identity; it follows its own laws but the laws are found in the surrounding society; the work is a windowless monad but it expresses the social totality; the social function is to have no function, but autonomous artworks function as market commodities, fetishes, etc.<sup>176</sup> When Adorno claims something, he generally contradicts it a bit later.

Secondly, Adorno's autonomous artwork is tightly connected with the ethical and political project of freeing humanity from oppression. If the artwork is specifically connected with such a project, how can it be said to be self-legislating? More likely is it that the goal of the project—emancipation—dictates how the work should be. Moreover, since Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* comes across as being excessively prescriptive for how artworks *should* be, this casts doubt over the avant-garde artwork (a work in the service of greater human freedom) being independent, even in the *one half of a double character* meaning. Meanwhile, it seems non-contradictory to say that when the autonomous artwork fulfil goals, it can do so by refusing to operate according to the dictates of other institutions.



## SUMMARY

Now that we have muddled through, teased out and discussed numerous conceptions of ‘the autonomous artwork’, which of Kant's “building blocks” and of these other thinkers' conceptions remains viable for contemporary artworks? Starting from the beginning of the chapter and progressing systematically, the following summarizes what the discussion indicates might be able to be thrown out and what can be salvaged.

In relation to the artist, the work's autonomy understood in terms of the *Kantian genius* seems impossible to maintain because of the artist's inability to avoid conceptual thought; Pollock

---

<sup>175</sup> Harding, 1992, p. 183.

<sup>176</sup> Adorno, 1997, pp. 236-241. (The Mediation of Art and Society.)

himself collapsed the notion of *spontaneous creation*. Also, *transgressing established norms* is exposed as deeply embedded in external rule following. The *private expression of individual thought or feeling* seems better, but since the quest for originality follows an external rule, uniqueness of expression cannot be demanded; rather, focus remains on *authenticity of expression, that the artist has “made it her own”*. The mild problem with this is that it is a far cry from what ‘autonomy’ usually means (independent, self-legislating). If it is so distant from the more traditional meaning of autonomy, would that be grounds for relinquishing the claim of autonomy in this respect? I think not, since making it one’s own pulls it closer again, and I see no problem, in principle, with letting the meaning wander a bit. Kant’s ‘*law-likeness without law*’ can be maintained *if* understood in terms of the work’s laws being secreted through the process of creation, like the oyster shell, yet this does not preclude the work also following external laws.

As far as understanding the work’s autonomy in terms of its reception, *pure disinterest* is jettisoned, first for its subterfuge, but also for the mere impossibility of it, as Heidegger and Nietzsche were employed to show. Meanwhile, even though commodification and fetishization may be unavoidable, such need not be the primary focus of the judge’s attention; *access to the artwork (albeit partial) through proactive sympathy and attentiveness, willingly attending to the phenomenal characteristics in a serious, consistent way*, seems achievable, but the judgment is clearly not a disinterested judgment. It points to the receiver’s (moral) obligation to care about the work, but to be critical of how her interest is deployed. Meanwhile, Morgan’s *purposive disinterest* seems self-contradictory, only “disinterested” in name, it is a cloak for interest. The sceptical position of Posner and Kincaid—that when we judge a work, all we do is look into the mirror of our own values—seems irresponsible because it never even tries to come to terms with the artwork, but treats it as a foregone conclusion that whatever the judge decides is a self-reflection. This position therefore allows an uncritical acceptance of all aesthetic expression. In light of Goodman’s arguments for feelings being used cognitively, it seems invalid to explain the work’s autonomy in terms of a *reception through feelings, devoid of conceptual thought*. A more hopeful explication is *the fundamental incommensurability between the aesthetic symbolic form and the symbolic forms of speech and language or under-determination by language*: These are promising because they explain how the receiver converts aesthetic elements into symbols that negate singular phenomena, subsuming it under general abstract categories. This somehow is harmonizable with Kant’s *aesthetic ideas*, possibly better understood as *very general concepts*, which house more thought than specialized concepts can accommodate.

When contriving ‘the autonomous artwork’ as the artworld’s separation from the rest of society, it was recognized that this adopts a Kantian-inspired practice of drawing up a ‘proper’ domain for artworks (dividing the judgment of taste from other judgments). The problem however, is to keep the constructed distinctions from dissolving. The work’s *autonomy*

*understood as related to political decision* holds, but otherwise the distinctions fade; artworld-internal reference becomes, in the final analysis, a matter of the judge's goodwill (the Haake discussion). Distinction through peculiar *artworld logic* is a claim unproved, not least because the art market is the perfect "little sister" of The Market. Kant's *universal* quantity and mode of *sensus communis* are discarded, since the best we can hope for is agreement within pockets of the artworld, which may, at times, follow Humpty Dumpty: An idiosyncratic stipulation of the identity, meaning and value (import) of artworks. The artworld is involved in an ongoing power struggle where various judge's opinions vie for collegial support. If we argue that Humpty Dumptying is the peculiar artworld logic, this fails to create a distinction, since Humpty Dumptying is a well-proven rout of semantic change, hardly unique to the artworld.

Metaphysical realist descriptions of 'the autonomous artwork' fared poorly; the intractable problem arose of not being able to distinguish what is rightfully internal or external to the work. And severe doubts arise over the very existence of a metaphysical work, which is only accessible to a purified receiver.

'The autonomous work' described as *having a value based on formal properties and the relations holding between them, and the work's value being independent from meaning, reference and utility*, are highly problematic because they reject referentiality, meaning and utility—things the contemporary artworld values highly. The notion of *the work's independence from the moral domain* is impossible, since the artwork is public, social, and thus always already morally enmeshed. Nevertheless, the autonomist's rejoinder concerning *the ontological priority of pre-moral aesthetic features* seems hopeful for, as Pater shows, artworks *are* aesthetic experience, and such may be a primary value, to which, as he put it, "philosophy, either religious or political, can only refer back to, in a secondary way".<sup>177</sup> Yet at the level of mere 'aesthetic experience' (e.g., experiencing the human figure as a cylindrical form inscribed in space, delineated by light/shadow contrast), the artwork as a public, social phenomenon is suppressed. The suggestion to accept the *ontological priority thesis*, as far as the artist is concerned, but exclude receivers from it, is rejected because receivers are also able to experience the aesthetic phenomena similarly to the way Pater and Whistler describe. Are we to deny them the right to their own experience? Surely not. Still, to insist on a continuous bracketing out of moral and epistemological interest and intention would be immoral, not amoral, especially in cases where content is so blatantly available, where we experience that artworks have political effects, where, as Gadamerians have shown, even Pollock's drips are mimetic. A solution could be to think of 'the autonomous artwork' along Whistler-Pater lines, but as a temporal, flickering mode. Regardless of whether or not there is a logically necessary connection obtaining between artworks and attitudes, the thesis

---

<sup>177</sup> Loesberg, 1991, p. 12-14.

of *the independent value of ontologically prior aesthetic features* is fraught. For the present, I will let it stand, and in chapter 5, the theme will be readdressed.

A series of failed conceptions followed: *The delimited world of forms and symbols that is self-sufficient for its correct interpretation* is disappointing because the distinction between what is internal and external is, just as it was for Beardsley, undecidable. Moreover, favouring what one thinks is internal could be, at least in some instances, detrimental to the rigorous interpretation New Criticism seeks. The *self-sufficiency for correct interpretation* thesis also is inconsistent, because it uses a theory not found in the artwork in order to help interpret it. Inconsistency is also a problem for the view that *the work is self-sufficiency for its own justification*, because the one who claims this acts as an external “court of appeals” assisting in justifying the work.

Essentialism’s interpretation of ‘autonomous artwork’ as *distinct, independent value based upon the artwork’s witness to its own necessary and sufficient conditions for its distinct identity* collapses profoundly *vis a vis* contemporary artworks if we hold to Greenberg’s medium-based version. De Duve however, shows that the ready-made (‘art in general’) fulfils essentialism’s demands. But this victory is short lived since Humpty Dumpty returns and ‘autonomous artwork’ is reduced to a proper name: individual will, followed by a power struggle, which is again followed by a pocket of institutional agreement. This leaves us in scepticism concerning the work’s value and distinction.

*No universal definition* is rejected, first, because of faulty induction, secondly, because even if it were possible, it would still leave the artwork indistinct, since so many non-artworks would fall into the category. *No definition at all* is a no-go because it secretly depends on all manner of definitions and theories. *Intuitive expression’s* explication—*there is no body of rules for how to make, identify, exhibit, interpret, or evaluate the artwork, and no law steering the way the field of art develops*—fares poorly too; just because there may not be necessary or sufficient rules, this does not entail that there is no body of contingent, local rules that can be extracted for how to make, identify, exhibit, interpret, or evaluate the artwork, or for the way the field of art develops. As with essentialism, this view is too idealistic, either demanding that there be universal fixed rules or none at all.

The explication focusing on the work being *purposive without having determinate purpose* fails because, despite all Kant’s claims to the contrary, he never managed to separate aesthetic judgments from moral judgments, and no one else has either. More apt would be to view the work as *indirectly multi-purposive*. With regard to other construals of this notion, most of them cloak indirect multi-purpose (this will also be experienced in the next chapter.) The work’s autonomy described in terms of its *indeterminate telos* falters when the work provides a partial structure even a mediocre receiver is forced to complete.

Finally, Adorno's *double character*, which describes the artwork's *unresolved dialectical tension between its autonomy (negativity) and its being a fait social* looks promising: It acknowledges that the artwork is embedded in society, that its material is not only formed matter but that it is also societal—this could be a way of resolving the problem we had with Pater's phenomenological experience on a sub-artwork level. However, Adorno's explication is so radically paradoxical that it undermines itself.

Perhaps the most successful interpretation of 'autonomous artwork' with regard to purposiveness, is the insight that *nothing is able to fully control the telos/effect of the artwork*, not even the receiver, for, as a simple Freudian lesson instructs us, the receiver may not be in full control of her attitude and reception. Moreover, the contingencies of reception in the ongoing historical continuum show that the work's telos remains indeterminate. Yet does this uncontrollability mean that the artist and receiver have no obligations with regard to the work and each other? (This problem will be addressed in chapter 6.)

#### *A synthesis of provisional moments of autonomy*

Would it be possible to take the bits that have held up best in this chapter (even if, in some cases, they seem a far cry from 'autonomy' understood as independent or self-legislating) and create a provisional synthesis of moments of autonomy for the contemporary artwork? They would be 6 in number: 1) *the artists' authenticity of expression; law-likeness without a law*; 2) *the work's separation from truth-as-correspondence (the fundamental incommensurability between the aesthetic symbolic form and the symbolic forms of speech and language; under-determination by language; the work's dealing in aesthetic ideas, possibly better understood as very general concepts, which generate more thought than highly specialized, determinate concepts can accommodate)*; 3) *the work's autonomy understood as related to political decision*. Then follow three moments which are problematic: 4) *the work's independent value due to the priority of aesthetic features* (this could be called '*ontological priority*', meaning that if the aesthetic material of the artwork is there first, before meaning, it could be argued that a non-moral reception is primary, before valuing the work instrumentally); 5) *some sort of double character, one side of which is autonomous in a variety of senses*; 6) *the indeterminate telos*. The first moment in this list is related to the artist, whereas the rest focus more attention on the artwork and the receiver's interaction with it. Let us call all these moments *provisional aspects of the contemporary artwork's autonomy*, and with this chapter as ballast, let us now launch into Heidegger, Blanchot and Derrida: Perhaps they can further illuminate these moments, and in particular, the last problematic three. Maybe also, through examining their thoughts on artworks, it would be possible to resuscitate some moment of autonomy in relation to the receiver's attitude?

# 5

## HEIDEGGER, BLANCHOT AND DERRIDA ON THE AUTONOMOUS ARTWORK

The goal of this chapter is to address how Martin Heidegger, Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida re-figure the artwork's autonomy. (The goal is not to address these thinkers' entire philosophy of art.) Heidegger is an important point of origin for Postmodern approaches to art, since he tried to reconnect the artwork with truth. Could his conceptual pair *earth/world* be a better way of explicating *a double character* for artworks, *the status of aesthetic features* and *what artworks are for*? Blanchot aligned himself with many Heideggerian thoughts but jettisoned others, since he interprets *earth* in a more clearly material way, and may possibly give it ontological priority. Could his pair *the autonomous slope/the dead slope* of the artwork provide a better way of explicating these three issues? Meanwhile, Derrida's conception of the artwork is an engagement with, reaction to and rejection of various aspects suggested by these first two thinkers. Can he successfully surmount the problems? I think he can, based on his explication of a series of *successful failures* and the *undecidable* artwork.



### A. Heidegger's artwork: earth and world striving

'Double character' is not an expression Heidegger uses, but it can easily be read into his essay, *The Origin of the Work of Art*,<sup>178</sup> in relation to his explication of the artwork's 'workly character'. Therefore before delving into how the artwork is autonomous, a few words must be said about its 'workly character'. Heidegger specifically states that he wants to avoid describing the artwork in terms of form/content: *an object or thing with a form on the one hand, and an allegorical, symbolic content on the other*. The artwork, he says, is not a material thing/object, albeit the museum's cleaning woman may think so.<sup>179</sup> "This incontestable fact [that there is a form and a content] proves neither that the distinction of matter and form is adequately founded, nor that it belongs originally to the domain of the artwork [...] The prevailing thing-concepts obstruct the

---

<sup>178</sup> Heidegger, 1964.

<sup>179</sup> Op cit., p. 652.

workly character of the work”.<sup>180</sup> Furthermore, the subjectivized and aestheticizing experience of the work’s formal character (in other words, the Modern Kantian approach to artworks) is the element in which art dies,<sup>181</sup> “and we know nothing at all of what we really and solely seek: the workly character of the work of art.”<sup>182</sup>

### *The workly character of the artwork*

By ‘workly character’, is Heidegger trying to point to what the artwork does—it’s labour? If we turn to *Sein und Zeit*§15, ‘work’ refers to the Greek term *pragmata*. This would indicate that Heidegger thinks of the artwork as an action (like a verb rather than a noun) that is more than self-reflection; as *pragmata*,<sup>183</sup> it is always already ensconced in meaningful contexts of use. Therefore, what the receiver broaches *first* is a meaningful, useful artwork, and only at a later stage can the receiver countenance its thing-ness and materiality. Hence in stark contrast to Pater and others of an aestheticist persuasion, the work’s formal qualities and physical materiality are not primary, but must be thought *out from* the work’s workly *being*, not the other way around.<sup>184</sup>

What is this workly-being of the artwork? The artwork is a location where a meaningful event takes place—*Aletheia*—the unconcealedness of beings, what is given to view<sup>185</sup>: “The work being of the [art]work is the *setting up of the world* and a *setting forth the earth*.”<sup>186</sup> Heidegger’s idiosyncratic language is too strange to understand without further ado: By being confronted with an artwork, say the van Gogh shoe painting [[Illustration 10](#)], he claims that the being of the equipment—shoes—is made available. The artwork *gives* us the shoe’s truth—the equipment approaches us just as it is. This is, for Heidegger, the reason why the artwork can be conceived of as a putting-into-work-the-truth-of-being, and not as a representation of an already given telos or a production of the judgment of beauty, purely aesthetic and formal for a judgment of taste. This putting-to-work-of-truth happens only under the condition of the artwork participating in the *world*, which Heidegger denies lies in the Modern understanding of the work’s autonomy and in all the institutions that sustain that notion. If the artwork is placed in a museum or treated as an object for historical research, it is robbed of its essential room—a *world*. In contrast to great art of

---

<sup>180</sup> Op cit., p. 661.

<sup>181</sup> Op cit., p. 701. He says this in the epilogue.

<sup>182</sup> Op cit., p. 665.

<sup>183</sup> Heidegger, 1996, p. 64. I have strategically chosen to rely upon *Sein und Zeit* in order to clarify a concept that is rather obscure in *Origin*. Meanwhile, I grant that this is problematic in light of Heidegger’s thought having changed focus after he wrote *Sein und Zeit*. *Origin* was written after *Sein und Zeit*, during a phase where he was on the way towards what has been called his ‘late thinking’. This change of focus entails, briefly, that he became more concerned with *being* rather than *beings* or *Da-sein*. The change is also perhaps implied in *Origin*, inasmuch as Heidegger is most concerned with the artwork and not, to the same degree, the artist or the receiver. (Meanwhile, this is highly disputable, since the work his artwork is—the event of *Aletheia*—could hardly self-subsist unless the receiver-preserver was not already deeply involved.) Relying on *Sein und Zeit* to clarify concepts in *Origin* is also problematic in that there is no guarantee of a direct gradual progression of change between the early and the late Heidegger.

<sup>184</sup> Wallenstein, 2001, p. 115.

<sup>185</sup> Heidegger, 1964, 677.

<sup>186</sup> Heidegger, 1964, p. 674; 676.

the pre-modern era, Modern autonomous artworks are placeless. In other words, they are torn from any specific context and therefore cannot set up a world. Of course there are problems with this, since van Gogh's shoe painting is indeed Modern art, but anyway, in order to show the artwork's "worlding" function, and in contrast to the modern artwork's "placelessness", Heidegger presents the Greek temple-artwork as setting up a world:<sup>187</sup> But what precisely is *a world* and how does the artwork set it up?

To "open up a world", means that the artwork "opens a space" for Da-sein<sup>188</sup> to meaningfully live and act. The world is the entire structure of meaningful relations that constitute our experience as Da-sein, that range of possibilities—that "horizon of disclosure"—within which Da-sein lives as a purposeful human being, rather than simply as an animal or inanimate object. It is the nexus between existence's different dimensions—political, religious and existential. Meanwhile, simultaneously as the artwork sets up a world, it also *sets itself back in the earth*, the side of the work that likes to hide. More will be said about the earth in a moment, but suffice it to say at this point that the world is an openness that rests on the stable, enduring all-sheltering earth. Through the pragmata-labour the artwork does, we experience the creative "strife" of *world* and *earth*, and investigating this strife is central to Heidegger's analysis of the art's *work*.

In the artwork, the earth and world strive or battle with each other. What immediately springs to mind is a sort of Hegelian dialectic, neither side favoured. This striving is not bad, for earth and world need each other, and the task of the artwork is to provide a location for battle: The earth, of its essential nature, seeks to hide itself, and the world to bring into the open, to set forth what *is*, namely truth—*Aletheia*, the unconcealedness of beings, what is given to view.<sup>189</sup> *Aletheia*, which etymologically can be interpreted as *not forgetful*, emphasizes that the Open and Available must always be grasped from out of the dark, hermetic *earth*. Heidegger refers back to a comment made by Albrecht Dürer, that "art lies hidden within nature, he who can wrest it from her, has it".<sup>190</sup> To "wrest", Heidegger surmises, means to draw out from nature; a *rift* in nature opens up and art is drawn out.<sup>191</sup> Hence, when Heidegger claims that the artwork sets to work *Aletheia*, this is not 'truth' understood as coherence, pragmatic success or correspondence with some external telos; Heidegger's art-truth is disclosure, non-propositional; the artwork gives to things their look. It is an entwining of doing and making (*praxis* and *poiesis*); material comes into

---

<sup>187</sup> Heidegger, 1996, §14-18. For a Catholic, it is easy to think of one's local parish church, all the pilgrim churches and St. Peter's Basilica and square, in the way Heidegger describes the world set up through the Greek temple.

<sup>188</sup> Dasein is Heidegger's term for human being. In German, Da (here, or also there) and Sein (being, to be), "there-being" it is deployed to indicate the kind of existence self-conscious human beings uniquely possess. Stated simply, Dasein is concerned, it cares about being in the world. Self and world need each other, for they function together, inter-dependently. Dasein's being is actively engaged with its own unique world.

<sup>189</sup> Op cit., p. 677.

<sup>190</sup> Op cit., p. 693.

<sup>191</sup> This is a significant thought for Derrida, as we shall see shortly.

the “Open” of the work’s world.<sup>192</sup> Heidegger talks about the temple revealing the nature (physis) around it. For example, if the columns were not there, we would not notice the stone. Perhaps he means that if we had not been confronted with the temple juxtaposed with nature, we would not have noticed nature. [Illustration 11] This is an instigation of a knowing outside theoretical knowing. The world *rests* on the earth, and the earth (the stone of the column) *juts through* the world. Crudely put, the already meaningful temple (world) rests on stone (earth), and its materiality juts through, or makes itself noticeable, because when we look at the temple, we notice the earth in the materials. [Illustration 12]

But what about the Modern artwork? In stark contrast to Kant, even though, e.g., the van Gogh painting is not an object of use like temples or hammers, Heidegger presents it as more useful than just for the preserver’s<sup>193</sup> self-reflection; her *contact* with the work, the experience of it being *here*, binds her and the work together in the creation of history, and this expands culture. And at this point, it is also worth considering the ready-made, even though Heidegger himself did not reckon it: The ready-made could possibly be the most exemplary work from a Heideggerian perspective, since it opens up a field around the every-day object and makes it circumspect.<sup>194</sup> To open up a world and introduce time and history, to allow something to emerge “into the unconcealedness [truth] of its being”,<sup>195</sup> to allow an understanding of “what shoes are in truth”—this is a considerable list of tasks for a modern artwork to achieve, and one might conclude that Heidegger’s conception of the artwork renders it highly instrumental (workly). In what ways then, is Heidegger’s artwork autonomous? In at least three ways: The artwork is *self-subsistent, the earth withdraws and is self-occluding, and the work remains unknowable*.

### *The work subsists in itself*

Although Heidegger clearly admits that the artwork is preconditioned upon a creator<sup>196</sup> and a receiver (a preserver), and thus is not independent from them, he explains that, in the unity of earth/world, the artwork exudes an “uninterrupted plain thrust”, which constitutes “[...] the steadfastness of the work’s self-subsistence”.<sup>197</sup> The distinction between what the artist can take credit for and the work’s self-genesis remains unclear, “this thrust, this “that it is” of createdness, emerges into view most purely from the work”.<sup>198</sup> Heidegger ponders the work’s self-subsistence, its “closed, unitary repose of self-support”.<sup>199</sup> The work seems to “cut all ties to human beings, the

---

<sup>192</sup> Op cit., p. 674.

<sup>193</sup> “Preserver” is Heidegger’s term for the receiver or the judge.

<sup>194</sup> Thanks to Vibeke Tellmann for a discussion on this.

<sup>195</sup> In Heidegger’s description of the peasant shoes, he says the shoes belong to the earth, not the world, but the world of the peasant woman protects the shoes. This distinction plays a central role in Heidegger’s discussion of art.

<sup>196</sup> ‘Preconditioned’ does not mean that the creator is the origin, for, as Heidegger says in his introductory paragraph, “art is the origin of both artist and work”. p. 650.

<sup>197</sup> Heidegger, 1964, p. 689. My italics.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Op cit., p. 675. My italics.

more simply does the thrust come into the Open [...]”<sup>200</sup> Compared with the artwork, the artist is inconsequential, “[...] almost like a passageway that destroys itself in the creative process for the work to emerge”.<sup>201</sup> Although the creative act is performed by the artist, the nature of the work is not determined by the artist, but by the nature of the work itself.<sup>202</sup> It is not *N. N. fecit* (so and so has made this), but *factus est* (it is made).<sup>203</sup> Such assertions as these underscore the claim in the second paragraph of his essay, that “art is the origin of both artist and work”.<sup>204</sup>

*The earth withdraws, occludes itself*

The artwork is autonomous in the sense of *unknowable, withdrawn, undiscloseable* or *severely limited knowledge*. How so? Heidegger uses the term *earth* to indicate what is already there, the absolute ground from which worlds are constructed. Earth is the nature that is in plain view (rocks, dirt<sup>205</sup>). Since the artwork, of its essential nature, is self-occluding, this means it will seek always to remain on the side of the earth. “The earth is the “spontaneous forthcoming of that which is continually self-secluding and to that extent sheltering and concealing.”<sup>206</sup> Earth, bearing and jutting, strives to keep itself closed.<sup>207</sup> Earthiness resists administration; we are not “at home” with it on account of its preservation of otherness. We never can know it, except in a very minor way, not even through technical mastery. When we try to produce knowledge about the earth, say by cutting a rock open, it still “does not display in its fragments anything inward that has been disclosed.” And when we weigh it, “the precise determination of the stone remains a number, but the weight’s burden has escaped us.”<sup>208</sup> Focusing on the artwork then, this could be interpreted to mean that when we focus on formal, material aspects, e.g., colour harmonies, the geometrical division of the pictorial field, or the sale-price from Southerby’s, the workly character of the artwork will have eschewed us. Although the artwork fixes in its form that which springs from the earth, the receiver’s and artist’s experience of its earthy character is one of mere exposure, of apprehension without comprehension. The work’s autonomy is described in terms of another kind

---

<sup>200</sup> Op cit., p. 690.

<sup>201</sup> Op cit., p. 669.

<sup>202</sup> Op cit., p. 685.

<sup>203</sup> Op cit., p. 689.

<sup>204</sup> Op cit., p. 650.

<sup>205</sup> It may very well be that this is too vulgarly put, since Heidegger says “What this word [*earth*] says is not to be associated with the idea of a mass of matter deposited somewhere...” But just before this sentence (in the English translation), he says “It clears and illuminates, also, that on which an in which man bases his dwelling.” Heidegger is, I feel, quite ambiguous on this point (Heidegger, 1964, p. 671). It is also worth noting that in *Sein und Zeit*§15, Heidegger speaks of “nature” in such a way that it seems to be synonymous with earth in *Origin*, for he says, “As the ‘surrounding world’ is discovered, ‘nature’ thus discovered is encountered along with it [...] But in this kind of discovery of nature, nature as what ‘stirs and strives,’ what overcomes us, entrances us as landscape, remains hidden. The botanist’s plants are not the flowers of the hedgerow, the river’s ‘source’ ascertained by the geographer is not the ‘source in the ground’.” (Heidegger, 1996, p. 66) From this, it seems that earth includes all of nature, both what can be empirically known and what can be ascertained indirectly. And it can include the metaphysical.

<sup>206</sup> Op cit., p. 676.

<sup>207</sup> Op cit., p. 687.

<sup>208</sup> Op cit., p. 674.

of concealing or refusal; the “clearing” or “lighted area” the artwork sets up simultaneously conceals as it reveals:

But concealment, though of another sort...at the same time also occurs within what is lighted. One being places itself in front of another being, the one helps to hide the other, the former obscures the latter, a few obstruct many, one denies all. Here concealment is not simply refusal. Rather, a being appears, but it presents itself as other than it is. This concealment is dissembling.<sup>209</sup>

‘To dissemble’ means to hide under a false appearance. To try to explain this, recall that, as well as revealing what is around us, light can be blinding. Like, if I hold a mirror in my lap, it will reflect light into my face from below and will counteract other directional light sources that reveal my wrinkles. An easy face-lift, a false appearance. We start to get an idea of the tremendous extent to which we do not notice what is there in front of us all the time but still out of sight.

At this point it is possible to get the impression that, after all, *earth* is just another name for material: Has Heidegger fallen into a double character of raw material/meaningful content? If we jump to this conclusion, he pulls us back: “What this word [*earth*] says is not to be associated with the idea of a mass of matter deposited somewhere...”<sup>210</sup> This may be an aporia, but maybe it is just Heidegger’s way of trying to emphasize that the meaningful artwork is what Da-sein encounters *first*. For he says, “After the world is set up, the earth emerges as native ground.”<sup>211</sup> “[...] the work sets itself back into the massiveness and heaviness of stone, the firmness and pliancy of wood, metal, colour, and colour harmony.”<sup>212</sup> The meaningful artwork is there first, and because it is, materiality and thingliness also are there.

### *The world is unknowable*

Lest the reader jump to the conclusion that Heidegger sets up a duality between *earth as autonomous/world as instrumental and heteronymous*, then hopes are dashed, because the work is historical and the world a work sets up can also be unknowable and withdrawn: About the Bamberg cathedral [[Illustration 13](#)] and the sculptures in the Munich Glyptothek [[Illustration 14](#)], Heidegger says, “[...] the world of the work that stands there has perished.”<sup>213</sup> World withdrawal and world-decay are permanent. We cannot recall the past since it is overtaken by tradition and conservation. Problematically then, one wonders why the world of the peasant woman who walks the earth <sup>214</sup> is available to us, since the painting is preserved in a museum, an apparently inauthentic place. Curiously therefore, while the work is meaningful and sets up a world, that world is historical, fragile and never an object that “stands before us and can be seen. It is the

---

<sup>209</sup> Op cit., p. 680.

<sup>210</sup> Op cit., p. 671.

<sup>211</sup> Op cit., p. 671.

<sup>212</sup> Op cit., p. 674.

<sup>213</sup> Op cit., p. 669.

<sup>214</sup> Heidegger imagines a peasant woman has worn the shoes he sees in the van Gogh painting.

ever-non-objective to which we are subject as long as we live”.<sup>215</sup> Da-sein and the artwork’s world are bound together, but the world is not an object for circumspection. Thus Heidegger seems to assert that the workly character of the artwork cannot be an object of knowledge. If we treat the artwork’s world as an object of study, it will escape our attempt at conceptually determining it. Therefore, on the one hand, the workly character of the artwork is available to the preserver in the act of preserving, in the act of taking part in the event of truth, but on the other hand, as soon as the preserver tries to analyse the workly character, treat it as an object of study, it skirts away.

At first glance, the strife between earth and world may appear to be a double character where earth is autonomous and world is instrumental and heteronymous, but no. Both earth and world are instrumental, and, in their unity, the work is described in relation to some traditional hallmarks of autonomy: *the work’s self-subsistence*, the artist is like a conduit for *the work’s self-creation*, The earth’s hiding lends association to some chapter 4 descriptions of *the artwork as unknowable*. Meanwhile, Heidegger’s explanation of how the artwork conceals simultaneously as it brings into the open is an innovation in the history of describing the artwork’s autonomy. Or is it a recurrence of Plato’s scepticism about artworks in *Republic X*? If what is brought to light nevertheless conceals, then is this partial appearance partially false, given that it is not in the Open? But as partial false appearance, how can Heidegger assert that it is Truth—*Aletheia*? This aporetic appearance now is a way in which the artwork is understood as autonomous—its full unconcealment is un-available, its world remains unaccounted for. It seems that, for Heidegger, the conceptual pair would be between *truth/concealed*, not *truth/falsity*. At this point the reader may expect—demand?—a fuller discussion, but since Heidegger’s conception of earth/world profoundly informs Blanchot’s and Derrida’s conceptions of the artwork, discussions of it will resume at the end of the subsequent Blanchot section, as part of the Derridian section, and at the end of the chapter.



## **B. Blanchot’s double character**

### *The dead and the autonomous artwork*

In his essay “Literature and the Right to Death”,<sup>216</sup> the artwork has two “slopes”: the dead and the autonomous. For the autonomous slope, a great number of descriptions apply. The artwork is

---

<sup>215</sup> Op cit., p. 673.

<sup>216</sup> Blanchot, 1995. Although Blanchot’s writings primarily deal with literary art, what he says about it can, in many cases, also apply for pictorial and other art forms. Ullrich Haase and William Large claim that since most of his writings deal with the same issue, it is difficult to speak of development in Blanchot’s texts. Therefore I feel that for the intents of this paper, I am justified to limiting the scope of my discussion to “Literature and the right to Death” as a primary source. (Haase, Ullrich and Large, William 2001, p. 7.)

*ontologically prior to logos; it is a radically singular, independent other; it is stubbornly ambiguous and beyond cognitive grasp; it is irreducible to a genre description; a fragment existing in essential ontological solitude; it is the negator of the artist, the receiver, and of meaning; only purposeful for signification in general.*<sup>217</sup> To explicate these descriptions it is first worth asking: What if the autonomous artwork was not absolutely singular? What if it did not reside in ontological solitude? What if it was explainable, understandable, “talkative”? Blanchot would answer that such an artwork is a *death*, an absence of presence: The irreducibly singular phenomenon eschews the receiver when it is subsumed under a universal, intelligible, and thus comprehensible category. What the receiver hopes to address—the artwork itself—is occluded, and the conceptual apparatus never reaches the goal for which it aimed. From Blanchot’s perspective therefore, the autonomous artwork has a “language” remaining on the hither side of conceptual categories—“the speech of death”. Blanchot explains:

For me to be able to say, “This woman”, I must somehow take her flesh-and-blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her. The work gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being. The word is the absence of that being, its nothingness, what is left of it is when it has lost being—the very fact that it does not exist.<sup>218</sup>

When the artwork signifies by means of general conceptual signifiers, it “kills” the particular in its full presence (the earth hides). Blanchot elucidates this further by quoting his mentor, A. Kojève: “Adam’s first act, which made him master of the animals, was to give them names, that is, he annihilated them in their existence (as existing creatures).”<sup>219</sup> In order for humans to experience meaning, we use general conceptual tools; artworks that signify something are like this, and by virtue of general symbolic signifiers, they negate their particularity. In exchange, their general conceptuality gives what is negated a transformed life in our minds. Think, for example, of *bright yellow and black*: In Western cultures this combination generally signifies *danger* or *caution*. It is pretty hard for us to experience the colour combination without inadvertently quickening our attentiveness to possible danger. Through such significations we establish meaning and comprehension, but, according to Blanchot, this is at great cost because we lose access to what is present: “[...] images that do not directly designate the thing but, rather, what the thing is not.”<sup>220</sup>

The project or labour for autonomous artworks is therefore to recover that which general conceptualization pushes away—the work’s presence—and this is achieved through the work’s materiality. “Everything physical takes precedence”: rhythm, weight, mass, shape, the material base, the trail of ink.<sup>221</sup> The materiality of artworks returns their *presence* to us. As such, the *fragmentary nature* of the artwork is also realized: It is a piece barely detached from its

---

<sup>217</sup> Blanchot, 1995, p. 300-344.

<sup>218</sup> Op cit., pp. 322-323.

<sup>219</sup> Op cit., p. 323.

<sup>220</sup> Op cit., p. 326.

<sup>221</sup> Op cit., p. 327.

subterranean surroundings. No longer a name, the work is an *anonymous moment* that has the ambiguous status of not being “beyond the world” (in the Heideggerian sense); simultaneously it is the presence of things before the world exists, their perseverance after the world wanes.<sup>222</sup>

But why is *the fragment* an exemplary instance of the autonomous artwork? On one hand, of course, there are always contexts to experience the work in; first and foremost, the context of non-contextuality, and this entails the context of Modernism and Modern art theories.<sup>223</sup> On the other hand, it is as if the receiver just sees one detail of a much larger work that has become lost or is unavailable; the fragment seems to be all there is because there is no immediate context to help the receiver understand its significance. An example of this could be where an artist takes a brushstroke or a detail from a human figure, tears it from its first context, and blows it up into an artwork in its own right. Many Antoni Tàpies works could be described thus.<sup>224</sup> [Illustration 15] If one examines the phenomenological experience of being confronted with a fragment, it is as if the artist’s claims for the work and the theories *withdraw* from the receiver’s experience. No longer intoned as the expression of a particular theory or person, our focus centres on the physical phenomenon. It could be a mark made by anything! Blanchot believes that the single fragment can communicate in its own right. This is also a “death”, but now, a death of all contexts for knowledge, meaning and significance, and it is the “birth” of the autonomous work. Blanchot explains the being of the autonomous artwork as follows:

It is not beyond the world, but neither is it the world itself: it is the presence of things before the world exists, their perseverance after the world has disappeared, the stubbornness of what remains when everything banishes and the dumbfoundedness of what appears when nothing exists. That is why it cannot be confused with consciousness, which illuminates things and makes decisions; it is my consciousness without me, the radiant passivity of mineral substances, the lucidity of the depths of torpor.<sup>225</sup>

“Not beyond the world, but neither is it the world.”<sup>226</sup> Notice the parallels with Heidegger’s earth: It is present before the world is set up, and it preserves, just as did Heidegger’s earthy character. The “dumbfounded silent witness” is akin to Heidegger’s work that instigates a knowing outside theoretical knowing. But what seems most different from Heidegger’s explication is that Blanchot is quite clear about earth’s pure materiality: it is radiantly passive mineral substance. Heidegger would disclaim this, for he says: “What this word [*earth*] says is not to be associated with the idea of a mass of matter deposited somewhere [...]”<sup>227</sup> So an important distinction between Heidegger and Blanchot is that Heidegger does not limit the autonomous character to its materiality, but

---

<sup>222</sup> Op cit., p. 328.

<sup>223</sup> Even though such contexts for valuing and signification are available, they do not guarantee that the receiver will actually address the artwork, for there is the risk of addressing the theory and then the artwork is reduced to an illustration of it.

<sup>224</sup> <http://spaightwoodgalleries.com/Pages/Tapias3.html> has several Tàpies’ works exemplifying this approach. Confronted with one of his monumental sand-encrusted works, one feels but a nose-length from a graffiti wall.

<sup>225</sup> Blanchot, 1995, p. 328.

<sup>226</sup> I interpret Blanchot’s ‘world’ along the lines of Heidegger’s.

<sup>227</sup> Heidegger, 1964, p. 671.

opens up the possibility of it also being metaphysical. Still, it unclear what the autonomous artwork is if it is “not beyond the world, but neither the world itself”, so let’s press on.

*‘The autonomous artwork’ as the negator of artist, of the receiver and of meaning*

Perhaps it can help to explicate Blanchot’s autonomous artwork if we examine three negations he claims it achieves: Whereas the “dead artwork” (i.e., the meaningful, instrumental artwork) negated the presence of particulars, the autonomous artwork negates 1) the *artist*, 2) the *receiver* and 3) *meaning*. First, as far as *negating the artist*, Blanchot describes the artwork’s insisting on “playing its own game”, without the one who created it. “[...] the work cannot be planned but only carried out [...] he will begin to write, but starting from nothing and with nothing in mind—like a nothingness working in nothingness...”<sup>228</sup> This is highly reminiscent of Woolf’s oyster shell analogy. The artist is tempted to think that she has thought it up, but it is Art that has made the work through her.<sup>229</sup> “[...] the work is made outside of him, and all the rigor he put into the consciousness of his deliberate actions, his careful rhetoric, is soon absorbed into the workings of a vital contingency which he cannot control or even observe.”<sup>230</sup> The artist’s intentions are laid waste; whatever sort of result it is, is beyond what could have been anticipated. No goal existed in the artist’s mind that can correspond with what is now unfolded in time and inscribed in space. This seems much like Heidegger’s self-subsisting artwork, and it also resonates with Mukarovskij’s non-intentionality discussed in chapter 4. Meanwhile, although the artist is not in control of the work, this does not mean she is irrelevant, for the work creates the artist, just as did Heidegger’s work. And where there is no intention by an artist for the work to attain to, the artwork is necessarily true and faithful to itself because it is not a correspondence to anything. At *this point* the artist examines it and has intentions about it. But these intentions, in their turn, are negated when the artwork goes public. At *that point* the receiver’s intentions re-define, re-describe and re-value it.<sup>231</sup> Therefore Blanchot goes on to argue that *the artist cannot be asked to justify the artwork.*<sup>232</sup> In sum, the artwork is responsible for creating the artist but the artist is not responsible for the meaning of the work, its significance, message, etc., because these things belong to everyone who interprets it, who reads into it conventional, conceptually defined or private meanings. Thus the work is every receiver’s responsibility and the artist’s only inasmuch as she too is a receiver, because general concepts cannot be the property of anyone in particular.

Secondly, the artwork *negates the receiver*: Even though the work only exists when it has become a public reality, alienated from the artist’s belated intentions, the work is constantly made

---

<sup>228</sup> Op cit., p. 304.

<sup>229</sup> Op cit., p. 317.

<sup>230</sup> Op cit., p. 307.

<sup>231</sup> Op cit., p. 305.

<sup>232</sup> Op cit., p. 305.

and unmade when it collides with the receiver's intentions.<sup>233</sup> Nevertheless, the results are “infinitely varied, meshed with a future that cannot be grasped”.<sup>234</sup> Hence, in the work's reception, the unified Cartesian subject-receiver fragments:

[Consciousness] tears itself away from the meticulousness of an I, it is recreated beyond consciousness as an impersonal spontaneity, the desperate eagerness of a haggard knowledge which knows nothing, which no one knows, and which ignorance always discovers behind itself as its own shadow changed into a gaze.<sup>235</sup>

Now Blanchot's earlier claim that the work is “not beyond the world, but neither is it the world” becomes more lucid: It is a statement about an artwork that has fragmented the receiver's consciousness, and it is also an explication of the third negation, that of *meaning*. Blanchot speaks of “the stupor of confrontation in the depths of obscurity”,<sup>236</sup> or “the negation that negates nothing, the refusal to take part in the world”.<sup>237</sup> The a-signifying artwork is not a meaningful, power-wielding instrument. Its nugatory being is unable to reveal anything. Non-representing, non-signifying, it merely presents. In its refusal to mean, it becomes “the language of no one and the light of a consciousness deprived of self, this insane effort to bury itself in itself, to hide itself behind the fact of its visibility”.<sup>238</sup> If you ask me, this is not the same thing as Heidegger's earth that likes to hide; *consciousness deprived of self* is a good description of the way a *zombie* would experience an artwork: a will-less, speech-less being.

*'The autonomous artwork' as only purposeful for signification in general*

What is gained by these negations? When the autonomous artwork negates the meaning and signification that is derived through concepts, *signification in general* is gained: “Although precise meaning fades, what asserts itself now is the very possibility of signifying, the empty power of bestowing meaning.”<sup>239</sup> This *sounds* like it might be in harmony with Kant's advancement of “the culture of mental powers in the interest of social communication”,<sup>240</sup> for as Kant says, “We judge the beautiful not according to concepts, but according to the purposive attunement of the imagination that brings it into harmony with the power of concepts as such.”<sup>241</sup> Blanchot's autonomous artwork is the condition of possibility for signification and communication, whereas Kant's is an opportunity to become aware of the imagination's purposive attunement for the possibility of signification and communication. Still, Blanchot's conception is a criticism of Kant's, because to his mind, Kant misses what is particular about the

---

<sup>233</sup> Op cit., p. 306.

<sup>234</sup> Op cit., p. 307.

<sup>235</sup> Op cit., pp. 331-332.

<sup>236</sup> Op cit., p. 328.

<sup>237</sup> Op cit., p. 315.

<sup>238</sup> Op cit., p. 329.

<sup>239</sup> Op cit., p. 329.

<sup>240</sup> CJ §44: 306.

<sup>241</sup> CJ §57, Comment I, 344. My italics.

artwork and the experience of it. Furthermore, Blanchot denies the unified receiving subject Kant readily assumes.

### *The relationship between the two slopes*

Blanchot juxtaposes the autonomous artwork with the dead artwork, describing them as “two slopes” of the same ambiguous artwork, but how do they interact? Is there a clear advantage given to one slope? First of all, the slope of the meaningful, dead artwork is assumed to “have gotten control of everything”; real things all refer back to an unreal whole which they form together, “to the world which is their meaning as a group [...]”<sup>242</sup> But since this meaning is dishonest (it is madness to think that something is completely present through the absence that determines it), art sets off “in quest of a language that can recapture this absence itself and represent the endless movement of comprehension.”<sup>243</sup> Now the autonomous slope arrives—the artwork’s concern for the presence of things, for their unknown, free and silent existence, their innocence and refusal to come into the world. The receiver flounders back and forth across a watershed:

Where, in a work, lies the beginning of the moment when the words [the material] become stronger than their meaning [...] At what moment in this labyrinth of order, in this maze of clarity, did meaning stray from the path? [...] But if reason now retraces its steps, the illusion immediately vanishes into thin air, reason finds only itself there [...] so that reason starts off again and loses its way again.<sup>244</sup>

There is a “powerful trickery” in artworks, a “mysterious bad faith” that allows them to play everything both ways. Blanchot goes on to conclude that the two slopes are the source (origin) of literature (the artwork).<sup>245</sup> Let us start discussing Heidegger’s and Blanchot’s conceptions.



## DISCUSSION PART 1:

### HEIDEGGER’S AND BLANCHOT’S AUTONOMOUS ARTWORK

As my introductory comments indicated, one of the purposes of this chapter is to examine how Heidegger and Blanchot can help resolve problems experienced in chapter 4, particularly with regard to the *double character* (Adorno’s understanding of the double character seemed to undermine itself) and in light of this, for the autonomous character, *we were in a quandary as to whether aesthetic, material or formal features are there first, and if so, would that imply that they should be favoured in understanding and interpretation, and in using their ontological priority as an explication of the work’s autonomy*. The main thrust of this discussion will revolve around these issues, and in the discussion section at the end of the chapter, more Heidegger/Blanchot

---

<sup>242</sup> Blanchot, 1995, p. 330.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Op cit., p. 335.

<sup>245</sup> Op cit., p. 344.

issues will be addressed in light of Derrida. The Derrida section of the chapter will also include explicit criticisms of Heidegger.

*Ambiguity with the status of the earth and world, and the dead and autonomous slopes*

Heidegger's *earth* and *world* are both physical and metaphysical; neither "character" is favoured in the workly character (*Aletheia*) of the artwork. But since the workly character—what Heidegger claims to really be seeking—eschews him when he focuses on it as an object of study—the world withers or decays—then it may be argued that the work on the whole is a *hider*, since we never can have access to it as an object of study. Moving the focus to Blanchot, such ambiguity is readily admitted in his explication of the artwork:

[we do not know] if it is expressing or representing, if it is a thing or means that thing; [...] if it is transparent because what it says has so little meaning, or clear because of the exactness with which it says it, obscure because it says too much, opaque because it says nothing. There is ambiguity everywhere: in its disinterestedness—but behind this disinterestedness lie the forces of the world, and it connives with them without knowing them, or again, ambiguity uses this disinterestedness to safeguard the absolute nature of the values without which action would stop or become mortal; its unreality is therefore both a principle of action and the incapacity to act, in the same way that the fiction in itself is truth and also indifference to truth; in the same way that if it allies itself with morality, it corrupts itself and, if it rejects morality, it still perverts itself; in the same way that it is nothing if it is not its own end, but it cannot have its end in itself, because it is without end, it ends outside itself, in history, etc.<sup>246</sup>

In contrast to Heidegger's work setting up a world, giving men their outlook [on life], Blanchot's artwork only "plays at working in the world."<sup>247</sup> But does Blanchot favour one of the two slopes? Hard to say. On the one hand, in become meaningful, the dead artwork raises us up from mere existence into rational beings: "Death is man's possibility, his chance [...] Death is man's greatest hope...Death works with us in the world; it is a power that humanizes nature, that raises existence to being, and it is within each one of us as our most human quality[...]"<sup>248</sup> On the other hand, the autonomous "zombifying" artwork is the condition of possibility for Heidegger's worlding/significatory artwork. The autonomous artwork has "the empty power of bestowing meaning "a strange impersonal light"<sup>249</sup> what asserts itself is the very possibility of signifying. Still, it is unclear if Blanchot favours the aesthetic artwork over the meaningful artwork, since this could be interpreted in two ways: *a) Flesh comes before logos*, in other words, the material is there first, then the formal features, and only at a later stage comes meaning. Therefore *the material and formal features are grounds for claiming the work's autonomy*. *b) The material and formal features should be favoured when understanding, interpretation and valuing the work*. As far as I can see, Blanchot agrees with *a*, not *b*, since he readily admits that "death is man's greatest hope".<sup>250</sup> From this, it can be argued that he agrees with Heidegger about the artwork's

---

<sup>246</sup> Op cit., p. 342.

<sup>247</sup> Op cit., p. 341. Blanchot would deny that 9/11 is an artwork since it did not "play" at being effective.

<sup>248</sup> Op cit., p. 336-337.

<sup>249</sup> Op cit., p. 329.

<sup>250</sup> Blanchot, 1995, p. 336-337.

“worlding” task. Nevertheless, inasmuch as both are unclear about the status of earth/world and dead/autonomous slope, they are “on the road” to Derrida’s undecidability.

*Is the autonomous artwork prior, and thus the condition for signification?*

Has Blanchot argued successfully that materiality (“the radiant passivity of mineral substance”) is prior to and therefore the condition for signification, and that focusing on the work’s materiality returns the artwork’s *real presence* to the receiver? And with regard to Heidegger, how does his statement hold up—that the earth, which the artwork is set back into, “emerges as native ground”? I do not think Blanchot or Heidegger can justify these assertions. This is because they cannot avoid concepts when applying mental powers to non-conceptual phenomena. Blanchot assumes that—passive material substance—is the precondition for logos to arise.<sup>251</sup> This cannot be proved, only assumed with a religious-like belief.<sup>252</sup> He uses concepts (entailing absence/death of presence) to claim that real presence is returned; he assumes to have access to what is out there—earth, rhythm, weight, mass, shape—as *presence minus conceptual thought*. Blanchot uses concepts to perform the task of understanding aesthetic experience in general and artworks in particular. In sum, the argument that general concepts cannot point out particulars is irrelevant because ‘artwork’ in either of its slopes, is *always already beyond* the stage of particulars. If artworks are symbolic form, then identifying something as an artwork presupposes that concepts are already present; the *world* and *earth* already vie with each other. Heidegger, while obscure, manages more successfully to skirt *the priority of aesthetic features* with his earth “emerging as native ground”. This need not be synonymous with claiming that the earth *is* native ground. The ‘as’ can mean that the earth merely *appears* to be there first.<sup>253</sup> Yet ambiguity abounds; according to standard usage of ‘native’, whatever is native is there first. If earth (rocks and such) “emerges as” native ground, this might mean that he deems it is ontologically prior. Heidegger seems to contradict himself here, in relation to his other assertion that “nowhere in the work is there any trace of a work-material” (p. 685).

*A problem with Blanchot’s fragmented consciousness vis a vis the zombifying artwork*

---

<sup>251</sup> Blanchot, 1995, pp. 327-329.

<sup>252</sup> In this connection, Heidegger is careful to avoid claiming that earth is non-metaphysical. I risk going off on a tangent, but I feel that the following is related to the claim that *earth is prior to logos*: There is no logical reason why God/Logos was not there first. It says in Genesis 1:2-3, “*The spirit of God moved on the face of the waters. And God said, “Let there be light...”*” In the creation myth, water and darkness were there before God/logos spoke, but this does not entail that logos did not have its being *simultaneously* with water’s being. In John 1:1, “In the beginning was logos”, neither does this entail that earth/physys is secondary, rather, logos and earth co-existed. It is worth reflecting over the experience that, in nature, there are instances of irreducible complexity, even down to the molecular level, which support the assumption that *earth* is intentionally directed. <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/behe.html>

<sup>253</sup> At this point, an analysis of the German text would be in order.

Blanchot can hardly deny consciousness as such in relation to the autonomous artwork, and at the same time claim that a “haggard knowledge that knows nothing” is “desperately eager”.<sup>254</sup> What could be the condition for this eagerness if not *a consciousness intending*? Even if the self of the receiver were at its lowest common denominator, say an inebriated human holding a TV remote control—this could be an instance of “the depths of torpor”, a state of mental and motor inactivity with partial insensibility—but extreme sluggishness cannot simultaneously be “desperately eager”. Generally, when a human is confronted with an artwork, there is some directedness of attention/intention and some comprehension, at least the comprehension that there is something one does not grasp. And this still leaves open the possibility for Blanchot’s insight that we apprehend the artwork without comprehending it.

But can a receiver enter into a state of mere apprehension? This would be like an instance of wilfully induced *amnesia* (memory loss) and *agnosia*: A-gnosis,<sup>255</sup> Can a healthy person wilfully induce such a state? If we recall Walter Pater’s description of the aesthetic experience of an artwork<sup>256</sup> it certainly seems possible, and Pater has the right to his own experience: “each object is loosed into a group of impressions—colour, odour, texture”.<sup>257</sup> Meanwhile, we land back in indecision, just where we were in chapter 4: We do not have any evidence that the material, formal features are there first since we are already inside language.

*Is ontological priority at all a relevant issue for contemporary artworks?*

The problem also recurs in Blanchot’s text, which we also experienced in the earlier Pater discussion, that at the level of rhythm, weight, mass, etc., the autonomous earth side of the artwork is too distant from the phenomena it is supposed to inform—the artwork. At the level of Blanchot’s autonomous artwork (Pater’s ‘aesthetic experience’), it cannot be an artwork for ‘artwork’ is suppressed.<sup>258</sup> With regard to contemporary artworks: What if the artwork is a readymade, say Hoovers in a Plexiglas case? [Illustration 16] External information, such as that the Hoovers have never been used, or that through the work’s title, *New Hoover Convertible/New Shelton Wet Drys 5 Gallon Double-decker* (1981-87), the artist has intended to make an ironic connection to the desirability of products such as sports cars—is not this information more helpful for the receiver than that the work’s presence be returned? Such artworks as this render the *ontological priority* of aesthetic features irrelevant; it simply does not matter what came first when trying to construct their meaning and import, so why should it have anything to do with their autonomy? A text with a photo is enough to engage us. But if this is the case, then why

---

<sup>254</sup> Blanchot, 1995, p. 331.

<sup>255</sup> See page 29 for discussion on agnosia.

<sup>256</sup> See page 41.

<sup>257</sup> Pater, 1998, p. 829.

<sup>258</sup> Bernstein, 1992, p. 14, talks about the too great distance between aesthetic experience and ‘artwork’.

should we suddenly turn about-face and start to prioritize formal features and material etc., when the artwork needs defending from political onslaught?<sup>259</sup> Wouldn't it be more consistent to find a way of expressing their autonomy that was related to their meaning?

Even if one chooses to focus upon the seemingly prior aspects, moral/epistemologically informed considerations do not necessarily distract one's attention from them; quite the contrary—such aspects may draw one's attention to precisely those formal features of objects or events that a culture values. For example, if a receiver is aware of the moral codes expressed in an artwork, this may encourage the receiver to take more time and examine the relevant formal features more thoroughly. Take for instance a feminist reading of female portraiture: Equipping oneself with knowledge about culturally entrenched perceptions of women can focus attention on the formal qualities (e.g., how the compositional lines dissect the body, or how light/dark pictorial planes are organized). So the benefits of prioritizing the supposedly ontologically prior aspects, or the formal features of contemporary artworks are at least suspect.

### *Ontological solitude*

Indeed, some artworks are strange; we enter into their proximity, are exposed to them but are not subjects of conceptual mastery and control. But Blanchot claims that the autonomous artwork is *never* an object *for us*, only the dead artwork is, and that we constantly flip back and forth between the “two slopes”; we experience the continuous striving between autonomous earth and dead world. The problem is, a conceptual artwork such as Koon's *New Hover Convertibles* spends no time whatsoever in ontological solitude, nor is there much striving once the receiver accepts that the work is conceptual art. Formal analysis is almost irrelevant; it is sufficient to read about the work. But if we ignore conceptual art for the present, and focus our attention on other sorts of artworks, is there a necessary, constant striving between earth and world? A receiver has to start somewhere with strange, discombobulating artworks, from the side of the earth, exposing oneself to them is as good a place to start as any. But artworks do not remain beyond cognitive grasp for very long because humans are clever at learning new codes. Even Abstract Expressionist works and obtuse Surrealist works by Max Ernst and Duchamp have been quite satisfyingly accounted for.<sup>260</sup> It may be up to each receiver to decide how much explanation and interpretation is satisfying, and although no finite human can demand absolute explanations of artworks, still, satisfaction often obtains, and in the process, even the aesthete traverses over to the “dead slope”. It is unlikely the receiver will return to being a subject of mere apprehension once this happens. Therefore Blanchot fails to show either that there is a constant striving between the dead world and the silent and autonomous earth, or that the artwork is ontologically alone. Artworks are not

---

<sup>259</sup> See pp. 5-6 for examples of this “about-face”

<sup>260</sup> Kraus, 1998. Chapter 2 discusses Ernst; chapter 3 Duchamp's famously obtuse *Large Glass* (Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors). For *Large Glass*, see also de Duve, 1998, pp. 401-409, “The Encounter of an Object and Public”.

exhaustibly knowable, but this does not mean that one half of them is radically unknowable and that there is a constant back and forth movement. Moreover, if one draws a general conclusion about all artworks from a particular instance of a multivalent artwork, instead of showing that artworks exist in solitude, the multivalent artwork becomes an illustration for a theory. Would this not contradict their solitary being? Consider also that when the experimental style of Blanchot's literary texts makes them difficult to interpret—at first glance they might seem ontologically alone—recourse to his literary theory helps in understanding what he is getting at, and this experience would seem to breach his claim for ontological solitude, or the irreducible nature of anonymous, impersonal consciousness.

### *The artwork's fragmentary nature*

When examining artworks' fragmental character, truly this can occur via a number of means: the teeth of time and circumstance could have turned the work into a fragment, the work could be the result of total non-intentionality (what Blanchot and Mukařovský call "art's own intentions"), or fragmentariness can follow a formula. This is the case also with Tàpies' works: Fragmentality may be designed specifically by the artist to look that way, and this would indicate that they are products of consciousness rather than "what preserves after the world has disappeared".<sup>261</sup> Fragmentality in contemporary art is most often a convention intended to conform with a theory—say one written by an art theorist like Blanchot. One gets the suspicion that for the fragmentary nature of the autonomous artwork to be authentic, it would have to be something totally accidental. Also, if something is a fragment, a bit torn from a wider context, we can also imagine it inserted into contexts and losing its fragmental status. As such, the fact of a work's fragmentality is ambivalent; it proves neither to support nor weaken the claim of a connection between fragmentality and autonomy.

In sum, it seems like the best thing about Blanchot's double-charactered artwork is that it is highly ambiguous; this is a standard explication of the work's autonomy. Otherwise, it is a fraught account in at least four ways: First, Blanchot's claim of the artwork's radical unknowability due to its particularity is problematic because, if art is truly the *other* and all we ever are is exposed to it (we apprehend but do not comprehend), then how is Blanchot able to describe its unknowability so well? He uses conceptual thought to describe the presence of the work, something that is supposed to be minus conceptual thought. He is like a person who says, "I know nothing" but then proceeds to tell all sorts of things he knows. Secondly, Blanchot is also inconsistent in claiming that the consciousness that broaches an autonomous artwork is fragmented into a "desperately eager haggard knowledge that knows nothing". Third, the work's fragmentary nature is ambivalent, neither supporting nor weakening the claim of autonomy. Finally, ontological solitude

---

<sup>261</sup> Blanchot, 1995, p. 328.

can only be conjectured, and the thought struck that ontological priority is probably not a very relevant issue for contemporary artworks anyway. Let us move on to Jacques Derrida, to see how he deals with the autonomous artwork and the double character issue. After presenting this, the discussion will resume.



### C. Derrida: The undecidable artwork

In “The Truth in Painting”,<sup>262</sup> Derrida might be describing the artwork as having a double character, but it is not at all clear. The work’s character is *undecidable*; sometimes it seems to have a double character, but as soon as the judge makes this decision, the floodgates of doubt open. I would like to argue that because of this, Derrida, more so than Heidegger and Blanchot, is able to surpass the problems of *the ontological priority of aesthetic features*. Furthermore, he avoids the difficulty of having to explain how the receiver constantly flips back and forth between the two characters. Derrida also avoids the metaphysical problem Heidegger and Blanchot have, of needing to return the work to an origin.

I see Derrida’s ‘autonomous artwork’ in three ways: For him the expression would mean, first, that the work is *undecideable in form*, secondly, it refers to *the artwork’s non-restitution to a referent, to a corresponding truth*, and thirdly, *non-restitution to a purpose/undecidability of purpose*. After spending a brief two pages on Derrida’s deconstructive practice, these three descriptions/claims will be addressed in turn, followed by discussion.

#### *Derrida’s deconstructive practice*<sup>263</sup>

Of course it is entirely beyond the scope of this paper to address Derrida’s philosophy as a whole. Nevertheless, a few points are worth mentioning that will aid in understanding his position on the artwork’s autonomy. First of all, an important thesis of his is that *there is nothing outside the text*.<sup>264</sup> What does this mean? A text is usually thought of as something written, but in an even broader sense, the term ‘text’ is used to indicate anything humans have made or constructed, e.g., an artistic creation. ‘Text’ traditionally implies that there are other things in the world that have not been made but which just have their existence (being, truth), regardless of whether or not anyone is aware of them. According to this view, everything in the world belongs either on the side of representation (text) or presence (the real). This metaphysical view—we can call it *the metaphysics of presence*—has been the dominant philosophical tradition since ancient times. However, Derrida thinks differently: For him, ‘text’ carries the sense of something that is made—

---

<sup>262</sup> Derrida, 1987.

<sup>263</sup> Derrida repeatedly denied that *deconstruction* was a method or theory but that it is a process that takes place within texts. Nevertheless, researchers notice that his books follow a pattern that certainly bears the marks of a method and a theory.

<sup>264</sup> Derrida, 1977, p. 158. The phrase in French is “*Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*”.

that is all. There is no inference that there is something outside the text that just has its being.<sup>265</sup> There are two consequences from this: first, everything is text; secondly, because everything is text, nothing is prior to textuality, hence there can be no such thing as ‘earth existing in ontological solitude’, or earth in the sense of originary native ground, beyond the scope of a world. “A text is not an imitation of presence; instead presence is an effect of textuality.”<sup>266</sup> (This much agrees with Heidegger’s notion that the artwork allows earth to jut through the world.) “What I call “text” implies all the structures called “real”, “economic”, “historical”, socio-institutional, in short: all possible referents.”<sup>267</sup> A point of confusion is that, what Semiotic theory speaks of as a referent,<sup>268</sup> Derrida would call *another text*. But this does not mean that all reference is denied: “Every referent, all reality has the structure of a differential trace, and that one cannot refer to this “real” except in an interpretive experience.”<sup>269</sup> In other words, to claim that *there is nothing outside of the text* is to acknowledge that one can never get to a point where something no longer refers to something else: there is nothing outside of *context*. From this, it would be impossible to claim that there would be something rightfully internal to the proper experience of an artwork, and neither would there be anything we could rightfully exclude. All of the experiences in our life-world can come to bear. As such, Derrida would have to agree with Nelson Goodman that feelings are also cognitive.<sup>270</sup>

Derrida’s method for arguing—*deconstruction*—has as its goal to dismantle the *metaphysics of presence*.<sup>271</sup> This is a philosophical position that understands truth-as-correspondence and art as representation; the truthfulness of an artwork depends upon it corresponding to some external, non-present referent. The representational theory dominates the *otherness* art is, by refusing to acknowledge what is present to view, for sake of the abstract, external and non-present logos. Already it should be apparent that this is the same goal Heidegger and Blanchot aimed for: To overcome this philosophical position and the way it has determined the way we think about artworks. But Derrida’s method is not shared by either Heidegger or Blanchot, and, I claim, he is more radical than his precursors’ in the way he construes ‘the autonomous artwork’, because the deconstructive method extends beyond arguments for ontological priority (that material features are there first) and ontological solitude (the earth hiding), by insisting upon the artwork’s unanswerable quality of *différance*. This sounds just like “difference” but is spelled with an *a*. It is perhaps analogous to Heidegger’s *riss* that is wrestled forth in the strife between earth and

---

<sup>265</sup> A specific example of someone who views existence according to the view Derrida rejects is Petter Dass, who wrote: “*Gud er gud om alle land lå øde; Gud er Gud om alle mann var døde.*” (God is God even if all nations are destroyed; God is God even if all mankind are dead.)

<sup>266</sup> Lucy, 2004, pp. 142-144.

<sup>267</sup> Derrida, *Limited inc.*, quoted in Lucy, 2004, p. 143.

<sup>268</sup> Reference back to p. 31-32.

<sup>269</sup> Derrida, *Limited inc.*, quoted in Lucy, 2004, p. 143.

<sup>270</sup> Reference back to p. 30.

<sup>271</sup> Bernstein, 1992, p. 138.

world.<sup>272</sup> Derrida uses the term to describe a field that cannot be clearly established, which is there but only noticed indirectly, through finding places in an artwork/text which fail at whatever they were deployed to achieve. Such is the hallmark of the aesthetic field: *failure*—to correspond to a referent, to establish borders or distinctions, to establish formal qualities, to identify object from subject, to be instrumental. All this culminates in achieving the *successful failure* of not being able to *finally* judge the artwork, either with regard to form, content, meaning or value; whatever judgment we make, it will necessarily be inconclusive. This, as I see it, is ground for claiming that Derrida's conception of the artwork's autonomy is more radical than either Heidegger's or Blanchot's, although it may be that Heidegger's 'earth hiding' and Blanchot's 'the ambiguity of the work that only plays at working in the world' also suggests such a conclusion. Failure is a structure that does not "bridge a gap" between truth/epistemology/origin/logos and the text. Seeking out the places in an artwork where *différance* resides is a means by which to argue the artwork's autonomy—its successful failure to return to a referent.

Derrida achieves the failure by interrogating his object of study with a *double reading*. This could be understood as Derrida's way of thinking the double character: The first reading interprets the artwork so that it has some conventional coherence in relation to the system of ciphers we call the artwork. The second reading, which reveals *différance*, exceeds the first, occurring when Derrida feigns to hold a strong position of *truth-as-correspondence* and demands such rigorous adherence between the artwork and its claimed referent that it eventually collapses into *aporia*: profound un-knowing. The judge tries to take account of all the hidden relations involved in presencing, e.g., she tries to take account of *being*, the coming into unconcealment and the unconscious intentions of the artist, or the anonymous intentions of the work—everything unsaid, but thereby said all the more—the entire goings-on "behind stage". For example, Derrida scrutinizes the cameraman's choices; notices things that seem at first hand to be non-essential to the main system of ciphers called the artwork. But then *the unsaid* of the artwork emerges, the conditions making the first reading possible; they spiral into regress, for in order to witness the cameraman recording what we see through his aperture, we would need another camera trained on him, and so on and so forth. Un-knowability consequently appears in all the relations, be they directly present to view or not. Derrida's double reading is firstly an interrogation of what makes meaning possible, secondly, of what makes meaning undeterminable and without correspondence between the artwork and logos. In Derrida's view, this is a "salvation" of the authentic intention of the artwork, an intention the artist is not aware of.<sup>273</sup> From the double reading method, he

---

<sup>272</sup> Thanks to Vibeke Tellmann for this thought.

<sup>273</sup> Derrida has absorbed a lesson from Freud. I say this because, even though Plato discussed the unknowability of the soul, it was Freud's understanding of the unconscious that raised the modern awareness of the possibility of not being aware of our intentions. A good example of how Derrida attributes the intention of an artwork to the unconscious is in his discussion of Meyer Schapiro's essay. Derrida finds that when Schapiro tries to return the painting to being a self-

radicalizes the conflicts inherent in Kant's sublime aesthetic judgments: Deconstruction is the production of a sublime moment of "non-judgment" *vis a vis* an artwork, and, as was the case with Kant's sublime judgment, the sublime is *in us*. Without further ado, let us turn to the three moments of 'the autonomous artwork' found in the chosen chapters of "The Truth in Painting".

*The 'autonomous artwork' understood as having undecidable form*

*Undecidability* basically means that whatever judgment one makes, it could always have been otherwise and it is never settled once and for all. Every judgment, in order to be a judgment, has to be unprogrammable, and has to pass through the "experience and experiment of the undecidable",<sup>274</sup> a struggle where more than one possibility remains open. If the decision were a foregone conclusion, there would be no judgment.

*No finality of form* is one way of phrasing Derrida's argument for the undecidability of form, which he discusses in his essay "Parergon".<sup>275</sup> It is the antithesis of Kant's *formal finality*. Recall that 'parergon' was a term used by Kant to refer to *the supplement*, décor, or the frame that limits and protects the artwork, whatever comes in addition to the ergon, the pure artwork itself.<sup>276</sup> Derrida's deconstructive method *successfully fails* to establish the formal limits of an artwork, the point where the ergon ends and the parergon begins. But how is this failure achieved?

Derrida entertains the assumption that there is a distinction between what is internal and external to the work of art<sup>277</sup> and then befuddles it. In his process of deconstructive interrogation, of paying scrupulous attention to the artwork, it becomes so problematic, so contradictory, so equivocal, that whatever rightfully belongs to the work itself cannot be differentiated from what is external to it. In that case, the work cannot be independent and distinct in the sense championed by Formalists. The inquiry turns back upon the receiver and becomes the receiver's self-inquiry.

For example, Derrida examines *Lucretia* by Lucas Cranach.<sup>278</sup> [Illustration 17] Through his careful observation he is struck: From one vantage point the flimsy see-through veil is not essential because it provides no coverage, nor is the necklace or the frame/décor around the central motif essential. These come in addition to the centre of interest. But if these things are unessential, then why are they there at all? The *parergon* (frame, décor) are useful for something. And if useful—perhaps the veil accentuates Lucretia's nudity, or the passé-partout or frame adds depth to the picture, or it has a colour that accentuates the main focus—then another vantage point

---

portrait of the artist, he inadvertently returns the artwork to his friend and fellow-Jew, Professor Goldstein. Thus Derrida claims that Schapiro returns the van Gogh painting to his unconscious intentions.

<sup>274</sup> Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, p. 116. (Quoted from Lucy, 2004, p. 149.)

<sup>275</sup> Derrida, 1987, pp. 17-147.

<sup>276</sup> CJ§14. An instantiation of the Kantian understanding of the frame, as *not* part of the work proper, is where some museum conservation departments shift out frames in accordance with the fashion of the era. Conversely, the frame understood as part of the work proper leads other museum conservation departments to recover original or period-frames, or to create reproductions of such. Nevertheless, both practices can also be viewed as fashions of an era.

<sup>277</sup> The container metaphor was first mentioned on p. 18.

<sup>278</sup>, Derrida, 1987, p. 58-72.

emerges; the parergon would not really be optional anymore, but would become internal to the artwork. Hence the borders of the ergon unravel. The judge is unable to settle on a perimeter of “the work itself”, but follows some constantly mutable edge like the movement of a wave. As a shape that dissolves itself, the parergon is sublime; it is the thing that frames, finishes, completes and perfects an artwork. Yet in perfecting, it melts with the work and then melts with the external context, the hermeneutic circle around the work. The distinction between the object and of the field of aesthetic judgment is blurred.

But this frame is problematical. I do not know what is essential and what is accessory in a work. And above all I do not know what this thing is, that is neither essential nor accessory, neither proper nor improper, and that Kant calls *parergon*, for example the frame. Where does the frame take place. Does it take place. Where does it begin. Where does it end [...]<sup>279</sup>

Problematization dissolves finality of form and the judgment of beauty is impossible to make; only the sublime judgment remains.<sup>280</sup> However, for Derrida, this is not a Kantian sublime judgment. In order to understand this, a reminder of Kant’s sublime judgment is in order: Kant started from the position that the only fundamental natural unit of measure is *nature as an absolute whole*, “infinitely comprehended”. This measurement is sublime because it is absolutely great; in comparison, all else is small.<sup>281</sup> Absolute greatness cannot be found in any object of the senses; for any object perceived, a larger one can be given. Consequently, the mere ability to think shows a faculty of the mind surpassing every standard of sense, revealing in us an unfathomable depth of super-sensible power, whose consequences extend beyond what we foresee.<sup>282</sup> Striving for absolute comprehension, beyond what imagination is capable of representing in a simple perception or image, happens when we are confronted with scenes like the Pyramids—their magnitude alludes to the *idea of absolute greatness*.<sup>283</sup> Imagination's failure to contain this idea results in pain/displeasure, because “the imagination reaches its maximum. As it strives to expand that maximum, it sinks back into itself”.<sup>284</sup> But pain is not the end, for characteristic of sublime feeling is a movement to pleasure: Our vital powers are momentarily checked but then flow more strongly. We are awestruck: Nature appears “vanishing small in contrast to the Ideas of Reason”.<sup>285</sup> Hence we realize our superiority to nature “within and without us”. “True sublimity is in the judge’s mind, not in the object, the judging of which prompts this mental attunement.”<sup>286</sup>

Derrida’s sublime judgment also focuses back on the judge, but not in Kant’s way; rather than being awestruck by how greatly superior the judging subject’s ideas of reason are, the unified subject begins to dissolve. Derrida finds himself barred from making the judgment of beauty:

---

<sup>279</sup> Derrida, 1987, p. 59.

<sup>280</sup> CJ§25, 26.

<sup>281</sup> CJ§25.

<sup>282</sup> CJ§25, 250; §29, 271.

<sup>283</sup> CJ p. 252.

<sup>284</sup> CJ p. 252.

<sup>285</sup> C.J. p. 257.

<sup>286</sup> C.J. p. 257.

One can hardly speak of an opposition between the beautiful and the sublime. An opposition could only arise between two determinate objects having their contours, their edges, their finitude.<sup>287</sup>

Clearly this is quite a different understanding of the artwork's autonomy from that of the Formalists, Pater, Essentialists, Minimalists and New Critics, who follow Kant's finality of form. It is also a blow to the claim of ontological priority, because it is now impossible to say what is ontologically prior. Derrida's problematization of parergonality is a tool for dismantling the *container metaphor* often used for artworks: the notion that there is something properly internal and external to them, to the field of art, or the legitimate discourse concerning them. 'Container' hedges the aesthetic field in from truth. Displacing the container metaphor with the frame metaphor, Derrida chops down the hedge around "pure taste" (unsullied by interest and purpose). *The aesthetic field is autonomous, not because it is walled in, but because we cannot precisely put our finger on it.* The artwork is an ambiguous threshold perched on the brink of a *void* (other terms he uses for this void are *centre, essence, definition, logos, origin, abyss*). It is like an elaborate cartouche with a void centre. [[Illustration 18](#)] The beholder is caught in a circularity.

*'The autonomous artwork' understood as non-restitution to a corresponding truth*

Derrida understands 'the autonomous artwork' in terms of its being separate from truth. But what does 'truth' mean for Derrida? To explain this, a brief reminder of Kant's and Heidegger's 'truth' is in order, because Derrida's notion is a response to theirs.

It is as if Kant's *harmonious free play between the imagination and understanding* is erased, and in its place Derrida writes *non-restitution to a corresponding truth or origin*.<sup>288</sup> Recall that for Kant, 'truth' meant that some phenomenal bit is subsumed under a general category, which resulted in knowledge being created. Insofar as the phenomenal bit is subsumable, it is true; if not, it is false. 'Fine Art' had nothing to do with this sort of truth because reason is not engaged; the imagination and understanding play with the aesthetic idea but cannot, no matter how hard they try, subsume the phenomena under a determinate concept. Kant therefore cordons off artworks into a distinct field removed from truth-as-correspondence. Heidegger, however, objected to Kant's way of understanding of what truth is: Art is a form of knowledge, it is truth because truth is *Aletheia*, what comes into unconcealment, is made present to view, even in its self-re-occlusion.<sup>289</sup> Recall that Heidegger felt the need to identify the origin of art: Since Being was occluded, withdrawn and forgotten, the representation theory was destined to hold sway and truth construed as correspondence. This was the origin of metaphysics and the history of being, its destiny as a thing forgotten which now needed to be retrieved. But, we may ask, is it necessary that the being of artworks be phrased in terms of loss and retrieval? Clearly, it may be the case

---

<sup>287</sup> Derrida, 1987, p. 127.

<sup>288</sup> Synonyms of *non-restitution* are the *logic of non-arrival, the aesthetics of failure or referentiality at play*.

<sup>289</sup> See for example Heidegger, 1964, p. 680.

that the logic of representation entails that a subject/logos/being withdraws in order for metaphysics to supervene on the back of the representation theory, because this theory of art could not have existed without subject/object dualism. It seems there has to be a subject that can be represented by an object, and the object, to be true, has to be returnable to the subject. When Plato demanded that artists represent true ideas, a demand for correspondence to some metaphysical other was established, hence the destiny of art has been that art was understood as representation and was judged according to the standard of truth-as-correspondence.

When Derrida looks at this situation, he deems Heidegger's attempt to return the artwork to an origin is just part of the same old metaphysical philosophy both of them are trying to dismantle: He debunks Heidegger's claim that what is present to view lacks or has forgotten its *becoming*, because what is Other, which the positively given dominates, is not, as Heidegger thinks, being or presencing; it is not that there is something lost that needs to be regained. *What is Other is neither essential nor the origin of what is present to view, because what is present has no essential origin; it is circular.* Furthermore, according to Derrida, it is a misunderstanding to think that one could get to artworks by adding self-sufficiency or *in-it-self-ness* to them. It is a mistake to think that one can strip all purposivity and pare down to some pure artwork, a pure kernel of essence or origin: "The trait" (the artwork) is situated "between the visible edging" [the passe-partout and frame] and the phantom in the centre"<sup>290</sup> (the essence or *logos* of the artwork) that has fascinated or bewitched us. Derrida thinks Heidegger never managed to unconceal the origin of art because the notion of it is premised upon the old metaphysical tradition of thinking that *logos* comes before flesh. Because there is no essence to art, there is no origin to be unconcealed. Whatever is the hypokaimenon—the supposed centre around which traits gather:

[...] hides another underneath but this latter still hides or veils...a "more" originary thingliness. But as the "more" carries itself away, the thing no longer has the figure or value of an "underneath". Situated (or not) "under" the underneath, it would not only open an abyss, but would brusquely and discontinuously prescribe a change or direction, or rather a completely different topic.<sup>291</sup>

This theme pervades "The Truth in Painting". Derrida reflects over Cézanne's words to Emile Bernard: "I owe you the truth on painting and I will tell it to you".<sup>292</sup> He asks: What must truth be in order to be owed or rendered in painting? If it consisted of rendering, what would one mean when one promised to render it as something due?<sup>293</sup> "[...] perhaps what is at stake in painting is truth, and in truth what is at stake [that idiom "the truth in painting"] is the abyss."<sup>294</sup> Proceeding to describe the abysmal hunt for truth, Derrida observes,

---

<sup>290</sup> Derrida, 1987, p. 12.

<sup>291</sup> Derrida, 1987, p. 291.

<sup>292</sup> Derrida, 1987, p. 2.

<sup>293</sup> Op cit., p. 4.

<sup>294</sup> Op cit., p. 7.

It circulates very quickly among possibilities, with disconcerting agility it displaces its accents or its hidden punctuation, it potentializes and formalizes and economizes on enormous discourses, it multiplies the dealings and transactions, the contraband and graft and parasitizing among them.<sup>295</sup>

Hence ‘the truth in painting’ is *a circular abyss*. Derrida conjectures that the artist may very well intend truth (as correspondence), and surely he commits a *painting act*, but “the allegory of truth in painting is far from offering itself completely naked on a canvas”. Thus Derrida dreams “[...] of a painting without truth, which without debt and running the risk of no longer saying anything to anyone, would still not give up painting.”<sup>296</sup> Derrida does not think Cézanne owes the truth to Bernard because the artwork appears purely passive, deprived of both origin and end. It is *an enigmatic, emphatic undecideable without epistemological dimension*.<sup>297</sup>

To come to grips with how ‘not owing the truth’ in some ways, is an agreement with, yet a radicalization of Kant, it is worthwhile to recall that Kant made a distinction between free and adherent beauty (*pulchritude vaga* and *pulchritude adhaerens*).<sup>298</sup> The notion of what it is to adhere is important for Derrida, and he, like Kant, wants the judgment of an artwork to be non-adherent. But in contrast to Kant, Derrida wants it to be an interested judgment, because he bows to Heidegger’s view that Da-sein is always intentionally directed towards goals.<sup>299</sup> Intentional directedness implies interest is already present and, if there is a goal to which Da-sein strives, the goal is instrumental. But if art is instrumental then it is “adherent” in the Kantian sense, and thus tied to truth-as-correspondence. This looks like a catch-22. How can the artwork be made to not adhere (be separate from truth-as-correspondence) and yet the receiver be intentionally directed? Derrida must demonstrate that it is simply un-returnable.

With no retrieval possible, there would be no concept to which the artwork’s representation could adhere, and the thing that is iterated would have no referent. Still, it could be reiterated and would allow structures of meaning (logos) to be instituted. For example, if there had been a referent for a squiggle on a paper, then it would be subject to the correspondence theory of truth and the representation theory of art. But since no referent can be found, we are unable to essentially define the squiggle and thus it refers only to itself. Still, this does not mean that the squiggle refers to its formal qualities—Derrida is not trying to return to formalism or essentialism! *Its referential power has to do with its essential lack of referent, which can then be reiterated and receivers can go on from there, instituting structures of meaning they themselves supply.*

---

<sup>295</sup> Op cit., pp. 8-9.

<sup>296</sup> Op cit., p. 9.

<sup>297</sup> Bernstein, 1992, p. 138.

<sup>298</sup> CJ§16: “Free beauty” is where the receiver does not presuppose a *concept* of what the object’s purpose is, and ‘concept’, for Kant, entails a telos. For example, the beauty of the flower is free; we do not think of its various parts as for plant reproduction when admiring it. By contrast, “adherent beauty” is where the judging of a thing beautiful depends upon it being connected to a concept of what the object is for. The beauty of a horse was such for Kant: It was beautiful only insofar as it fulfilled the concept of transportation.

<sup>299</sup> See p. 28.

For the sake of his argument for non-restitution, in his deconstructive reading of the Van Gogh shoe painting, Derrida follows Heidegger's tack of searching for an origin. He writes a story of *successful failure to retrieve*.<sup>300</sup> If we think of it in terms of the Cinderella story, Derrida is the prince who tries to return the shoe to a number of ugly sisters: He looks for a subject the art-object can be returned to but it is utterly impossible for him to put the artwork onto an artist's intention, any interpretation to the painting, or a historically specific pair of shoes. Derrida cannot establish any of the claims Heidegger's detractor, the positivistic art historian Meyer Schapiro, makes:

They are clearly pictures of the artist's own shoes, not the shoes of a peasant [...] the pictures were painted during van Gogh's stay in Paris in 1886-87; one of them bears the date: '87' [...] They are the shoes of the artist, by that time a man of the town and city.<sup>301</sup>

To 'be in someone's shoes' is to be in his predicament or his station in life. For a painter to represent his worn shoes as the main subject of a picture is for him to express a concern with the fatalities of his social being. Not the shoes as an instrument of use, though the landscape painter as a worker in the fields shares something of the peasant's life outdoors, but the shoes as 'a portion of the self' (in Hamsun's words) are van Gogh's revealing theme.<sup>302</sup>

In his essay, Schapiro claims Heidegger has blatantly appropriated Van Gogh's artwork and "put the shoes on his own feet",<sup>303</sup> but Derrida senses that, for Schapiro, it really is a political issue who the painted shoe's recipient is: The Nazi-enemy Heidegger is stealing the artwork from its rightful owners, the disinherited Van Gogh and Professor Goldstein.<sup>304</sup> Thus Schapiro's purpose is to expiate dispossessed Jews as well as to tell a part of Van Gogh's life history: The shoes are Van Gogh's self portrait because a ghost resides in them. Schapiro supports this claim with positive evidence, a letter from Gauguin, who relates what Van Gogh said about a shoe painting. And it sounds like Schapiro has a watertight case. Meanwhile, Derrida deems the positivistic approach an *unsuccessful return* because, he argues, when a *remark* is made, one presupposes that there was a *mark* there first. Schapiro's is an undecidable remark about shoes because it tries to ground/justify the claim that there ever were such shoes as we see in the picture. But this claim is groundless; van Gogh could have painted any old shoes, made them up, conflated fuzzy memories from several pairs. Schapiro supposes that the relation between language and the world is well founded and reliable; that the artwork describes something historically accurate. However, according to Derrida, for all the emphasis on positivist facts, Schapiro's correspondence is just another form of fiction competing with other narratives and holds no favoured hierarchical position. Hence Derrida's point seems to be both epistemological and hermeneutical: It is paint on a surface; that is all we know for sure; we can never trace an artwork back to a unified referent other than to painting in general: "There is Painting":

---

<sup>300</sup> As well as in *Restitutions*, this theme can also be found in several other works: *The Voice and Phenomena*, *Economimisis*, *Grammatology*.

<sup>301</sup> Schapiro, 1998, pp. 428-429; Derrida, 1987, p. 364.

<sup>302</sup> Schapiro, 1998, p. 431.

<sup>303</sup> Derrida, 1987, p. 366.

<sup>304</sup> Schapiro's text is dedicated to Goldstein, a fellow-Jew who fled Nazi Germany, just as did Schapiro's family.

The shoes are there in painting, they are there for figuring, representing, remarking, de-picting?) painting at work. Not in order to be reattached to the feet of somebody or other, in the painting or outside it, but there for-painting.”<sup>305</sup>

With no restitution to origin or telos, the work “goes to court”, but the judge can never reach the “supreme court” level where finality of form, origin, telos, content, significance or meaning is established once and for all. Derrida responds with incredulity over any claim anyone makes about the artwork. He sees the judge and artwork caught within incommensurable conceptual systems: Whatever is said about the artwork does not relate to what is out there in the way it is intended to, because every term within the system also alludes to or depends upon the ‘trace’ of other terms within the system that are absent. To make this more clear: Schapiro can utilize the discourse of portraiture, or Heidegger the discourse of truth as *Aletheia*, but neither can encode the truth about the artwork in the world.

*‘The autonomous artwork’ understood as non-restitution to a purpose*

Derrida’s third way of construing the artwork’s autonomy is in terms of *uselessness*. He does this by continuing the onslaught against Heidegger’s restitution of the artwork to an origin. Recall that for Heidegger, the telos to which the artwork should return is to its ontological origin; this is the source of the nature in which the being of an entity is present. Art is the origin of the artwork and of the artist. What the work really is, is defined by what is at work in the work, by the happening of truth, the strife between world and earth. For Heidegger, the happening of truth is the telos of the work of art: It discloses, opens up a *world* of speech and introduces time and history. This opens up for knowledge (epistemology). The *silent earth* is the condition for speech and cognition. Heidegger’s earth is the “absolute horizon”, marking the limit of the world (what is intelligible). But if the work of art opens up a world (an episteme), its earthy/material character means it will itself always remain on the far side of the truth-as-correspondence discourse and epistemic worlds. Shoes are for the soles of feet, the threshold between the earth and the world, so the leather soles of the shoes are returned to the self-occluding soil. The painting is returned to an originary peasant-like Eve—a true cosmic origin, more originary and thus more true than a van Gogh self-portrait. This is quite a profound return but Derrida belittles it; he cannot see *why* the point Heidegger was trying to make in his essay should be illustrated with the shoe painting.<sup>306</sup> If Heidegger explicates ‘Great Art’ with the example of a Greek Temple—which opens up the earth and reveals a whole paradigm of thought, gives to the world its look and men their outlook, telling the truth about truth—why did he fall into this “ridiculous and lamentable”<sup>307</sup> illustration; a passage over-laden with pathos, where he ignores the painting and starts talking about a peasant

---

<sup>305</sup> Derrida, 1987, p. 372.

<sup>306</sup> Op cit., p. 292-293.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid.

woman wandering the earth? The “abuse” does not stop here though, for Derrida also turns on the artist van Gogh, just as he did on Cézanne in the introduction (“Must we take the painter literally, once he starts to speak?”<sup>308</sup>) Through problematizing the lucidity of what is visible, Derrida deconstructs the artist’s stated intentions; he notices that the painted shoes are unreal, unworn, untied and unlaced. The painting does not even look like a pair, but like two left shoes.<sup>309</sup> Since uselessness is now so rampant, Derrida determines that *it does not matter* who owns the shoes or who has appropriated them; such is not the point of the artwork:

The “same truth” could be “presented” by any shoe painting, or even by any experience of shoes and even any “product” in general: the truth being that of a being-product coming back from “further away” than the matter-form couple, further away even than a “distinction between the two”. This truth is due to a “more distant origin”. It is not the truth of a relationship (of adequation or attribution) between such and such a product and such and such an owner, user, holder, bearer/wearer-borne. The belonging of the product “shoes” does not relate to a given subjectum, or even to a given world. What is said of belonging to the world and the earth is valid for the town and for the fields. Not indifferently, but equally.<sup>310</sup>

The shoes could have been replaced with any “product in general” because there is no need of an adequation between them and an origin. The painting of them remains independent from a moral obligation to be returnable to a referent.<sup>311</sup> The only thing Derrida can conclusively return the shoe painting to is, “The shoes are there in painting, they are there for figuring, representing, remarking, de-picting?) painting at work.”<sup>312</sup> On the scale of rightness, however, if the painting was to return to something more than this, Heidegger’s returning the painting to a mystical truth is *more true, more valuable* than any positivist notion of correspondence. The positivist’s truth-as-correspondence is a (false) logocentric confidence in language as “the mirror of nature”. This is the illusion that the meaning of a word has its origin in the structure of reality itself and hence makes the truth about that structure directly present to the mind. All this amounts to a false metaphysics of presence.<sup>313</sup>



## DISCUSSION PART 2: DERRIDA’S NARRATIVE OF THE AUTONOMOUS ARTWORK, WITH COMPARISON TO KANT, HEIDEGGER AND BLANCHOT<sup>314</sup>

It is difficult to come to a decision about Derrida’s conception of ‘the autonomous artwork’ because the relevant bits of *The Truth in Painting*—“Passe partout”, “Parergon” and

---

<sup>308</sup> Op cit., p. 8.

<sup>309</sup> Op cit., 1987, p. 374-375.

<sup>310</sup> Op cit., 1987, p. 312.

<sup>311</sup> The problem of moral obligation is addressed more fully on page 98-99.

<sup>312</sup> Derrida, 1987, p. 372.

<sup>313</sup> This explanation can be understood as closely following Wittgenstein’s rejection of the picture theory of language, although, I do not know if Derrida read or acknowledged Wittgenstein’s work.

<sup>314</sup> My discussion is not demonstratively divided into the voice of an autonomist and a dissenter, however these voices are still present.

“Restitutions”—are written in an obscure, sometimes disjointed and rambling style.<sup>315</sup> “Restitutions” is like a discussion, but it is never clear how many are involved, or which voice is saying what. It is an experience of sublime judgment to determine if Derrida intends to say anything unambiguous. “The Truth in Painting” is like unto an aesthetic object; while this allows Derrida to appropriate for himself some of the power and force of autonomous (undecidable) artworks, it equally entails the text’s diremption from truth-as-correspondence. If Derrida himself were to read my discussion of his text, it is a foregone conclusion that he would say I have misunderstood him.<sup>316</sup> This notwithstanding, in the following discussion, focus will be on how I deem Derrida’s undecidable artwork compares with Kant’s artwork, and how undecidability affects 1) *the artwork, the artist and the receiver*, 2) *the separation of artworks from truth-as-correspondence (non-restitution to truth)*, and 3) *purpose without a purpose (non-restitution to a telos)*. Heidegger and Blanchot will be brought into the discussion when relevant.

### **1. The work, the artist and the receiver in light of undecidability**

#### *Undecidability makes the subject fall apart*

With regard to the artwork from the Kantian perspectives, it was a unified, independent, self-reflexive subject, an honorary person. By contrast, Derrida’s artwork-subject is fragmented and it’s self-questioning is never resolved.<sup>317</sup> Whereas Kant’s formal finality expressed a ‘law-likeness without following a law’, now, because of the work’s ambiguous character, it really is impossible to say that logos comes before its flesh since the work only returns to its lack of origin. Insofar as the artwork is ‘intertextual’ and fragmentary (a fragment made up of borrowed fragments), convention is all it is; it could be following innumerable laws. The bits meshed together from here and there with no clear form pose a strong contrast to Kant’s artwork judged according to formal finality. Derrida’s artwork rules out a New Critical inquiry, since there is no self-sufficient finality of form that can function as an authoritative context for interpretation.

Moving attention to the artist and the receiver: For Kant, the artist was a genius endowed by nature to create with aesthetic ideas, and the receiver was a disinterested judge. Now, with undecidability, the distinction between the two becomes fuzzy. The artist is understood mostly as another receiver. There may be intentions she unknowingly expresses in the work, or the work may have its own intentions that are beyond her purview. The Kantian genius rejected, Derrida treats the artist as a deliberate intender, but one whose intentions fail. Hence it is likely he would

---

<sup>315</sup> It is very easy to understand why, in 1992, twenty philosophers including some very well known ones, signed a letter to the University of Cambridge to protest its controversial award of an honorary doctorate to Derrida, maintaining that his work "does not meet accepted standards of clarity and rigor". They described his philosophy as being composed of "tricks and gimmicks similar to those of the Dadaists."  
<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cup/catalog/data/023112/0231121342.HTM>

<sup>316</sup> He would still do a close reading of my text. Derrida thinks that just changing the time of the text’s reading turns it into a new text/artwork.

<sup>317</sup> This is also and particularly the case for the artwork entitled “Restitutions”.

agree with Blanchot that the artist “dies” at the “hand” of the work and therefore is not accountable for the effects of her work. (This is not to say that the artist is not responsible; this will be addressed in chapter 6). But neither is the receiver in control of her reception. Recall that for Kant, the mere ability to think showed that the mind surpassed every standard of sense, and he was awestruck by just how great Reason’s transcendental Ideas were—nature was nothing in comparison to them. The artwork provided the judge with self-reflection concerning her superior power of reason: For the judgment of beauty, reflection concerned the harmonious workings of cognitive abilities. Alternately, when confronted with the mathematical sublime, pain was not the telos of judgment, but it metamorphosed into a feeling of pleasure: “the feeling of a momentary checking of the vital powers and a consequent stronger outflow of them.”<sup>318</sup> Yet the sublime judgment—what Kant intended as an appendix to the judgment of taste—now comes to occupy Derrida’s centre stage. Importantly, when he experiences that judgments fold back on the judge, he retains Kant’s assertion that “true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging person, not in the natural object.”<sup>319</sup> He also retains Kant’s account of the receiver seeking to make sense of a meaningful and expressive whole, but falling short of determining the form or theme in a unified way. Another compatibility with Kant is that the undecidable coincides rather well with the notion of ‘aesthetic ideas’, which contain more scope for reflection than the receiver’s determinate concepts can wholly make sense of. Heidegger and Blanchot would also be able to find themselves in this failure: Sublime understanding is always a partial and indeterminate grasping of contextual wholes, which necessarily are conditioned upon an absolute whole beyond what finite humanity can fathom.

What Derrida rejects is Kant’s and the modern humanist’s belief in the unified subject, the transcendental foundation for experience as such. Simultaneously he rejects Kant’s *quality of displeasure* since, for him, it never is transposed into pleasure. This is because, for Derrida, encountering aesthetic phenomena—what is *other* than conceptual understanding—has a disruptive, debilitating effect on conventionalized understandings, and succeeds to make strange or de-habituate what the Kantian receiver thought was unambiguously clear.<sup>320</sup> Derrida’s sublime experience shows reason to be in shambles, stymied by the tremendous magnitude and mutability of *whatever* bit of phenomenon it encounters. Therefore there is an inability to make a distinction between the judgment of beauty and the sublime judgment; now *every judgment is sublime*. The artwork allows reflection over one’s ability to think—it is the precondition for truth-discourse as such—but it is more likely that the receiver thinks about how feeble is her thinking, how conflicted are the perceptions received through the senses. Seemingly paradoxical however, is that

---

<sup>318</sup> CJ§27.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid.

<sup>320</sup> A pertinent example of this is John Ruskin, in his autobiography *Praeteria*: “[...] the things in which I have been least deceived are those which I have learned as their Spectator”. (Quoted from Kraus, 1998, p. 6.)

the work may be made and unmade by each receiver, and this reveals something of the power of the receiver's will, and her responsibility for judgment in relation to sublime undecidables. The receiver takes on the semblance of artist: In the very act of interpreting a work, she inadvertently sets up a new work.

But could not the artist retain some intentional control, even if the work is not fully the child of her intention?<sup>321</sup> After all, even though the artist's intentions are negated by the "accidents of the method" of their creation,<sup>322</sup> and by the intentions of receivers, the work may very well be linked with the artist during the process of creation, because the artist can use her mistakes in a fruitful way.<sup>323</sup> Surely sometimes some of the artist's intentions obtain all the way to the gallery? We can construct a common position for Derrida, Heidegger and Blanchot as follows: *After the artwork is presented to the public, it is cut loose from the artist's intentions, be they in the form of interpretation, evaluation or claimed significance. As for the repeatable marks of symbolic forms, the mastery the receiver and artist think they have over them, which enables intersubjective communication, is undone, and the symbolic forms assume mastery over artist and receiver.* Indeed, it seems likely that the artist's intentions of the finished product are not identical to her intentions at the outset.<sup>324</sup> Yet it is doubtful that once the work leaves the studio, the artist's belated intentions die off completely and the receiver's intentions take over. In the art-institutional setting, artists and receivers can make pacts of agreement about the authority of the artist's stated intentions. Take Jeff Koons: One could argue that the greater part of Koons' art may actually be

---

<sup>321</sup> Take for example fine art prints pulled from copper plates. There are innumerable factors to that figure in: the temperature in the room; the room's humidity; the strength of the ferric chloride; how long the chloride has been exposed to air; how much sludge is in the etching pan; the thickness of gelatine or asphalt covering the copper plate; whether or not the copper plate was absolutely free of fat to begin with; how much the gelatine has shrunk and if it has shrunk evenly; the length of time the plate is in the bath, whether or not the bath is giggled during the etch. And after the plate is etched, there are more contingencies the artist needs to control in the printing process: the viscosity of the inks; their tackiness; the roller's weight, the felt's thickness, the order in which inks are rolled, the weight of the hand when wiping the plate of excess ink, the stiffness of the tarlatan, the height of the roller on the press in relation to the felts, how much sizing the felts have already absorbed, whether or not the felts are damaged in some way, the amount of sizing in the printing paper, how moist the paper is, etc. Clearly, the professional artist can control many of these contingencies, but not completely; all results must be, in part, due to the accidents or contingencies of the method, 'art's own intentions'.

<sup>322</sup> My terminology. 'Accidents of the method' has paradigmatic examples. One that immediately comes to mind is the masterful graphic artist, Krishna Reddy [[Illustration 19](#)] The following website has many of his pictures. [http://artswithoutborders.com/preview/reddy\\_preview.html](http://artswithoutborders.com/preview/reddy_preview.html) By making a printing mistake (spilling the linseed oil can in the printing ink), he ended up inventing a whole new kind of fine-art printing eventually called *colour viscosity printing*. This method enables the artist to print multiple colours in one pass through the press, thus avoiding the problems of trying to achieve perfect registration. See Hayter, 1982.

<sup>323</sup> Reddy went on to utilize this "mistake", turning it into a calculable, repeatable effect that met the rigour of hard science, when he chose. However, in artworks, going to that extent is not always interesting. [http://www.vadehraart.com/public-krishna\\_reddy.htm](http://www.vadehraart.com/public-krishna_reddy.htm)

It is also instructive to examine the works of Sigmar Polke in this respect. He has problematized *the autonomy of materials*: the triptych *Apparizione*, (1992), is a so-called "unpainted painting", for it was created when he poured chemicals on a surface. The fluids reacted with each other and with the air. Eventually they settled down, dried, and became the painting. This suggests a unity between the artwork and nature, for nature returns to the picture, not as motif, but as *a play of natural forces and processes*. The picture mocks the artist for it has almost totally created itself. Ironically however, because the artist chose consciously to set up his materials in a certain way, he also knows from experience, how the chemicals tend to react with each other, so Polk is the artist-director. [http://www.af-moma.no/?artist\\_id=68#](http://www.af-moma.no/?artist_id=68#) (Hanne Beate Ueland of Astrup Fearnley Museum, my English translation.)

<sup>324</sup> Blanchot's explanation of the artist's belated intentions rings true with my own experience as a graphic artist.

his reception-manipulation through video-performances, where he poses as the art-historian/critic of the artworks attributed to his name.<sup>325</sup> But there are also countless other counter-examples: Artists usually make public statements to effect the reception of their works, and it seems clear from the hordes of catalogue texts and art-historical treatises that the artist's stated intentions are usually taken into account as an angle worth considering, regardless of whether the receiver accepts them.<sup>326</sup> The artist may not be *the* final instance for interpretation and evaluation, but this does not mean they "die". On the one hand one might object, as did Beardsley: It is irrelevant whether the artist *wants to* or *tries to* influence reception, for if an artist says one thing about their work and yet the receiver experiences something else, then the independent-minded receiver will follow what their own experience tells them anyway. Regarding anyone's or anything's intentions as a final court of appeals causes the receiver to forfeit her imaginative powers and deprives her of responsibility. On the other hand, has Beardsley taken into account that the receiver is impressionable and only with difficulty ignores what she has heard? The receiver is neither fully bound nor fully free to judge independently of what has been told her. Reception functions by the power of suggestion, just as does advertising. Meanwhile, to resolve this impasse, one could try to force through the following distinction: We should distinguish between the artist proper and the artist-critic/historian/interpreter. By making this distinction, the problem could be skirted. But then a new problem arises of explaining *why we should favour* the artist-critic/historian over someone else who has critically studied the work? Surely it is by virtue of their proximity to the work's intentions in the process of creation.

If the artist's stated intentions are taken into consideration at all by receivers—and they usually are unless the work is a *bona fide* fragment such as, say an antique like the *Belvedere Torso* [Illustration 20]—the artist's intentions, albeit belated, take part in the power-struggle for establishing meaning. One can even argue that in the *Torso*, some of the intentions of the artist obtain in the fragment: unity of form can be reconstructed in the hips, the direction the head would have had, the angle of missing limbs can also be pretty well gauged. Surely an expression of super-human strength was intended. So even though we do not have access to who the artist is, or to a formally unified artwork, many of the artist's intentions still obtain. The fragment would probably have to appear even more fragmented, like rubble in a cultural landscape, in order to fall in line with the claim of the artist's "death" at the "hand" of the work. With education and experience, even the intentions of minute fragments can be reconstructed [Illustration 21a and 21b]. From this it seems like the claim of the work's independence from the artist's intentions is

---

<sup>325</sup> Koons admits he has never touched a number of the works attributed to his name. He selects found photos from which other artists (up to 70 at a time in his workshop) work. It is instructive to review his exhibition catalogue "Jeff Koons: Retrospective", to see just how much space is devoted to his own stated intentions. ("Jeff Koons: Retrospective" 04.09-12.12.2004, Astrup Fearnley Museum for Modern Art, Oslo.)

<sup>326</sup> For example, information for the public produced by Astrup Fearnley Museum between 2000 and 2005 highlight artist's stated intentions. [http://www.af-moma.no/?top\\_menu=5&item=Publikasjoner](http://www.af-moma.no/?top_menu=5&item=Publikasjoner)

highly disputable. At most, *it is only partly independent*. But is this saying very much? Maybe Derrida is just saying that positivistic certainty is unwarranted.

## 2. The undecidable artwork's separation from truth-as-correspondence

### *Derrida's scepticism*

How does Derrida's scepticism compare with Kant's? Kant, as we recall, thought the artwork could be separate from truth because the aesthetic judgment was made outside the scope of determinate concepts, which were necessary for making truth judgments. For this reason, artworks stood in a sceptical relation with truth. Derrida's scepticism stretches the separation between artworks and truth differently: Derrida seems to demand that we either have an exhaustive comprehension of the artwork—which would entail comprehending the absolute sublime whole of text/context—or else we must be strong sceptics. However, this does not coincide with our everyday experience of referring to things via language—we regularly experience satisfying explanations and interpretations of artworks, but then are “told” by Derrida that our experience and reflections are merely as right or as wrong as any other judgment we could have made because they are not absolute. A Derrida-defender could retort that Derrida is not a total sceptic, that artworks certainly do have justifiable meaning; it is just that it is impossible to reduce artworks to a final assertion of what they mean; they **risk** corresponding to a referent, but the final correspondence is always deferred. This accounts for the artwork's power to be excessively meaningful without being true, and this is why artworks are the condition for subsequent ongoing truth-as-correspondence discourses. Problematically however, this sort of defence of Derrida weakens the thrust of what he himself says about non-restitution, and his stated goal for “The Truth in Painting”: “Thus one dreams of a painting without truth, which without debt and running the risk of no longer saying anything to anyone [...] would still not give up painting.”<sup>327</sup> Derrida does not even want to run the risk of corresponding.<sup>328</sup> Through the sublime undecidable judgment, he sets up *a regime of three successful failures*. First, *the failure to clearly identify what is rightfully internal or what is external to the work*; secondly, *the failure to return the artwork to a referent*; thirdly, *there is the failure to use the work for any conclusive final purpose*. Because of these, the artwork can conclusively return only to itself, which Derrida interprets as “The shoes are there in painting, they are there for (figuring, representing, remarking, de-picting?) painting at work.”<sup>329</sup> The following objection arises: Has not Derrida, through this regime of failure, treated non-restitution and no formal finality as though they were foregone conclusions? If he has chosen beforehand that all judgments will be inconclusive, is he just a sceptic who cannot make a moral

---

<sup>327</sup> Derrida, 1987, p. 9

<sup>328</sup> Although I limit the scope of this paper to “The Truth in Painting” essays “Passe partout”, “Parergon” and “Restitutions”, I realize that others of Derrida's texts can point to a different conclusion.

<sup>329</sup> Derrida, 1987, p. 372.

or political commitment? (This was the complaint against Posner and Kincaid in chapter 4.) There are arguments for both a yes and a no answer on this; here is an *undecidability about undecidability*. Using the law-court analogy, in the first instance, the artwork is judged, but so insufficiently that the work still remains innocent because never proven guilty. The focus of the judgment falls back on the judge, on her own prejudices and the undecidable artwork floats free. In the second instance, *the work remains un-judged*. Let's examine this more closely:

*No: Derrida does judge the work.* Undecidability can entail that the artwork has a perfectly balanced sort of “ying/yang” double character; it is always in ebb and flow, never at rest, never favours one side. This view seems to be supported by the deconstructive “double reading” method, where the first reading is metaphysical, creating meaning through absence of presence, and the second reading returns aesthetic presence through undecidability. Schapiro's accomplishment could be acknowledged as one slope of this double character, and undecidability (whatever judgment we make about it, it will be as good/bad/right/wrong/true/false as any other judgment we could have made) the other slope. This could validate Schapiro's rigorous research into the historical, empirical data pertaining to the shoe picture. Meanwhile, we can grant that Schapiro goes too far in supposing that the relation between language and the world is well founded and reliable—that the artwork describes some historical thing accurately, and that this is objectionable because there is nothing to prevent van Gogh from having conflated fuzzy recollections of any number of shoes—nevertheless, as Derrida himself keenly observed, it could be two left shoes. It is intriguing to combine this observation with Schapiro's self-portrait claim, because van Gogh may have been thinking of himself as “two left feet”. There is an idiom in French, just as there is in English: When feeling that one has botched things up, one likens oneself to having “two left feet”: *"avoir deux pieds gauche"*. There is also *"se lever du pied gauche"* and *"avoir deux mains gauche"*. Alternately, *"ne pas faire qq chose avec deux pieds dans le même soulier"* means to do something well. As we learn from Gauguin's letter, Van Gogh was not pleased with his endeavors while painting the shoe pictures. Therefore, given that it looks like two left shoes, this would only strengthen the judgment that the shoe painting is a self-portrait.

*Yes: Derrida is a sceptic who refrains from judging the work.* If Derrida's sublime undecidability overrides the double character entirely, it would be like the “tau” that lies beyond the “ying/yang”, and this would silence our effort to speak about the work at all.<sup>330</sup> By rendering the judgment of all artworks sublime, it is as if we are in a paralysis—we simply cannot judge the work—it is an aesthetic figuration the figure of which we cannot decide. And our indecision results in silence. If we choose to interpret undecidability as extending beyond the perfectly balanced double character, it invalidates Schapiro's contribution, and the above interpretation

---

<sup>330</sup> “He who speaks about the tau does not know about the tau” said Lao Tzu. I am using Taoism as an analogy, although others have made a strong connection between Deconstruction and Eastern Philosophy. See for example <http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-PHIL/cai1.htm>

about the self-portrait as two left shoes. This position can be supported with the thought that if the artwork exists, not *inside reality*, but *inside one's representation of it*, this is a continuation of scepticism over *the thing in itself*. In that case, Derrida's project entails maintaining metaphysics, but in such a way that it avoids the need to return the work to a missing (metaphysical) referent. Hence undecidability deconstructs the representation theory of art that relied on the absence of presence, and it tries to guarantee *both presence and absence*. Derrida's 'there is nothing outside the text' claims to accommodate both the present and un-present aspects of the whole sublime work (which we cannot delimit, all the relations and anterior spaces of the relations), but does it? This seems undecidable too. But we can rightly wonder: If it is the case that there is nothing outside the text/context, if text and context are inextricable, if the sublime whole must be the amount against which a judgment is made, then how can Derrida maintain that just changing the time of the text sets up a new text? If there were nothing outside the text, then surely the change of time would still be within the text/context?

In sum, if Derrida fails to judge the work, if he only returns the painting to 'for painting', is this a non-informative tautology? I think not; tautologies can also be hermeneutic circles. Self-inquiry widening ever outward, providing opportunity for self-reflection. Since the artwork is not true (correspondence) to anything other than itself, it becomes excessively meaningful, useful, the judge is morally enmeshed in a fruitful feast for thought.

*Demonstrating non-restitution: A secret and contradictory trust in truth-as-correspondence?*

If Derrida is interpreted as maintaining a strong sceptical position, it means that anything he understands about the artwork is a misunderstanding because understanding is never direct but is always a form of partial interpretation, and it uses metaphor when it thinks it is being literal.<sup>331</sup> This subverts confidence in logical, ethical or political commonplaces and interpretations about the artwork, (e.g., that van Gogh's shoe picture is a depiction of a pair of shoes, or it was meant as a metaphorical self-portrait, or that Gonzales-Torres' *Placebo* adopts a Minimalist pictorial syntax and is critical of AIDS research-funding). The ontological being of the artwork is not given, Derrida would claim, because the language we use in our dealings with it cannot correspond to 'a reality out there'; rather, the artwork is constituted by us, in language, in ways that can never be justified by the claim that *this* is the way that the artwork 'really is'. The artwork exists, not inside reality, but inside one's representation of it—'There is nothing outside the text'.<sup>332</sup> Therefore Schapiro's description of van Gogh's shoe painting as either a portrait of the artist's shoes or as a

---

<sup>331</sup> This is not a theme Derrida addresses directly in "Truth in Painting", but in the essay "White Mythology" in the book *Margins of Philosophy*, he states: "there is no properly philosophical category to qualify a certain number of tropes that have conditioned the so-called "fundamental", "structuring", "original" philosophical oppositions: they are so many "metaphors" that would constitute the rubrics of such a tropology, the words "turn", "trope" or "metaphor" being no exception to this rule". Derrida, 1982, p. 229:

<sup>332</sup> Derrida, 1977, p. 158.

self-portrait, is not a mastering of what in historical reality is an empirical fact about the picture, but it is relative to the discourse of those who appreciate metaphor, and, within that discourse these interpretations are valid. And Derrida would surely agree, since he holds that language is metaphor. Put differently, *Derrida trusts language as metaphor*; he thinks all our knowledge of the artwork is metaphor-ridden and entirely relative to the scope of that conceptual system. But how can Derrida launch this attack on truth-as-correspondence without having a contradictory trust in such language actually corresponding to an external referent? For without a pretty confident notion of what is true (corresponding truth), how can he show that the artwork has fallen into contradiction? Thus it seems that Derrida's hope for "an artwork without truth"<sup>333</sup> still remains to be demonstrated. Derrida even admits as much: "each time that a rhetoric defines metaphor, not only is a philosophy implied, but also a conceptual network in which philosophy itself has been constituted."<sup>334</sup> This is confirmed by Christopher Norris, one of Derrida's allies, who states that there is no possibility of discussing metaphor, defining its attributes, its difference from 'literal' usage, or its problematic role, without relying on a *concept* of metaphor that will always have been prepared in advance by the discourse of philosophic reason.<sup>335</sup>

### 3. The undecidable purpose

"Non-restitution to a purpose" can be interpreted in a number of ways 1) *The work does not at all have final purpose*. Derrida espouses this when he can only return the painting to "for painting", when the artwork "owes" no truth, and when he finds the work useless. 2) *The work has an excess of non-conclusive purposes*.<sup>336</sup> Here whatever purpose we return the artwork to, it is in relation to our own prejudices and our own situation. Derrida espouses this meaning when he tries to uncover the "true" intention behind Schapiro's return. 3) *Restitution to a final purpose eschews us*. This does not exclude the possibility of there being a final purpose; it just always shoves it "around the bend". These three interpretations graduate from a radical scepticism to a position of hope or religious-like faith. If Derrida limited himself to the first interpretation, it would provide serious grounds for doubting whether he actually judges the artwork, choosing instead to treat non-restitution as a foregone conclusion, he is a radical sceptic. Inasmuch as he espouses the third, then he, in a Socratic sort of way, really believes there is a final purpose, but it is always beyond his grasp. If he remains hopeful that the work has final purpose, then it could be argued that Derrida holds to an art-religion.

---

<sup>333</sup> Derrida, 1987, p. 9.

<sup>334</sup> Derrida, 1982, p. 230.

<sup>335</sup> Norris, 2000, p. 142.

<sup>336</sup> For Derrida, it is less a question of what the picture is returned to and more a question of the theory behind the returning. It is thus *the theories* and not *who* the picture should be returned to that Derrida is most concerned with. Meanwhile, inasmuch as Derrida ranks hierarchically the value of philosophical commitments of Schapiro and Heidegger, is this not an indication that he secretly trusts in some sort of truth-as-correspondence?

*Judgment of purpose: An art-religion?*

In “Restitutions”, Derrida’s view of the work’s purposivity initially shares a similarity with Kant’s *purposiveness without determinate purpose*: The artwork is purposive, not for any particular cognition, but for cognition as such—to reflect over the means of reflection, the very possibility of signifying. But from then on, Derrida and Kant diverge: The work holds an excess of interested purposes. So Derrida’s undecidability turns Kant’s *purposiveness without a determinate purpose* on its head and makes it mean, not *formal purposiveness*, but *a wealth of cognitive purposes, none of which are conclusive*. But could it be that the sublime undecidable judgment of purpose lapses into an art-religion? Is it in danger of turning the artwork’s purpose once again into a transcendent, metaphysical entity (it is outside the text/context)? One cannot know what its purpose is, but one merely believes, with a religious-like faith, and finds through that faith, that it is exceedingly purposeful. To this the Derridian advocate must agree; she experiences the final purpose/telos of the work as absent, but it remains exceedingly purposeful. To conclude *The Truth in Painting*, Derrida poignantly says, “You don’t have to render anything. Just bet on the trap [the useless hermetic cipher an artwork is] as others swear on a Bible.”<sup>337</sup> Swearing on the Bible presupposes that the person swearing has faith: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”<sup>338</sup> So it seems like Derrida (who, after all, has written “Restitutions”, albeit in several voices), is either a radical sceptic or he is equating the judgment of an artwork with religious-like faith. One has to exercise faith because the work is autonomous in the sense of ‘hermetic and useless’. And what else can one resort to if there is no possibility for identifying a conclusive referent and thus no positivistic stringency? Restitution as religion. This seems to point directly to the metaphysical slope of the artwork; that meaning is conditioned upon absence. As such, Derrida’s artwork is clearly metaphysical.

The autonomist advocate could now try to argue that it is not religion but modern aesthetic philosophy: the history of reception shows that since receivers have consistently interpreted artworks differently through the ages, this is exactly what we should expect for an autonomous work (one that resists appropriation); if the receiver had true access to it, there would not be this constantly mutable purpose. The instrumentalist-detractor could then retort that constantly mutable multi-purposefulness proves merely that the work is historical, and that the needs of receivers change in relation to changes in their life-world—political, cultural, social, economic and religious changes. Receivers have true, albeit unfixed access to artworks, because receivers and artists share (at least in part) a language/means of communication that is historical. Stalemate.

---

<sup>337</sup> Derrida, 1987, p. 382.

<sup>338</sup> Hebrews 11:1.

*The undecidable artwork and moral concerns: Is the artwork morally obligated?*

Kant tried to place the artwork in a field distinct from moral judgment by arguing that it had no final purpose. As we have already discussed, Kant's attempt failed.<sup>339</sup> But if Derrida *successfully fails* to return the work to a final purpose, and the judgment turns back upon the judge (as a self-reflection that never renders any knowledge about the artwork), maybe then the work remains beyond moral obligation? Well, no. Derrida cannot accept the position of Blanchot—that the autonomous artwork remains on the side of the earth—because 'there is nothing outside the text'. The whole notion of *the artwork itself* consequently fails: The artwork is constituted by us, in language, in ways that can never be justified by the claim that *this* is the way that the artwork 'really is'. Undecidability is the grounds for NOT drawing a distinction between the artwork and the domain of moral responsibility. It is the necessary condition for the judge's moral responsibility. But in the same breath, no one person or thing can hold sole responsibility: not the artwork *itself*, since there is no such thing; not the artist, because she is not in control of her intentions and she is on par with the receiver; not any particular receiver, because language is a symbolic system shared by everyone in the society. Responsibility is spread out over everything; the language or semiotic system the artwork uses is a power that flows through it without congealing at any one point. Hence it would be a mistake to hold any one instance as solely responsible for the content or effects the artwork produces.

Derrida shows that undecidability entails that there are no foregone conclusions. We cannot make a blanket statement beforehand about the work's independence from epistemological and moral concerns. Judges are obligated to scrutinize each particular artwork and hold in mind that whatever they decide, they could have made a different judgment. But could the undecidability of the artwork mean that anything the artist offers is O. K.? No. Undecidability is not an excuse for relativism or nihilism, although some of Derrida's detractors have claimed that it is.<sup>340</sup> But it can mean that the range of choices for which the artist and receiver can be ethically responsible or irresponsible for, is wider than has been understood under High Modernism, that judges make decisions based on the "firm" ground of prejudice. It may mean that responsibility with decidability is responsibility with undecidability. Undecidability increases responsibility because it obliges the receiver to make distinctions between choices, and to reflect over them; to recognize the order of priorities one favours, one's cultural conventions. From this perspective, the receiver appears to need more vigilance. In fact, vigilance displaces uncritically accepting the cut and dry

---

<sup>339</sup> Kant's failure to achieve this separation was discussed on p. 54.

<sup>340</sup> "Derrida's influence has been disastrous," Roger Kimball, a conservative critic, said in a 1994 New York Times Magazine interview. "He has helped foster a sort of anemic nihilism, which has given imprimaturs to squads of imitators who no longer feel that what they are engaged in is a search for truth, who would find that notion risible." <http://www.todayalternativenews.com/index.php?event=link,150&values%5B0%5D=5&values%5B1%5D=1937>

foregone distinctions Modernism put in place—that it always is irrelevant to judge the artwork with regard to political concerns, morality, religion, etc.

#### 4. How successful is Derrida's failure?

Just how undecidable are artworks really? How successful is the regime of failure? Surely some artworks are more un-returnable than others? With *much* effort, Derrida achieves a supposedly successful failure of restitution for a simple still life, but the regime of failure is highly disputable. The thesis of undecidability is itself undecidable, or can only partly obtain. Successful communication does occur—because people in a community master shared symbolic forms. An artist can intend to express something and the receiver can understand what is meant, and the artist's doings and the receiver's understandings are possible by the *grace* of repeatable aesthetic marks in a historical, cultural setting, because of good will, and because of institutionalized pacts of agreement.<sup>341</sup> Through the van Gogh painting, Derrida claims to have demonstrated that this mastering is undone through the mastery the symbolic forms have *over us*. But we can rightly exercise a healthy scepticism on this point: Derrida himself “masters” the artwork by appropriating it as an illustration for his theories of non-restitution and undecidability. It may be argued that Derrida ends in contradiction: He has already decided, out from his theoretical commitments, what he wants the painting to mean and he is only interested in that one meaning. He treats the painting as a foregone conclusion that it is undecidable and thus finally un-returnable. In sum, the artwork appears as not entirely undecidable, not entirely unreturnable to more than itself.

As a final critical remark, it is worth reflecting that from ‘the undecidable artwork’ absurdity is forthcoming: Since anything can be art these days every bit of phenomena would be a particular undecidable. But should a system that has useful explaining power be rejected just because it leads to *this* unintended absurdity? I think not. Human-created systems are not completely consistent, and they tend to become more than was intended.

#### *The usefulness of the undecidable artwork*

We have seen that ‘the undecidable artwork’ can be useful for avoiding some of the problems with the double character; it can also aid in interpreting the being of some contemporary artworks. Take Yoko Ono's instruction pieces:<sup>342</sup> Where is the Kantian form of finality that results in self-reflection over the harmony of mental faculties, or a formal finality that can be grounds for critical analysis and justifiable interpretation? Radically ambiguous being, located neither on the side of

---

<sup>341</sup> Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and *On Certainty* could be brought in here, but the scope of this paper does not allow it.

<sup>342</sup> A retrospective of the art of Yoko Ono, including several of her instruction works, is presently available: *Horizontal Memories Exhibition*, 22 January-8 May 2005, Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo.

the earth nor the world, now is useful for understanding the mode of existence of artworks that lack traditional formal constraints. Ono's instruction works instantiate the artwork's ontological instability resulting in open-ended self-reflection. The instruction may be nothing more than to produce a series of thoughts, or to discuss something with someone. The artwork may include conventional aspects (there is something framed and hanging in the museum), or there may be a "limited series of prints" of the instructions, or the printed instructions may be made in such a way that each of the 10,000 examples are slightly unique, but the artwork also includes convention-governed structures from the commercial world: the bus stop, the vending machine, the thousands of repetitions, SMS, internet. Yet if it is the case, as Ono maintains, that the artwork is not found in any of the artworld or commercial-world places, and it cannot be a commodity since it cannot be bought or sold—*it is nothing material but exists only in the meeting between people*—then the stable existence of the artwork collapses; what is the status of its being? There is no formal unity self-sufficient for its own interpretation. It is an inherently unstable, undecidable and partly metaphysical existence.

## SUMMARY

### *'The HBD autonomous artwork'*

As a summary of this long-winded chapter, here is a synthesis/review of the points about which it seems Heidegger, Blanchot and Derrida can agree concerning the autonomous artwork. Where there is disagreement, I give deference to what I deem Derrida's position to be. Let's say that the three meet for coffee, and together agree on a common conception of 'the autonomous artwork' called *'the HBD autonomous artwork'*. What moments would it have?

(1) First of all, a claim about the work in relation to the artist: that *the work is independent from the artist's intentions for it*. Particularly after the artwork is presented to the public, it is cut loose from the artist's intentions, be they in the form of interpretation, or claimed significance. As for the repeatable marks of symbolic forms, the mastery the receiver and artist think they have over them, which enables inter-subjective communication, is undone, and the symbolic forms assume mastery over artist and receiver. Heidegger would say the work self-subsists; that it remains unknown where the artist and the process and the circumstances of the genesis of the work lie.<sup>343</sup> For Blanchot, the artist "dies" at the "hand" of the work,<sup>344</sup> and Derrida would argue from the point of view of successful failure to return the work to the artist's intentions for it. The artist does not owe the truth.<sup>345</sup>

(2) Secondly, all three would agree that *the work is independent from the receiver's intentions for it*. Heidegger would point to the work's earthy character, its self-occlusion. Blanchot would point

---

<sup>343</sup> Heidegger, 1964, p. 689.

<sup>344</sup> Blanchot, 1995, p. 307

<sup>345</sup> Derrida, 1987, p. 8; 375.

to the death of the receiver at the hand of the work, and Derrida would point to the judgment being sublime, its turning back on the judge and becoming a self-inquiry.

(3) All three would readily agree that the autonomous artwork is *an unknowable particular fragment, anterior to the truth-as-correspondence discourse*, yet the condition for that discourse.

(4) There would be general agreement over the work's relation to purposiveness: *It resists determinate appropriation, yet in the very act of doing so, it opens up for all manner of appropriations*. From here, all three would phrase the artwork's indeterminate purposiveness differently: Heidegger: To open up the earth and set forth a world, to allow truth to come into unconcealment. Blanchot: When the artwork negates the meaning and signification that was derived through concepts, what asserts itself is the very possibility of signifying. Derrida: To return the work to 'painting', which means to broach what it is to bring into being: "perhaps what is at stake in painting is truth, and in truth what is at stake (that idiom) is the abyss."<sup>346</sup>

(5) A 'double character' would garner agreement from Heidegger and Blanchot, although the precise nature of the earth—whether it is partly metaphysical or only material would remain a point of dispute. The two would also readily agree that there is a dialectical movement between the two characters. Meanwhile, Derrida would object to this by saying that the artwork is undecidable; it is impossible to distinguish between what belongs to which character, or that either side has priority because the origin is absent, a void logos. Thus the three thinkers would have to compromise with Derrida and settle for something like this: *The autonomous artwork has a radically ambiguous character that cannot be conclusively distinguished, either with regard to two distinct characters, form, reference, meaning or value*.

(6) What about the work's relation to moral concerns? Blanchot would think it is a foregone conclusion that the artwork is anterior to such, since it is presence apprehended by a zombified conscience. Heidegger and Derrida disagree. They would argue that earth and world are simultaneously the case. With Derrida's 'there is nothing outside the text', the artwork cannot remain *beyond* the domain of moral responsibility. Still, whatever decision one makes about the work turns back upon the judge and becomes a self-inquiry, so the work is not addressed in a final sense. The three will provisionally have to write that *the work has an ambiguous undecidable character, which renders its relation to moral concerns undecided, but judging the work is nevertheless a moral responsibility*. What is meant here by *judging the work*, is all the various decisions one can make *vis a vis* the artwork, be they a judgment of taste, or about the work's purpose, it's formal qualities, value, everything. There are no grounds for bad faith.

This chapter presented alternative accounts of a double character for the artwork along the lines of Heidegger and Blanchot, showing the ways in which they deem the work both autonomous and to

---

<sup>346</sup> Derrida, 1987, p. 7.

discuss these ways. Secondly, it showed how Derrida absorbs some insights from each of these thinkers as well as from Kant, in his conception of the undecidable, non-returnable artwork. The reader may wonder—is not the HBD basically just an interpretation of the Derridian position? Should it not just be called “D”? I think not, because with undecidability, it is still unclear whether or not a double character remains. ‘Double character’ may apply not to the work, but to the way the judge “reads” the work. From here, the next thing to do is to gather together the moments discussed in chapters 4 and 5, compare and discuss them, and see if yet a third hybrid can be constructed, that will be useful for understanding the autonomy of contemporary artworks.

# 6

## A THIRD HYBRID

The goal of this chapter is to compare, evaluate and discuss the various moments of autonomy presented thus far, and then hazard a third synthesis of moments of autonomy for the contemporary artwork. After this, the following question is asked: Even if we can construct a new synthetic understanding of autonomy that fits better with today’s artworks than do the already-established versions of autonomy, is it something we need?

### **The *PH* viewed through the lens of the *HBD* and vice versa**

At the end of chapter 4, a list of moments was suggested, of ways in which the contemporary artwork could be understood as autonomous. This provisional hybrid (PH) was as follows: *1a) the artists’ authenticity of expression; 1b) law-likeness without a law; 2) the work’s separation from truth-as-correspondence (the fundamental incommensurability between aesthetic symbolic forms and the symbolic forms of speech and language leaves the work under-determined by language; the work’s dealing in aesthetic ideas, possibly better understood as general concepts that generate more thought than specialized concepts can accommodate); 3) the work’s autonomy understood as related to political decision; 4) the work’s independent value due to the priority of aesthetic features; 5) some sort of double character, one side of which is autonomous in a variety of senses; 6) the indeterminate telos.* At the end of chapter five, another list of moments was suggested for how the contemporary artwork could be understood as autonomous. This synthesis

of Heidegger, Blanchot and Derrida's thinking (HBD) gave some preference to Derrida's undecidability in order to avoid problems experienced with the notion of the double character. The moments of autonomy were as follows: The artwork: 1) *is independent from the artist's intentions for it*; 2) *is independent from the receiver's intentions for it*; 3) *is an unknowable particular fragment, anterior to the truth-as-correspondence discourse but the basis for that discourse*; 4) *resists determinate appropriation, yet in the very act of doing so, it opens up for all manner of appropriations*; 5) *has an undecidable character that cannot be conclusively distinguished, either with regard to two distinct characters, form, reference, meaning or value*; 6) *The undecideable character renders the work's relation to moral concerns inconclusive, but judging the work is nevertheless a moral responsibility.*

To make the task easier, I take the easy decision first: I reject PH 4 (*the work's independent value due to the priority of aesthetic features*). Through lengthy discussion,<sup>347</sup> it was found that neither earth nor world could have priority. It is also rejected because, at the level of materials, the artwork is suppressed,<sup>348</sup> and because, in relation to contemporary artworks, it may be irrelevant.<sup>349</sup>

The moment of *the work's autonomy understood as related to political decision* (PH 3) is, to a large degree, a sociological/political issue concerning the status of the art institution. The art institution is something created by humans; it is not a natural kind. Therefore, if we want to give artworks various modicums of autonomy, we make a pact of agreement amongst ourselves that this will be a commonly held convention. Still, the question nags: If artworks are inherently undecidable, if the work of our hands exceeds our intentions, what would that indicate in terms of consequences for the institutionalised conventions of agreement which together with human actors, make up the artworld? For one thing, it would indicate that the "nature" of *the art institution* as the condition for the artwork<sup>350</sup> is nevertheless mutable and can be re-negotiated continuously. This is a huge topic, and very important, yet, as I said in my introduction, I have strategically chosen to not focus on the art institution and its relation to the work's autonomy, partly in order to comply with the limitation of 115 pages, but also because I see it as an issue which focuses primarily on the institutional setting, not the artwork.<sup>351</sup>

PH 2 (*the work's separation from truth-as-correspondence*) harmonizes well with HBD 3 (*an unknowable particular fragment, anterior to the truth-as-correspondence discourse but the basis for that discourse*). However, in the discussions of chapter 5, HBD 3 was highly disputed because truth-as-correspondence can obtain, by the grace of conventionalized agreements, even if

---

<sup>347</sup> See pp. 47-59; 75-83; 102.

<sup>348</sup> See pp. 58-59; 76.

<sup>349</sup> See pp. 75-76.

<sup>350</sup> See p. 32.

<sup>351</sup> A book worth reading on this issue is Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*, Cambridge Mass.: MIT, 1993.

positivism is ruled out. To think of the work in terms of *a double character* and *the indeterminate telos* (PH 5, 6) would be an improvement over HBD 3 because on the one hand, the work can be true in terms of correspondence, it can be meaningful and return to a telos, while on the other hand it is subject to a scepticism that renders it independent from truth as correspondence. Still, the sceptical solution expressed in PH 5 and 6 is, as I see it, greatly enriched by HBD 4, 5, and 6 (*4: resists determinate appropriation, yet in doing so, opens up for all manner of appropriations; 5: the undecidability thesis; 6: The undecideable character renders the work's relation to moral concerns inconclusive, but judging the work is nevertheless a moral responsibility*) because HBD 4, 5 and 6, while also sceptical—in light of undecidability, we are incapable of saying anything conclusive about the artwork—nevertheless, disallows “bad faith” and a radical-sceptical “anything-goes” relativism. With undecidability, the artwork is addressed, scrutinized—it is not just a mirror of the receiver’s attitudes—but it still “throws” the artist and the receiver back on themselves to confront their own attitudes and responsibilities.

With regard to *authenticity of expression* (PH 1a): We recall that this was a far cry from what autonomy usually means (self-legislation, independence). Meanwhile, *law-likeness without a law* (PH 1b) did not exclude the artist-work relation from also following innumerable external laws and therefore it was only partial. A similar partiality obtained for HBD 1: *independence from the artist's intentions*, and HBD 2, *independence from the receiver's intentions*. Therefore, PH 1, HBD 1 and HBD 2 bear being discussed in light of *undecidability* (HBD 5 and 6) because autonomy founded on a sceptical undecidability warrants no foregone conclusions. Furthermore, since the disinterested attitude was cancelled out of the PH, in light of undecidability, the question warrants re-opening. The next paragraphs will therefore focus on 1) *the artist's authenticity of expression* and 2) *the receiver's responsibility* in light of the work's undecidability.<sup>352</sup>

### **The artist's authenticity of expression in light of undecidability**

In chapter 4, the artist's ‘authenticity’ was interpreted as “to make the expression one's own”; to take some expression already found in the culture and somehow personalizing it, such that it gives no impression of being copied or second-hand (e.g., Pollock's drip technique was “his own” even though Max Ernst had drip-painted before him.) But could *authenticity of expression* be expanded in a relevant way for *the contemporary artwork* (which was glossed as a work that *does not* bear all the hallmarks of Modernism, such as separation from political and moral judgments), precisely by viewing it “through the lens” of the work's undecidability? To put it more crudely: In light of the work's undecidability, how can artistic practice be the artist's authentic expression?

---

<sup>352</sup> A composite list of what is tentatively kept thus far is as follows: PH 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6, and HBD 3, 4, 5 and 6.

In light of undecidability and the many things it entails,<sup>353</sup> the artist is *thrown back on herself*. By this idiom, what is meant is: 1) *her artistic practice is lawlike without a law, both agency and product; the work is not an effect of some external thing.* 2) *The artist takes responsibility for her expression; she really means what she intends to say; it is an expression of her genuine conviction.* These points need further explanation.

#### *Law-likeness without a law: agency and product*

On p. 21, law-likeness without a law was described as what the artist habitually does; it was simultaneously an agency and a product, “the oyster shell” secreted by artistic practice.<sup>354</sup> This still holds. But in light of undecidability we can now add the following thought: While the choices an artist makes depend on the kind of person she is, her historical situation—an enormous network of factors, lived experiences (a world)—as such, her practice follows external rules. But all the factors that determine what the artist is capable or incapable of are not the only things that determine the work. Undecidability enunciates *the artist’s own agency*; she is free to make significant choices; In some respects this is analogous to Kant’s “Copernican Turn” (see p. 2) because it is not what the world holds for the artist as a source of influence, things that cause her to do x, but what she brings to the work.

#### *‘Authenticity’ as taking responsibility for one’s artistic expression*

If the contemporary artwork has an undecidable character, it is seemingly in conflict with itself in a number of ways, including its relation to the artist: On the one hand, the artist is responsible for the authenticity of her expression, in the sense that she is morally responsible for the purpose she intends. On the other hand, she is not responsible for what receivers actually do with the work. The artist is led into a paradox because she cannot mean what she intends by her work; the phenomena can, in part, master her and not she it. As such, the work exercises the artist’s un-freedom (un-autonomy), and this causes some artists, with seemingly good conscience, to disclaim responsibility for the effects of their work. This renders unto undecidability a rather fixed-looking character!—and it lands the artist in an ambivalent position (precisely where avant-garde artists found it comfortable to be): Under cloak of undecidability, she can treat it as a foregone conclusion that all responsibility is fully laden on the receiver. In the same manoeuvre

---

<sup>353</sup> For instance, there is always a problem with distinguishing formal finality, it is never the case that the artwork is “in order”, i.e., that it fulfils a purpose according to normal conditions of everyday life; the artist aims for one sort of receiver but gets another, the artist cannot know what the effects of her work will be (witness the effects of *Fountain*); maybe for the artist to say what she really means, she would have to say something different, but that again would be a failure; when the artist tries to express what she means through the work, the work falls into paradox because symbolic form is always open to more than one interpretation; the artist does not have control over the *world* she sets up. In light of Wittgenstein, 1958, §87, we can imagine another rendition of a double character for artworks: Wittgenstein pointing to all the times we do understand, while Derrida points to all times we misunderstand.

<sup>354</sup> Woolf, 1994, pp. 549-550.

however, the artist is irresponsible, dishonest, unreliable and inauthentic; acting in “bad faith”.<sup>355</sup> It may be that accusing the artist of these vices is a result of viewing the work’s autonomous slope from the vista of its “dead” slope. I submit however, that this predicament makes viewing the work as undecidable more appealing than to view it as having a double character, because it emphasizes the artist as having no moral *carte blanche*. The artist would now be seen as just as responsible for her works, for what she intends to say, as for anything else she does in life. It presents the artist as an obligated being, living in community, having to be sensitive to fellow human beings, subject to the same law as everyone else. A part of artistic practice would be self-questioning: In what way am I trying to expand culture and aid the interest of social communication? But more than this: Am I my brother’s keeper? What about the weaker brother? Who is my neighbour? These are surely questions it behoves everyone to reflect on. To take undecidability seriously would cause the artist to be authentic by taking responsibility to *own up to the intentions she is trying to communicate, express genuine conviction over those intentions she is aware of, but admit the existence of other goals beyond her horizon that may obtain*. Take Serrano—when he claims he did not intend sacrilege with *Piss Christ*; he still does not exonerate himself or the work, for whatever else the artwork is, it is also sacrilegious.<sup>356</sup> By owning up to the multiple meanings, the artist takes responsibility for them. This also indicates that the artist, in the interest of authenticity of expression, must admit that her works can be hurtful. Irresponsibility arises when the artist responds with “Since I did not mean x, my expression cannot mean x, therefore I am absolved of accountability.” This is irresponsible because it does not admit the work’s poly-vocal character. To extrapolate from Toril Moi,<sup>357</sup> the artist has responsibility for the situation that arises whether she likes it or not, albeit not in an absolute sense, since undecidability forces her to make choices that will never be sufficient or absolute.

Yet while saying this, it is important to distinguish between the artist’s intentions as a source of meaning, and her intentions as a source of responsibility; the distinction reveals, on the one hand, that an artwork will always mean more than the artist intends, and such intentions may be irrelevant for the receiver’s interpretation. On the other hand, the artists’ intentions are not irrelevant for determining the artist’s responsibility for her work (Moi exemplifies the distinction by pointing to the way we judge premeditated murder as opposed to involuntary manslaughter). Evaluating the artist’s responsibility for her work *can* entail considering her intentions, still, oft times the artist does not understand what she is saying/expressing/intending (and this creates work for critics and historians).

---

<sup>355</sup> It will be recalled that ‘bad faith’, *mauvaise foi*, (Sartre) describes someone who views herself as being determined by a relatively fixed character and external circumstances beyond her control. Under the pretence of un-freedom, she disclaims responsibility with a good conscience.

<sup>356</sup> Here, clearly, the contemporary artwork is more than the aesthetic picture; it includes a concept and a title.

<sup>357</sup> Moi, 2003, p. 60-75. In this essay, Toril Moi reflects over Stanley Cavell’s “Must We Mean What We Say?” and the writings of Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.

But regardless, an attitude common in High Modernism's artworld is now illegitimate, for under the regime of undecidability, it is impossible to treat political and moral judgments as external and thus invalid. Through the lens of undecidability, the artist cannot claim, as was exemplified in the survey on the artist's moral responsibility mentioned in the introductory chapter, "A morally responsible artist is no artist."<sup>358</sup> or "An artist is morally responsible as a human being, not as an artist".<sup>359</sup> Under Modernism, artists gave interviews and some wrote their own catalogue texts, but today, broadcasting the artist's claimed intention is common, not least because of undecidability, even hanging up signs with the curator's intentions.<sup>360</sup> Institutions are now known to admit exercising bad taste; subdued admission of blame has been expressed.<sup>361</sup> What does not happen, which still is different from everyday life, is that artists usually do not admit that their works can be effective in a negative way,<sup>362</sup> nor do artists admit thwarting the interest of social communication. Why does this not generally happen in the artworld? This is also what it means to be authentic—to take responsibility for what we express.<sup>363</sup> Would such an admission be so detrimental to the artist's freedom of speech?

But would such an understanding of authenticity of expression entail that the contemporary artist should always give interviews, write essays in gallery catalogues, augment her visual or otherwise artwork with her stated intentions? Well, certainly if a problem in interpretation arises this would seem appropriate. But otherwise? Such a question cannot be answered in advance of a specific situation, since foregone conclusions are hard to come by with undecidability. *Authenticity of expression in light of undecidability* opens into questions having to do with differences between doing a thing inexactly, partially strangely, ineptly, badly—or not doing the thing at all<sup>364</sup> Hence undecidability addresses a further region of the artist's agency: It has been noted that there are many ways in which an action can go wrong, but it would be incorrect to suppose that the artist is obligated to take precautions to insure, whenever she undertakes to do anything, that *none* of these wrongs will come to pass; her obligation may be limited to avoiding

---

<sup>358</sup> Frigstad, p. 56. Quote from the author Anne B. Ragde.

<sup>359</sup> Frigstad, p. 57. Quote from Åsmund Torkildsen, professor of art theory and director of Drammens Museum.

<sup>360</sup> This is the case with the new thematically hung basis exhibition at the Oslo National Museum, Spring, 2005.

<sup>361</sup> I refer to the the Dror Feiler incident, January 18, 2004, where Sweden's ambassador to Israel, Robert Rydberg, was summoned to discuss the issue at the Foreign Ministry, agreed that the artwork "may very well be in bad taste (but) [is] not a justification of suicide bombers".

<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/01/18/world/main593870.shtml> In Norway, gallery owner Andreas Engelstad <http://norskisraelsenter.no/engl/antis/2004-02-20-antisemite-in-g-dsname.php> removed Chris Reddy's *Anti Semite in the Name of God* from an exhibition in 2004, out of respect for Holocaust survivors.

<http://norskisraelsenter.no/nor/antis/venst/2004-02-20-antisemit-i-guds-navn.php>

<sup>362</sup> Here I think of the *invasion of privacy* (Richard Billingham's family photos (1997)) and *exploiting the bereaved* (Marcus Harvey's *Myra* (1997)). The role of the curator/exhibition organiser in being an interface between, on the one hand the artist's right and freedom to make work, and on the other hand, the right of the public to be protected against offensive or harmful images, appears to be crucial. The curator creates an appropriate context for the presentation of the work to the public. She must understand the laws of indecency, etc., in order to strike the right balance.

<sup>363</sup> Socrates is a good instance of someone who was authentic; he drank the hemlock.

<sup>364</sup> It should once again be noted that Derrida's undecidability appears now as one slope of miscommunication, whereas Wittgenstein's "in order" points to the other slope, the "dead" artwork that successfully communicates.

doing something that is *highly likely* to result in some misfortune, to avoid carelessness, or to be especially careful where the action is dangerous or delicate. Still, such a sentiment sounds like a recipe for paralysing the artist's agency; it is hard to see how any avant-garde artworks could be made. Also, what if the intention is to offend, and that in being offended, the receiver is morally exercised and improved? Say she learns tolerance? But should the artist offend so that the receiver's grace will abound? Thankfully the artworld is accustomed to controversy, and it has proved to be a place that tolerates more of it than other institutions in society, witness Turner Prize exhibitions of recent years. Moreover, in late capitalist societies we have freedom of speech and expression, and there are laws defending our right to it, so this also bolsters the tolerance of the artworld. Still, even at this point in history, it may be argued that there are some subjects, which are too dangerous or at least unwise to deal with through radically undecidable means.<sup>365</sup>

Finally, when undecidability throws the artist back on herself, it is her responsibility to reflect over whom she wants to share her created *world* with—her contemporary receiver—for to intend one's work for a certain sort of receiver is also to choose the issues with which one deals and the goals one intends. It is to this cluster of issues—*how the receiver receives the undecidable work and the goal of undecidable contemporary artworks*—we now turn.

### **The receiver's responsibility in light of undecidability**

When confronted with an undecidable artwork, the receiver is also thrown back on herself: She must judge the work, but whatever judgment is made, it is not conclusive. Furthermore, because of undecidability, we cannot say before hand that the receiver *should* exercise proactive sympathy and attentiveness toward the work because other attitudes might also be useful and appropriate, depending on the situation. It is the receiver's choice to meet the work with anything from enthusiasm to indifference, disgust or silence. The work may be judged useless, it belongs to her freedom to reject it, but no matter what, she will always be responsible for her attitude; there is no excuse for bad faith.

Viewing the artwork through the lens of undecidability, the receiver is thrown back on herself. She must decide for herself to what the work will return. And if as she returns it to anything other than to itself, this at least belatedly puts the work in a relation with some sort of truth: The contemporary artist's aspirations for their work's purposefulness render them subject to the truth-as-correspondence discourses the instant the receiver tries to evaluate the artist's intentions. Truth in the sense of unconcealedness of being will always be the case with every artwork, since this is not exclusively either material or metaphysical unconcealedness. But what

---

<sup>365</sup> This view was expressed by a visitor to the (Stomach) Turner Prize exhibition in 2003: “[...] paedophilia is a subject so crammed full of dangers that it should not really be touched upon by art - a virus that should be contained rather than bringing it out into the open as his [Grayson Perry's] art does”. <http://www.spiked-online.com/Printable/00000006DFDA.htm>

about opening the work up to a pragmatic understanding of truth? A pragmatic view of truth would entail that the work is true if it brings about success—social communication.<sup>366</sup> If we recall the discussion of Gonzales-Torres' *Placebo*, receivers judge the work false with regard to truth-as-correspondence if they disagree with the artist's claims about it, i.e., they do not feel personally responsible for the deaths of AIDS sufferers. Nevertheless, this artwork has proved to be successful in communicating the common humanity of AIDS sufferers and as such, it can be said to be true in a pragmatic sense. Undecidable artworks cause the responsibility to fall back upon the receiver, to decide what sort of truth—be it correspondence, Heideggarian or pragmatic—is at stake, and to make a fallible decision in light of the situation at hand.

This situation moves the focus from the personal responsibility of individual receivers to public opinion on the whole. It is the case that in democratic societies, public opinion behaves as a sort of courtroom where artists, curators, gallery directors and other members of the art institution are called to account for their choices, “cross-examined” as it were. It seems right that public opinion is “the courtroom” because, if artists and museums receive taxpayer-funding, this presupposes that those involved in the art institution in some way or another *contribute to the good of society*, directly or indirectly; it means that *the purpose of artworks is to contribute to the good of humanity*. It may be argued that such a view conflicts with the undecidable artwork, the receiver cannot say definitively what the purpose of the work is. Yet if we look at how contemporary artworks are in fact used (this was addressed in the introductory chapter), it certainly seems they are used in a way that is an embroidering up CJ §44:306, where Kant states that beautiful art should “*advance the culture of mental powers in the interest of social communication*”. The contemporary artwork is instrumental, it would fall in line with Heidegger's *world*, Blanchot's “dead” art, the sort of work that is “man's greatest hope, his only hope of being man”,<sup>367</sup> and, as we saw in chapters 4 and 5, it is a sort of artwork which, while not necessarily always enmeshed in the truth-as-correspondence discourse, is the basis for it.

How can the contemporary artwork achieve its goal with regard to receivers? Gavin Jantjes, former director of the Hennie Onstad Senter for Art puts it thus: The work achieves its goals through confronting the receiver's consciousness—say by creating visions of how the society should ideally be.<sup>368</sup> To Jantjes' notion could be added that the artist can even present a dystopi—such visions set in motion a questioning of society, intellectual discussions and debate about what kind of world we want to live in. We become aware of our surroundings, of our own humanity

---

<sup>366</sup> I base this on the explication of the pragmatic understanding of *truth* in Mauthner, Thomas, *Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*, London, 1996, p. p. 573.

<sup>367</sup> Blanchot, 1995, p. 336-337: “There is being—that is to say, a logical and expressible truth—and there is a world, because we can destroy things and suspend existence. This is why we can say that there is being because there is nothingness; death is man's possibility, his chance, it is through death that the future of a finished world is still there for us; death is man's greatest hope, his only hope of being man.”

<sup>368</sup> Jantjes, pp. 97-109.

and that of others. This in turn may undermine those value systems that thwart human progress. All this contributes to our gaining greater insight, and the culture expands. Meanwhile, this exposes a great difference between the Kantian *sensus communis* and the sort of community the undecidable contemporary artwork engenders: For Kant, it was not possible to discuss artworks, we must all just agree; for contemporary art, discussion is essential, but it is not necessary to agree. Still, both the Kantian and contemporary positions are united in the view that the goal for art is nevertheless not determinate; we do not know how the society will change via the art-discourse, culture will expand, but it is unclear what will in fact transpire.

### A THIRD HYBRID

Based on the discussions in chapters 4, 5 and thus far in 6, I hazard to suggest that the contemporary artwork has moments of autonomy as follows: 1) *the work has an undecidable character,<sup>369</sup> which favours neither its metaphysical nor physical aspects.* 2) *The work is probably always related to truth in a Heideggarian sense, since it must necessarily have aspects of earth and world; however, it may or may not be related to truth-as-correspondence, or to truth in a pragmatic sense. It is up to the receiver to judge.* 3) *The work's autonomy is related to political decision.* 4) *With regard to the artist, the work's undecidability throws the artist back on herself: she is responsible for the authenticity of her expression and sincere in her intentions for the work, even though her intentions may fail. There is no excuse for an artist's bad faith.* 5) *Artistic practice is, at least in part, akin to law-likeness without a law.* 6) *The undecidable artwork throws the receiver back on herself; it is the receiver's choice to meet the work with anything from enthusiasm to indifference, disgust or silence. She may find the work useless, it belongs to her freedom to reject it, but regardless, she will always be responsible for her attitude towards it. There is no excuse for the receiver exercising bad faith.*

I used the verb “to hazard” in the above paragraph’s first sentence. This is because I am not convinced of the adequacy of this list; I could easily have come up with a different list. The whole project of constructing a new understanding of autonomy for today’s art, built up gradually through 3 chapters—crashes down to, at best, partial autonomy: partly undecidable, partly separate from truth-as-correspondence, partly law-like without law, and it is fully enmeshed in moral judgments. Still, it seems wise to construct a sober and careful list that does not make large claims about the work’s independence, for what remains of it is still significant.

In the mean time, another defeatist thought rears up: What if the project [of constructing a conception of ‘autonomous artwork’ that would be justifiable for contemporary artworks] is obsolete? Lambert Zuidervaart<sup>370</sup> suggests that in Western-democratic-capitalist societies, we do

---

<sup>369</sup> For a review of what undecidability entails, see pp. 81-100; 104 offers a short summary.

<sup>370</sup> Zuidervaart, 1990, pp. 61-77.

not need the artwork to be autonomous in order to challenge the status quo and to disclose human aspirations. Adorno thought artworks needed to be autonomous for just this task, but it is hard to imagine why this would have to be so today. Perhaps relative independence/autonomy would allow the work to present its challenge and disclosure in a more concentrated and sophisticated way, but the self-referential tendency of autonomous artworks could just as easily prevent this challenge and disclosure.<sup>371</sup> Perhaps some degree of autonomy helps in this task, but to claim that autonomy is a precondition for the subsequent truth discourse? Could not an artwork on the side of the world—a dead artwork—also challenge the status quo, even in ways more effective than those available to autonomous works? And could it not also disclose human aspirations and aid social communication? Non-autonomous artworks can be the point of origin for discussions that deal in truth-as-correspondence too. They can make strange, disorient us, such that we begin to see the everyday mundane things in fresh ways. What comes immediately to mind is Reinhard Haverkamp's *Norge 2000* [Illustration 22a and 22b]; with elegance and simplicity, it uses well-known, “dead” symbols to make strange the everyday. What about the *Black Madonna of Poland* [Illustration 23] under the Communist's regime? This clearly non-autonomous icon was stages as a device to subvert un-freedom. So what do we need ‘the autonomous artwork’ for?

The autonomist advocate rallies: First of all, we need to keep it because it describes aspects of our actual experience with artworks. For example, even the new basis exhibition at the National Museum in Oslo, designed to reveal the artwork as non-autonomous, fails in its goal; works placed in supposedly highly explicit contexts are still ambiguous.<sup>372</sup> Secondly, the artist needs ‘the autonomous artwork’ in the contemporary artworld in order to avoid the fate of the poet in Plato's *Republic X*: being evicted from political life. Autonomy understood along Kantian lines already was an eviction from political life, so if the expression ‘autonomous artwork’ can be used in the effort to safeguard freedom for contemporary political artworks, it needs to be re-construed in such a way that artistic knowing can be practical (moral) knowing and political practice while still maintaining the work's autonomy. This can be achieved by understanding the work's autonomy as related to the undecidable, possibly double character. Thirdly, ‘autonomous artwork’ is worth keeping because it helps maintain an important distinction between domains in our culture. Not everything needs to be subsumed under

---

<sup>371</sup> Zuiderwaart, 1990, p. 71.

<sup>372</sup> The curators assume that the work is non-autonomous in the sense that, in order to be meaningful, something external must provide a context for interpretation: “*I museet framstår det enkelte kunstverket som løsrevet fra sin opprinnelige, autentiske sammenheng. I monteringen har vi derfor søkt å tydeliggjøre hvordan vi som arbeider i museer går inn og kompenserer for dette meningsstapet ved å produsere nye forståelsesrammer.*” (“In the museum, individual artworks are presented as divorced from their original, authentic context. In mounting the exhibition, we have therefore tried to be explicit about how we who work in the museum go in and compensate for this loss of meaning by producing new contexts for understanding.”) (My translation) (*Kunst I Guidebok*, Oslo: Nasjonalmuseet for Kunst, Arkitektur og Design, 2005, pp. 4-5.) But even though the curators subsume Harriet Backer's *Blue Interior* (1883) under the rubric ‘Modern Life’ (pp. 44-45), the picture seems to have less to do with modern life and more to do with solving formal painterly problems: composition, depiction of depth and atmosphere, colour harmony, light-shadow contrasts. And for today's viewer, it is a far cry from ‘modern life’.

scientific rationality (*formålsrasjonaliteten*).<sup>373</sup> Particularly for human beings, we do not want to have to always be instrumental in order to justify our existence. ‘Autonomous artwork’ is worth keeping because it is a symbol of just this human freedom. Fourthly, ‘the autonomous artwork’ is a problematic promise—a partly empty promise (‘The autonomous artwork’ harkens to a utopian desire to return to a time without concepts. We want to look at artworks with wondering innocent eyes, all while, it was concepts that gave us freedom from being determined by nature<sup>374</sup>) but for all its emptiness, powerful—of freedom for us all. It gives aesthetic expression to visions, possibly utopian, of freedoms we could have. Even in democracies, groups considered by the mainstream as dangerous experience their freedom of speech is curtailed—say Marxists in the USA. When we lack freedom of expression, artworks are stages as having the freedom to speak in our behalf.

Seen in this light, the ‘autonomous artwork’—the ultimate description an artwork under Modernism could achieve—may be a poseur, but it may be a necessary one. For just as the independence for individuals and societies has increasingly pronounced itself throughout the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries, the artwork’s freedom remains an emblem of that freedom the individual seeks. In Kantian terms, it is a regulative idea, something we cannot confirm the existence of, but we postulate it in order to subvert oppressive economies, political or otherwise. The notion confronts us, its maker. It inquires, asking: *How independent are you?*

To this, the dissenter replies: On the illusion of freedom, un-freedom freely develops.

# 7

## CONCLUSION

What was a pressing issue in the prologue—my ignorance about critical issues related to the artwork’s status—might have just been a symptom of going to art school in a backwater of Europe, a school drenched in unreflected Modernism. But if art really were in a distinct domain from cognitions and morally obligated judgments, if artistic practice was a matter of primarily

---

<sup>373</sup> See pp. 33, 34, and 54.

<sup>374</sup> Thanks to Deirdre C. P. Smith for this thought.

tacit knowledge, this would support the view that artists need not reflect over their works, except with regard to formal and technical concerns. In practice however, we students reflected haphazardly over notions we absorbed from theories projected through the wider culture.<sup>375</sup>

Yet ‘the autonomous artwork’ is not just a pressing problem for ignorant artists. The introduction presented today’s predicament: Contemporary artworks do not behave like traditional Modern works. They are for purposes, which generally fall in under the purposes of avant-garde works: to make strange, to engender reflection, to challenge. And like works from earlier ages, contemporary artworks are imaginative ways of examining issues and asking questions about how we want to live, what kind of society we want to create. As such, they are tightly connected with cognitions and moral concerns—the two judgments Kant tried to separate the aesthetic field from. So how can we call such works autonomous? The introduction presented the problem of the multitude of disparate conceptions of ‘autonomous artwork’ used to defend or justify artworks from onslaught. Hence the *problemstilling*: Was it possible to lay out, discuss and reflect over the various conceptions of ‘autonomous artwork’, and construct a revitalized synthesis, which would be justifiable for contemporary artworks? Moreover, could the touted double character of artworks (the paradoxical autonomy and instrumentality) be coherent? In this errand, chapter 2 looked at *nomos*, *auto*, ‘autonomous’ and its closely related cognates. We saw what happens inadvertently when ‘autonomous’ is conjoined with ‘artwork’ came to light: the ideologically Romantic commitments, particularly the work’s honorary personhood, its metaphysical subject status. Chapter 3 accounted for Kant’s *judgment of taste*; it set out, as succinctly as possible, the numerous “building blocks” with which manifold construals of autonomy have been wrought. At least fifteen “building blocks” were identified.

Chapter 4 was sort of like a muddle through a swamp of alternatives. The goal was not to discover the one correct interpretation of ‘autonomy’ for contemporary artworks, but to survey the field, discuss the various positions, and then construct a list of those moments of Kant’s “building blocks” and of other thinkers’ conceptions that remain viable for contemporary artworks. Like Goldylocks tasting different bowls of porridge, fault was found with most all ways ‘autonomous artwork’ was concocted. The resulting hybrid of provisional moments of autonomy was, first of all, related to the artists’ authenticity of expression. From thence on, only partial autonomy obtained (see summary p. 57-61). Although the dissenter found fault with almost all the understandings of the work’s autonomy, from a pragmatic perspective, most of these can still be useful ways of appreciating artworks.

---

<sup>375</sup> In 1998, just prior to Kunsthandverkskolen merging with the Art Academy, a newly hired art-history teacher started addressing art-theoretical issues in her lectures. My experience is that artists do not read much. We tend to create according to intuition rather than with consciously cultivated aesthetic-philosophical reflections, theory and a sense of history. I do not see this as a problem when artworks are confined to an institutional setting. It becomes a problem when artworks are directly effective outside the institution, as was exemplified in the introduction.

Chapter 5 accounted for and discussed the thoughts of Heidegger, Blanchot and Derrida on the question of the work's autonomy. Heidegger's artwork, heavily informed by the conceptual pair of *earth* and *world*, and their unity—the workly character— was understood as both instrumental and autonomous. The workly character is described in relation to *the work's self-subsistence*, the artist is like a conduit for *the work's seeming self-creation*, the earth's hiding simultaneously as it reveals (an innovation in the history of describing the artwork's autonomy), renders *the work's unknowability*. The workly character of the artwork was available to the preserver in the act of preserving, in the act of taking part in the event of truth, but as soon as the preserver tried to treat it as an object of study, it skirted away. These descriptions of the artwork's autonomy did not seem to undermine themselves, but they were highly ambiguous.

Moving the focus to Blanchot's *dead* and *autonomous* slope of the artwork, the striking contrasts of the two slopes was useful to reflect over and resolve indecision about the claimed ontological priority of aesthetic features as grounds for autonomy. Blanchot's construal suffered a number of inconsistencies, intractable problems in imagining how it could be the case (e.g., the zombified receiver and the constant vacillation between the two slopes). The thought struck that *ontological priority* is just not a relevant issue for contemporary artworks; if a work is valued for everything but its material and formal features, then why should these suddenly become important when trying to defend it? Meanwhile, it was reflected that both Heidegger and Blanchot were “on the road” to *undecidability*, given that their conceptions of the artwork were highly ambiguous in every respect, yet they linger in ‘double character’ terminology.

Derrida's artwork was autonomous in three ways: first, the expression meant that the work was *undecideable in form*, secondly, it referred to *the artwork's non-restitution to any referent other than itself*, and thirdly, *non-restitution to a purpose/undecidability of purpose*. But there was a debilitating problem with these so-called successful failures: They could not be conclusively demonstrated. Still, the scepticism engendered was hopeful, even religious, and required the judge to do a “close reading” and to judge regardless inconclusiveness. Derrida's scepticism is radical because it does not return the artwork to anything other than itself. The void *ergon* preserves the artwork being put in a domain between scientific knowledge on the one hand, and ethics, magic and religion on the other, and these domain has no clear borders. It is a threshold where humans allow their creative work to be meaningful. Meanwhile, it offers a golden road between diverse pitfalls such as positivism, the self-undermining double character and radical anything-goes relativism.

In Chapter 6, a third hybrid was conceived, with partial autonomy for the work in each instance: 1) The undecidable character (which favours neither its metaphysical nor physical aspects). 2) It is always related to truth in Heidegger's sense, since it must necessarily have aspects of earth and world about it, however, it may or may not be related to truth-as-

correspondence, or to truth in a pragmatic sense—3) The work’s autonomy is related to political (stipulated) decision. 4) In relation to the artist, the work’s undecidability throws the artist back on herself: she is responsible for the authenticity and sincerity of her expression and intentions, even though they may fail, both in creation and reception. 5) Artistic practice which results in the work is, at least in part, akin to law-likeness without a law. 6) The undecidable artwork “throws the receiver back” on herself; it is the receiver’s choice to meet the work with anything from enthusiasm to indifference, disgust or silence. She may find the work useless, it belongs to her freedom to reject it, but regardless, she will always be responsible for her attitude towards it, bad faith is dis-allowed. The receiver judges what the work will be returned to, but never conclusively.

This hybrid list of autonomy for the artwork is partial, but it still is significant.

The meaning of the expression ‘autonomous artwork’ has been stretched in order to be shrunk. This deepens, renews and articulates our understanding of artworks. It is a bit of language that contains a culture and changes with the changes of that culture. By searching out the expression ‘autonomous artwork’, the artworld is coaxed away from unreflected assumptions and from grandiose and utopian visions of absolute freedom for art. Artworld professionals are coaxed away from the irresponsibility of foregone conclusions about truth and morals. The history and theory behind this expression, the philosophical reflection around it, are so immense that it seems to tell us something about the way we are, namely, that we have a hankering—perhaps a predisposition—for freedom of expression, moral independence, intellectual independence and independent agency.



## Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodore, *Aesthetic Theory*, (Robert Hullot-Kentor, translator), London: Athlone Press, 1997. (*Art, Society and Aesthetics*, pp. 1-14; *Enigma* pp. 124-125; *Society* pp. 225-259; *The Artwork as Monad* pp. 179-181; *Autonomy and Heteronomy* pp. 252-253.)
- Adorno, Theodore and Horkheimer, Max, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford Univ. Press, 2002. Transcribed by Andy Blunden for Internet, 1998.  
<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/adorno.htm>
- Arrhenius, Sara, "The art of Making a Scene in a Room which is No Longer There",  
<http://www.anthology-of-art.net/generatio/02/arrh.html> (2 pages).
- Beardsley, Monroe, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present: A Short History*, New York: Macmillan Co. 1966. Ch. 7-8, pp. 140-206.
- Beardsley, Monroe, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981, pp. 1-65.
- Becker, Howard S., "Artworld", in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, Kelly (ed.), vol. 1, 1998, p. 148.
- Blanchot, Maurice, "Literature and the Right to Death", in *Work of Fire*, (translator Charlotte Mandell), Stanford, Ca: Stanford University Press, 1995. pp. 300-344.
- Bowie, Andrew, "Aesthetic Autonomy", in *A Companion to Aesthetics*, Cooper, David (editor), Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.
- Burgin, Victor, "Socialist Formalism", *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Harrison, Charles and Wood, Paul (ed.), Oxford: Blackwells, 1995, p. 913.
- Booth, Wayne C. "Why Banning Ethical Criticism is a Serious Mistake", *Philosophy and Literature* – Vol. 22, No. 2, (October 1998), The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 366-393.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Richard Nice, translator, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Bernstein, J. M., *The Fate of Art*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993. (Chapters on Kant, Heidegger and Derrida plus introduction.)
- Carroll, Noël, *Philosophy of Art*, London: Routledge, 1999.
- Cheetham, Mark A., "Kant and Art History", *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, Kelly, Michael (ed.), Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998, Vol. 3, p. 47-52.
- Christiansen, Otto M., "Bourdieu's kunstsyn: en kritisk presentasjon av distinction, med utgangspunkt i Bourdieus kritikk av Kant" in *Om kunst, kunstinstitusjon og kunstforståelse*, Dag Sveen red.), Oslo: Pax, 1995, pp. 117-141.
- Crimp, Douglas, *On the Museum's Ruins*, (with photographs by Louise Lawler), Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993.
- Derrida, Jacques, *On Grammatology*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (trans.), Baltimore Md.: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1977.

Derrida, Jacques, *Margins of Philosophy*, (trans. Alan Bass), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Derrida, Jacques, *The Truth in Painting*, London: University of Chicago Press, 1987. (Chapters “Passpartout”, “Parergon”, “Restitutions”.)

de Duve Thierry, *Kant after Duchamp*, Cambridge Mass: October Books, MIT Press, 1998. (From introduction — “The Richard Mutt Case; Kant After Duchamp — Archaeology of Pure Modernism.”)

Daatland, Line, ”Tårnsallen Text for Public”, (A. Moi trans.), Bergen: Bergen Kunstmuseum, Spring, 2005.

Fried, Michael, “Art and Objecthood”; *Art in Theory: 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford: Blackwells, 1992, pp. 822-834.

Frigstad, Gard Olav (ed.), ”Enquête: A survey on Art”, *Norwegian Art yearbook 2003*, Oslo: Forlaget Bonytt, pp.37-62.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg, “Art and Imitation”, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1966, pp. 92-104.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Truth and Method*, second edition, (Weinsheimer and Marshall translators), London: Sheed and Ward, 1989.

Goodman, Nelson, “Kunst og Erkendelse”, in *Aestetiske teorier: En antologi ved Jørgen Dehs*, Odense Universitetsforlag, 1984, pp.107-129.

Gould, Carol, “Arthur Clive Howard Bell” *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, Kelly, Michael (ed.), Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998, Vol. I, p. 251-253.

Greenberg, Clement, “Modernist Painting”, *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (ed.), Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, pp. 754-760.

Guyer, Paul, “Kant: Survey of Thought”, *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, Kelly, Michael (ed.), Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998, Vol. 3, p. 27-30.

Haase, Ullrich and Large, William *Routledge Critical Thinkers: Essential guides for literary studies: Maurice Blanchot*, London: Routledge, 2001.

Haskins, Casey, “Kant and the Autonomy of Art”, in *The Journal of aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 47:1, Winter, 1989, pp. 43-54.

Haskins, Casey “Paradoxes of Autonomy; or, Why Won’t the Problem of Artistic Justification Go Away?” in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58:1, Winter 2000, p. 1-22.

Heidegger, Martin, “The Origin of a Work of Art”, in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger*, Hofstadter, Albert and Kuhns, Richard (editors), London: University of Chicago Press, 1964, pp. 650-703.

Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, (Joan Stambaugh, translator), Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1996.

- Hayter, Stanley W. *New Ways of Gravure*, London: Oxford University Press, 1947/1966/1982.
- Jantjes, Gavin, "Ansvarlighetens Kunst", in *Samtiden*, Knut Olav Åmås (ed.), Vol. 4, 2003, Oslo, pp. 97-109.
- Judd, Donald, "Specific Objects"; Morris, Robert "'Notes on Sculpture 1-3'" in *Art in Theory: 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford: Blackwells, 1992, pp. 809-822.
- Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Judgement*, §1-60, (translator Werner S. Pluhar), Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1987. (Referred to as "CJ")
- Kemal, Salim, "Kant on Beauty", *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, Kelly, Michael (ed.), Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998, Vol. 3, p. 31-37.
- Kittang, Atle, "Til forsvar for autonomiestetikken – rett forstått", *Samtiden*, Vol. 1, 2004, Knut Olav Åmås (ed.), Oslo, p. 139-149.
- Kittang, Atle, "For Eller Imot Tolking", in *Sju Artiklar om Litteraturvitskap*, Oslo, Gyldendal, 2001, pp. 35-53.
- Kneller, Jane, "Disinterestedness", in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, Kelly, Michael (ed.), Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998, Vol. 2, pp. 59-64.
- "Jeff Koons: Retrospective", Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo, 2004.
- Kraus, Roselind E., *The Optical Unconscious*, Cambridge, Mass: October/MIT Press, 1994.
- Kraus, Rosalind, "Sculpture in the Expanding Field" in Preziosi, Donald (ed.) *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 281-298.
- Lyas, Colin Al, "Benedetto Croce" in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, Kelly, Michael (ed.), Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998vol. I p. 474-476.
- Liddell, George Henry and Scott, Robert, *A Greek-English Lexicon*  
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?layout.reflang=greek;layout.refdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057;layout.reflookup=au%29tonomous;layout.refcit=;doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3D%2317832> <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0057%3Aentry%3D%2371006>
- Loesberg, Johathan, *Aestheticism and Deconstruction: Pater, Derrida, and De Man*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991. Chapter: "What is art for art's sake and how could it be anything else?" 41 pages.
- Lucy, Niall, *A Derrida Dictionary*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004.
- Makkreel, Rudolf, "Kant and Hermeneutics", *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, Kelly, Michael (ed.), Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998, Vol. 3, p. 52-55.
- Matisse, Henri, "Notes of a Painter, 1908" in Flam, Jack D. *Matisse On Art*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1973, pp. 32-40.
- Moi, Toril, "Å mene det vi sier: Om de intellektuelles ansvar", in *Samtiden*, Knut Olav Åmås (ed.), Vol. 1, 2003, p. 60-75.

Morris, Robert “Notes on Sculpture 1-3” in *Art in Theory: 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford: Blackwells, 1992, pp. 813-822.

Mukařovský, Jan, “Intentionalitet og ikke-intensjonalitet i kunsten” in Kittang (ed.) *Moderne litteraturteori: En antologi*, Oslo: 1991, (first published in 1943), (Jo Eggen, Norwegian Trans.).

Nietzsche, Friedrich, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (GM), Essay III “What Do Ascetic Ideals Mean?” §6. <http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/Nietzsche/genealogy3.htm>

Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, London: Penguin, 1969.

Norris, Christopher, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, (Revised Edition), London: Routledge, 2000.

Nussbaum, Martha Craven "Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism", *Philosophy and Literature* – Vol. 22, No. 2, (October 1998), The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 343-365.

Olsen, Stein Haugom, “Literary Aesthetics and Literary Practice”, in *The End of Literary Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. pp. 1-19.

Pater, Walter, Conclusion to “The Renaissance” in *Art in Theory 1815-1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Harrison, Charles (ed.), Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, pp.829-830.

Plato, “Ion”, in *Plato: Complete Works*, John M. Cooper, ed., Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997.

“*Politicizing Puberty: The zoning of child Sexuality in Art, advertising and the American household*” debate with Michael Medved Stephen Schiff, Naomi Wolf, Judith Levine, James Kincaid. <http://www.nerve.com/dispatches/voicebox/puberty/main.asp#Question1>

Pollock, Jackson, “Interview with William Wright” (1950), in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An anthology of Changing Ideas*, (Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (editors), Oxford: Blackwell, 1992. pp. 574-578.

Posner, Richard A. "Against Ethical Criticism" *Philosophy and Literature* – Vol. 21, no. 1, (April 1997), The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 1-27.

Posner, Richard A. "Against Ethical Criticism: Part Two" *Philosophy and Literature* – Vol. 22, no.2, (April 1997), The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 394-409.

Rorty, Richard, *The Decline of Redemptive Truth and the rise of Literary Culture*, 2000, <http://onegoodmove.org/1gm/1gmarchive/000517.html>

Sandberg, Lotte, “Museet for samtidskunst: Terskelen som ble tråkket ned”, *Samtiden*, (Knut Olav Åmås (ed.) Vol. 3, 2003, pp. 22-32.

Saunders, Frances Stonor, *Who Paid the Piper?* London: Granta Books, 1999.

Schapiro, Meyer, “The Still Life as a Personal Object—A Note on Heidegger and van Gogh” in Preziosi, Donald (ed.), *The art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 427-431.

- Sjklovskij, Victor, "Kunsten som et system av virkemidler" (Literature as Deixis), in Eide, Kittang and Aarseth (editors): *Teorier om diktekunsten*, Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1970.
- Stolnitz, Jerome, "On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness'", in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20.2 (Winter 1961), pp. 131-143.
- Sveen, Dag, "Kunstforståelse og kunstinstitusjon—et historisk perspektiv" in *Om Kunst, kunstinstitusjon og kunstforståelse*, Dag Sveen (editor), Oslo, Pax Forlag, 1995, pp. 9-115.
- Wallenstein, Sven-Olov, "Etterord" in *Kunstverkets Ursprung*, Stockholm: Bodförlaget Daidalos, 2001.
- Weitz, Morris, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 15, September 1956, pp. 27-35.
- Westphal, Kenneth R. "Kant on the Sublime", *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, Kelly, Michael (ed.), Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998, Vol. 3, p.37-41.
- Whistler, James McNeill, "The Ten O'clock Lecture", in *Art in Theory: 1815-1900, An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Harrison, Wood and Gaiger (eds.), Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, pp. 838-847.
- Wilde, Oscar, "Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray" in *Art in Theory: 1815-1900, An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Harrison, Wood and Gaiger (eds.), Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, pp. 861-862.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1958.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London: Routledge, 1999.
- Woolf, Virginia, "An Introduction to Mrs. Dalloway", in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. IV, Andrew McNeillie (ed.), London: Hogarth Press, 1994, pp. 549-550.
- Zöller, Günter, "History of Kantian Aesthetics", *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, Kelly, Michael (ed.), Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998, Vol. 3, pp. 44-47.
- Zuidervaart, Lambert, "The Social Significance of Autonomous Art: Adorno and Bürger", in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48:1, Winter 1990, pp. 61-77.
- Østerberg, Dag, "Kunsten som social institusjon og social konstruksjon: en begrepsavklaring" in *Om Kunst, kunstinstitusjon og kunstforståelse*, Dag Sveen (editor), Oslo, Pax Forlag, 1995, p. 143-160.
- Øverenget, Einar and Mathisen, Steinar, "Etterord" in Heidegger, Martin, *Kunstverkets Opprinnelse*, Oslo: Pax Forlag, 2000.
- Wellmer, Albrecht, "Truth, Semblance, Reconciliation: Adorno's Aesthetic Redemption of Modernity", in *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics and Postmodernism*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993. pp.1-