



Owen Hulatt, ed. *Aesthetic and Artistic Autonomy*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013, viii + 243 pp. ISBN 978-1-4411-9652-1

During the last two decades, considerable effort has been made to reassess and partly rehabilitate the modern conception of art as an autonomous sphere inherently tied with aesthetics. This brings the notions of aesthetics and autonomy back into the game, after they had been vastly criticized, not to say made taboo, by the artistic practices and much of the theory of the second half of the twentieth century.

Efforts to rediscover aesthetics¹ either offer a new interpretation of the post-war art movements, such as pop art, Fluxus, the happening, minimal art, and conceptual art, which allows one to include them in the aesthetic conception of art,² or revise the notion of 'aesthetic' itself so that it can embrace anti-aesthetic art too.³ These debates also include rethinking the question of the autonomy and the heteronomy of art⁴ as well as some efforts to read contemporary art in an Adornian vein.⁵ The collection under review, *Aesthetic and Artistic Autonomy*, continues in this tendency to rehabilitate the notions connected with the modern conception of art, explicitly focusing on questions of the autonomy and the heteronomy of aesthetic judgements and artistic practice.

Autonomy is a central concept that has been forging modern aesthetic thought since its origin in the eighteenth century. Its contours are blurred, however, due to the diversity of contexts in which it appears. It is used to signify a wide range of meanings, from differentiating the social sphere of art from the domains of science and morality to the particularity of the aesthetic experience. Amidst this confusion, the book under review provides useful tools for clarifying the notion of autonomy in the wide range of its possible uses. The collection serves as an introduction to the historical development of this concept as well as to the current perspectives of the field. The approaches it discusses are

¹ See, for example, Francis Halsall, Julia Jansen, and Tony O'Connor, eds., *Rediscovering Aesthetics: Transdisciplinary Voices from Art History, Philosophy, and Art Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

² Thierry de Duve, 'Kant's "Free Play" in the Light of Minimal Art', in *Rediscovering Aesthetics: Transdisciplinary Voices from Art History, Philosophy, and Art Practice*, ed. Francis Halsall, Julia Jansen, and Tony O'Connor (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 87–100; Diarmuid Costello, 'Greenberg's Kant and the Fate of Aesthetics in Contemporary Art Theory', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65 (2007): 217–28.

³ Jacques Rancière, 'The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy', *New Left Review* 42 (2002): 133–51.

⁴ Ibid.; Jason Gaiger, 'Dismantling the Frame: Site-Specific Art and Aesthetic Autonomy', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 49 (2009): 43–58.

⁵ Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013).



heterogeneous both regarding their position on the question of the autonomy and heteronomy of the aesthetic and art, and regarding the methodological standpoints they represent.

In his introduction, the editor of the volume, Owen Hulatt, briefly outlines the central role that the concept of autonomy plays in the study of art. He acquaints the reader with the origin and metamorphoses of this problem in the history of aesthetics, and argues for distinguishing between aesthetic and artistic autonomy. He also offers an interpretation of the polemical standpoints regarding these concepts, which are taken by the two currents into which philosophy split during the twentieth century – the analytic and the continental tradition. According to Hulatt, while the former primarily focuses on questions of aesthetic judgement, the latter is more concerned with artistic practice; whereas in the analytic tradition the conviction about art's autonomy prevails, in continental thinking we more often encounter the theory of the heteronomy of art. It seems, however, that Hulatt intends to go beyond this traditional distinction in the conception of the volume, since most of the contributors aim at convergence between the two approaches.

Hulatt also draws a clear line between aesthetics and the philosophy of art as two distinct disciplines, with the former addressing aesthetic judgements and the latter oriented towards artistic practice. This opposition seems problematic, because the continental tradition uses the term aesthetics in a wider sense so that it includes the philosophy of art, while the idea of the 'philosophy of art' as a discipline independent of the notion of aesthetics seems to be applicable to the current in the analytic tradition which assumes that aesthetic considerations are irrelevant to the essence of art.⁶

The gap between the analytic and the continental approaches is explicitly bridged by the author of the first chapter of the volume, Paul Crowther. He calls his position 'a post-analytic phenomenology' (p. 13), explaining that as a putative phenomenologist, he focuses primarily on the artwork and its making, whereas as an analytically minded philosopher, he tries to present his arguments rigorously and clearly. In his contribution, he argues for the autonomous, universal meaning of art, anchored in the so-called protosymbolic dimension that is supposed to be more basic than the iconographic and iconological dimensions tied to particular social contexts. On the basis of this assumption, Crowther declares that the contextual aspects of a work are irrelevant to its art status, and he dismisses institutional, feminist, or postcolonial positions, which accent

⁶ See, for example, George Dickie, 'The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (1964): 56–65; Noël Carroll, *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999).

the context of the reception of artworks, as expressions of 'Western consumerism' (p. 27).

Robert Stecker, in the second chapter, stays firmly within the boundaries of the analytic approach. He offers a suggestively simple scheme of the relationship between aesthetic and artistic autonomy, in which the first is affirmed and the second rejected. Stecker's point of departure is a concept of autonomy understood as the irreducibility of a value to other types of values. While we are able to appreciate aesthetic values for their own sake and not as 'defined by, derived from, or [as] a function of, other values' (p. 32), the same does not hold for artistic values. According to Stecker, the latter are always to some degree dependent on other values, including aesthetic value (though its presence is not necessary for something to be an artwork).

With Peter Lamarque's contribution, we move from the realm of abstract speculation about values towards an approach that uses an example of an individual artwork to show how aesthetic and artistic values come into being and are transformed historically. Lamarque examines changes in the appreciation of Jacques-Louis David's painting *The Death of Marat* over time, and demonstrates that although the emotions and political commitments that determined the reception of the work at the time of its creation fade away with time, the artist's formal, technical decisions become more visible, which allows us to appreciate the work for its own sake, independently of our attitude to depicted events or persons. Thus, even if the identity of the artwork is partly tied to the particular historical circumstances of its origin, it still has a sort of autonomous value.

Jason Gaiger, in his chapter in the volume, points to the political background of the concept of autonomy and considers further possible gains of moral and political thinking for the study of art. He turns to certain elements of this theoretical field, such as Isaiah Berlin's famous distinction between negative and positive freedom or the discussion about the notion of 'value conflict', and he applies them to the sphere of art. In this way, he opposes both the formalist account of the history of modern art and Arthur Danto's construction of pluralistic 'post-historical' art as freed from the burden of history, and instead defends the idea that value conflict has to be accepted as an irreducible 'intrinsic feature of contemporary art practice' (p. 83).

Annelies Monseré deals with problematic consequences of the formalist solution to the problem of so-called non-Western art. On the one hand, she argues that it was precisely the reduction of the essence of art to formal properties of a work, which allowed non-Western artefacts to be accepted as art, but, on the other hand, this gesture simultaneously subordinated them to the modern

Western understanding of art, depriving them of original functions (for example, in ritual). For these reasons, Monseré believes that the rejection of the formalist conception of art, which she calls 'aesthetic autonomy' (thus, somewhat arbitrarily, narrowing the meaning of the term), has been 'necessary and welcome' (p. 102).

The declared aim of Casey Haskins's chapter is to oppose the simplified view that recent art theory is divided into two hostile camps, one of which considers art to be autonomous and universally valuable; the other denies this idea in favour of different accounts of art's dependence on external influences. Haskins shows that the idea of the split is mythical in all imaginable senses of the term. Against the one-sided standpoints that stay trapped in this mythical division, Haskins argues for a less Manichaeian view, which he calls 'heretical' (p. 137), which would examine the possibilities of a nuanced idea of art as the interplay of autonomy and heteronomy. He finds examples of this complex approach in such important figures of the modern aesthetic tradition as Dewey and Adorno.

The Adornian line in this volume is further developed by Gordon Finlayson, who in his chapter closely looks at Adorno's analysis of Beethoven to examine one of the most essential and at the same time most problematic questions of Adorno's aesthetic theory – namely, how can an artwork be simultaneously aesthetically autonomous and an expression of political freedom? It emerges that in the work in question this is possible by virtue of parallels and differences between the formal setting of the work and a particular historical conception of freedom: both are based upon an organic ideal in which particular parts are reconciled within a higher whole. Whereas in Hegel, at least according to Adorno, the contradictions ultimately dissolve into the Absolute, Beethoven's work became inorganic by violating the rules of traditional musical form, and thus made visible the historical failure of the organic ideal of freedom.

Hulatt's own contribution to the collection he has edited elaborates on Adorno's idea of autonomy as a critique. He carefully considers Adorno's argument step by step to investigate how socially given material is transformed when it enters an artwork understood as a windowless monad, and how this autonomy critically reflects back on society. This attempt to clarify one of the key Adornian themes is highly instructive and helpful for any student of Adorno's thought. None the less, a question arises, if such a systematic account of his thought is not at odds with the intentionally non-systematic nature of Adorno's philosophical method; does it not transform Adorno's ideas precisely into the kind of 'identity thinking' he had sought to oppose?

The last Adornian contribution to the volume is Richard Stopford's elaboration of Adorno's rereading of Kantian ideas about the constitution of aesthetic autonomy in economical terms. This move could be considered an element of

a larger tendency within the Marxist tradition, which points to the historical and social conditioning of the Kantian idea of pure aesthetics as an expression of the bourgeois worldview of the late eighteenth century. Stopford, somewhat schematically, seeks to bring the Adornian economical translation of Kant's basic points to their logical conclusions, thus underlining Adorno's critique of transcendentalism.

With the last chapter of the volume, by Matthew Rampley, we step aside from Critical Theory by taking a closer look at the ideas of one of its most important opponents in German thinking. Niklas Luhmann describes art, among other social systems, as an 'autopoietic' system, which draws its boundaries from within, and is 'self-maintaining and reproducing' (p. 221). In this sense, art is autonomous, its function consisting in the integrating of 'what is in principle incommunicable – namely, perception – into the communication network' (p. 223). An important consequence of this approach to art is that it can explain avant-garde attempts at erasing the boundaries of the institution of art as an internal element of art autonomy, and can describe them as the self-observation of the system of art in opposition to the view, prevalent in Critical Theory, of modernism as the negation of communicability.

The conception of this book is apparently guided by a drive towards the systematization of the material. But this intention is not always manifest in the content of the particular chapters. Whereas the title of the anthology sharply distinguishes between aesthetic and artistic autonomy, most of the contributions do not stick to this distinction. Almost nothing, with the exception of Stopford's chapter on the Kantian concept of aesthetics, is said about aesthetic autonomy considered outside art – for example, about the aesthetics of nature. It is fair to say, then, that the aesthetic here is to some extent subordinated to the artistic or, more precisely, is conceived primarily in relation to art.

The editor's intention to present interdisciplinary approaches from both the analytic and the continental traditions in one volume is praiseworthy. But does he really succeed? A close look at the particular contributions reveals that continental thought is represented mostly by Critical Theory and marginally by the system theory of Luhmann or phenomenology (partly endorsed by Crowther). We do not find a hint of psychoanalysis or post-structuralism, that is, approaches representative of the heteronomous, as opposed to the autonomous, pole of thinking about art and aesthetics. A plausible reason for this might be that these tendencies no longer dominate the field of theory to the degree they did twenty or thirty years ago. This argument could, however, hardly account for the almost complete absence of the other two approaches, which could provide essential support to the idea of the heteronomous determination of art – namely, feminism

and postcolonialism. (These approaches are present only negatively as the target of an attack by Crowther.) It is not only because of the sharp criticism they receive from defenders of aesthetic or artistic autonomy that these methodologies deserve to have a voice in the collection under review. Even if these two methodologies refuse to consider the question of art's autonomy, the refusal itself would have been a challenging contribution to the topic. This also brings us to the observation that only one female voice is present among the ten authors in this volume. Does that mean that no one has anything to say on the topic of aesthetic and artistic autonomy except men writing in the tradition of analytic philosophy and Critical Theory?

Another relevant question concerns the extent to which the theoretical articles in the collection touch upon empirical transformations of their subject. As we have seen, the field of investigation is somewhat narrower than that suggested by the dichotomy of aesthetic and artistic autonomy which appears in the title of the collection. Artworks and artistic practices become almost the only topics at the expense of, say, questions of the aesthetic appreciation of non-art objects. In this connection, the editor observes that the special nature of philosophical aesthetics lies in its 'fidelity to the object of discussion' (p. 10), that is, the arts, and he expresses his hope that the collection will not emphasize particular theoretical approaches as much as the artwork itself (p. 11). I am afraid that this hope, with the exception of the Lamarque and Finlayson contributions, remains largely unfulfilled. That should not be surprising, if one takes into account the selective way in which both the analytic aesthetics and the broadly understood Marxist tradition approach their subject. Fidelity to the object of discussion is definitely not something a thinker like Crowther worries about: if an artwork or even a whole tendency or period does not fit in with his ideas about the essence of art, nothing is easier than to dismiss it as a merely marginal case, as he does with minimal art and institutional theory (p. 20).

It is also worth mentioning that the two exceptions of individual artworks which received some space in the book (David's *Death of Marat* and Beethoven's *Eroica*) come from the same period, the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century. This indicates the importance of this period of European history for the constitution of the modern notion of art as well as of the discipline of philosophical aesthetics; but it also testifies to the philosophers' difficulties or reluctance when faced with more recent material, which has yet to stand the test of time. Thus, no analysis of a work of contemporary art appears in this book. A question that some readers (including the reviewer) might worry about – namely, the role played by aesthetic or artistic autonomy in works produced today – remains ignored. This question could be developed in two directions: To

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which extent is contemporary art aesthetically or artistically autonomous? To which extent is the theoretical reflection of this matter relevant to contemporary art practice? The scope of most of the articles in the collection suggests that their authors are less interested in the latest artistic production than in well-established problems in the philosophical tradition.

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