

**THE SOVEREIGN
SELF**

**AESTHETIC
AUTONOMY**

**FROM THE
ENLIGHTENMENT
TO THE**

AVANT-GARDE
GRANT
H. KESTER

THE

SOVEREIGN
SELF



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TO THE

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AUTONOMY**

**FROM THE
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DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

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The creation of this book coincided with the early years of my son's life, and it was inspired in many ways by the complex labor involved in helping his unique spirit negotiate the tension between autonomy and dialogical interdependence that defines the human condition. I would like to dedicate this book to Elliott, and to Samira, whose wisdom and compassion are my constant guide. I also want to extend my gratitude to Ken Wissoker, who remained committed to this book, and its vision, despite formidable obstacles.

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INTRODUCTION

With the political artist things are very different indeed. For him Man is at once the material on which he works and the goal towards which he strives.

—Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794)

The concept of autonomy has emerged over the past fifteen years as a key locus of debate and theorization in contemporary art. In 2010, a consortium of European cultural institutions convened the Autonomy Project, an ambitious, two-year-long series of symposia, summer schools, and publications that featured many of the leading thinkers in the contemporary art world (Tania Bruguera, Boris Groys, Thomas Hirschhorn, Peter Osborne, Jacques Rancière, Hito Steyerl, etc.).¹ As the organizers acknowledge, the concept of autonomy has traditionally been associated with the outmoded image of the “isolated artist” laboring in their studio and “unaffected by the socio-political world.”² However, as they also note, autonomy has acquired a growing relevance in recent years as contemporary art has been increasingly

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instrumentalized by both the market and the demands of neoliberal cultural institutions. The return to autonomy thus represents an attempt to discover new ways in which art might “reenergize” its emancipatory potential.³ Critic Sven Lütticken, in an essay for the Autonomy Project newspaper, advocates a new “performative autonomy,” in which artists turn “performances back into acts” through their individual decision to refuse complicity with the neoliberal order.⁴ And artist Thomas Hirschhorn, during one of the symposia, boldly declared that “art must be something completely autonomous . . . and autonomous could be another word for the Absolute or for Beauty.”⁵ Autonomy also plays a central role in the work of Jacques Rancière, who has argued that the paradigm of aesthetic autonomy developed by philosopher Friedrich Schiller provides the crucial analytic frame necessary to understand the unique forms of insight generated by contemporary artistic practice.⁶ This same desire is evident in the recent revival of interest in Frankfurt School theorist Theodor Adorno, whose writing on aesthetic autonomy, according to John Roberts, still possesses “exemplary dialectical value.”⁷ And Nicholas Brown, in *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism*, defines the work of art as a “self-legislating” entity that can only preserve its critical power through its recursive “intervention” in the “institution of art” itself. Art that seeks “to confront capitalism directly,” beyond the protective enclosure of the art world, as Brown writes, “turns instead into a consumable sign of opposition.”⁸

These examples suggest the wide-ranging influence that the concept of autonomy continues to exercise in contemporary art theory and practice. Autonomy is consistently understood in terms of the relationship between the work of art and the surrounding social and political world, which serves as either the target of the artwork’s transgressive criticality or the engine of its inevitable appropriation. Thus, autonomy is associated with the defensive segregation of the artwork from an environment that is seen as fraught with both risk and transformative potential. While this research has shed important light on the complex relationship between aesthetic and political meaning in contemporary art, it has also been characterized by a central aporia. Thus, no matter how much the conventions of autonomy might be probed, expanded, or revised, the conviction remains that autonomy as such is the only possible form that art’s relationship to the social and political world might take. The essential task in the current moment is simply to recover the lapsed potential of aesthetic autonomy, even as its underlying ontological structure remains unquestioned. It is this underlying structure—the division between interior and exterior, purity

and impurity, authentic criticality and degraded complicity—that will be my concern here. It is, as I discuss in this book, a discursive structure that has remained remarkably consistent over the past two centuries. There is a great deal at stake in the recent turn to autonomy, as we seek to understand the nature and potential of both historical and contemporary art. It has, as well, significant implications for our understanding of cultural politics more generally. My goal in this book is to offer an alternative genealogy of the aesthetic that can help clarify those stakes, and also point to an often-subterranean tradition of artistic production that allows us to think the aesthetic beyond autonomy.

I use the term “aesthetic” in two related ways in this book. First, I use it to refer to the knowledge that is produced through the interaction between cognitive self-reflection and our sensory experience of the external world. I also use the “aesthetic” to refer to the specific ways in which this form of knowledge is constructed in philosophical and theoretical discourse, which is concerned with the potential emergence of a harmonious social order that might challenge the fragmenting forces of modernity. As I argue, aesthetic experience became a key site of speculative engagement during the Enlightenment because it promised to disclose a crucial human capacity to reconcile the individual self with a larger social body during a period of growing political uncertainty. In each context the aesthetic carries a utopian potential. There is, of course, a complex interrelationship between these two usages, as individual philosophers sought to mobilize the concept of the aesthetic on behalf of a specific emancipatory project (enlightenment or revolution). However, in many of the cases I examine here, the discursive staging of aesthetic knowledge was structured through an explicit hierarchy in which emancipation can only be secured through a process in which physical or sensual experience is subordinated to mental or cognitive supervision. In a key historical transposition, this same epistemological opposition is often projected onto entire classes of people (the proletariat, women, colonized subjects) who are seen as incapable of self-regulation. My own understanding of aesthetic knowledge follows a different trajectory. Here the discourse of the aesthetic does not seek to subordinate one of these terms to the other, but attends, instead, to their dialogical interdependence. I provide examples of forms of cultural and theoretical production that illustrate this alternative understanding at various points in this book. My primary focus, however, will be on what I will identify as the dominant interpretation of the aesthetic in the European tradition, which understands the cognitive as exercising a regulatory control over the physical in the formation of aesthetic knowledge.

At the center of the concept of aesthetic autonomy stands the sovereign personality of the artist, which is understood to transcend the complex, dialectical tensions that accompany the work of art itself on its perilous journey from the isolated studio to the social and political world beyond its doors. Thus, while the integrity of the artwork as a vehicle of emancipatory insight might occasionally be called into question, the authority of the artist as the originary source of this insight is never in doubt. Here the “internal” cognitive space of artistic creativity is essentially pure and uncorrupt, and the mechanisms of complicity or instrumentalization associated with the “external” world only accrue to the artwork after it has left the benign consciousness of the artist. As a result, we find a wide-ranging normalization of conventional forms of authorship throughout many of these debates, from Rancière’s valorization of a canon of white, male auteurs (in *Aisthesis* alone he discusses Whitman, Emerson, Balzac, Mallarmé, Ibsen, Rodin, Chaplin, Stieglitz, Vertov, and Agee), to Thomas Hirschhorn’s insistence on his own untrammelled “form giving” authority as an artist, to critic Claire Bishop’s conviction that the autonomous “authorship” exercised by the contemporary artist is the very precondition for “provocative art and thinking.”⁹

The belief that the utopian potential of aesthetic experience can only be fully expressed through conventional forms of authorial sovereignty has remained a central tenet of the modernist tradition for the past two hundred years. And certainly, art today faces a unique set of forces that threaten to diminish its transformative and transgressive power. However, before we rush to embrace autonomy once again, I would argue that we need a clearer understanding of its multivalent nature and of its constraints as well as its potential. In this book I will explore the complex history of artistic subjectivity and the principle of autonomy that it exemplifies. As I will suggest, the modern artistic self, which first takes coherent shape in the Enlightenment, is the ur-form for a whole series of subsequent institutional and discursive enclosures that are understood to be uniquely free from the forms of ideological domination that constrain all other modes of cultural production. Moreover, as I will also argue, the question of aesthetic autonomy has ramifications that extend well beyond art to a larger constellation of issues associated with the nature of political transformation, including the complex imbrication of the artistic avant-garde and the revolutionary vanguard, and forms of anticolonial resistance that challenge the Eurocentric concept of “Man” on which the aesthetic itself so often depends. In order to explore these issues, I will be examining the evolving discourse of aesthetic autonomy over a long historical arc, from its origins in Enlightenment aesthetic

philosophy, through the initial emergence of avant-garde art movements in the nineteenth century, to its more contemporary manifestation in what critic Hal Foster has termed a “neo-avant-garde,” beginning in the 1970s.

Autonomy and the Avant-Garde

The emergence of the modern avant-garde is associated with the transition to an aesthetic paradigm based on a concept of critical negation rather than redemptive beauty. This principle of negation would be embodied in the personality of the avant-garde artist, whose unique expressive freedom, manifested in an ongoing assault on normative social values, became the primary vehicle for preserving a form of autonomous criticality that was assumed to be otherwise absent in society due to the rise of an increasingly hegemonic system of political domination. We typically view the avant-garde as a repudiation of the concept of aesthetic transcendence that was central to the Enlightenment aesthetic. It was, of course, precisely the principle of autonomy, and the artist’s defensive separation from the chaotic social and political world, that avant-garde artists sought to overturn by challenging conventional notions of beauty and distanced aesthetic contemplation with provocative images of expiring stonebreakers and working-class barmaids. In fact, as I will argue here, there is a complex interconnection between the Enlightenment notion of aesthetic autonomy and the forms of radical negation that are typical of the avant-garde tradition. Thus, while the epistemological modality of the avant-garde will shift (from a concern with the virtual reconciliation of self and other in the experience of beauty to the strategic denial of this reconciliation through some form of cognitive assault), the underlying discursive structure of aesthetic autonomy (which governs the roles assigned to the artist, the viewer, and the work of art within a broader social network) remains largely unchanged.

The concept of the avant-garde has remained central to our understanding of modern art for more than a century and a half. While it has taken varying forms over the years, it has consistently emerged in conjunction with calls to revitalize art’s lapsed political potential. This is evident in a number of more recent publications, including Marc James Léger’s *Brave New Avant-Garde*, Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen’s *After the Great Refusal: Essays on Contemporary Art*, and John Roberts’s *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde*.¹⁰ This resurgence has been paralleled by various efforts in the realm of critical theory to resuscitate Leninism and the concept of a political vanguard.¹¹ Slavoj Žižek has even argued that the global hegemony of neoliberal capitalism will

only be arrested with the emergence of a new Leninist “master,” willing to take a decisive “leap” into the void through an unsparing commitment to revolutionary political violence.¹² The parallel here with the rhetoric of artistic experimentation (one thinks of Yves Klein’s *Leap into the Unknown* of 1960) is symptomatic. In fact, Alain Badiou identifies Lenin and Marcel Duchamp as twin exemplars of a new form of revolutionary thought unique to the twentieth century.¹³ As Badiou’s example suggests, the avant-garde artist and the vanguard leader have always been intimately linked. They share a common rhetorical orientation and a common set of beliefs about social change, violence, and the decisive role played by revolutionary and artistic elites.

In Badiou we encounter the symptomatic correlation between avant-garde art and revolutionary theory as radically autonomous modes of expression that bear a privileged relationship to political emancipation. In this view, the totalizing ideological control exercised by contemporary capitalism necessitates a complete break with all existing systems of thought. Philosopher Daniel Bensaïd has reflected on Badiou’s particular fascination with the concept of an absolute sovereignty: “Emerging out of nothing, the sovereign subject, like eventual truth, provides its own norm. It is represented only by itself. Hence the worrying refusal of relations and alliances, of confrontations and contradictions. Badiou invariably prefers an absolute configuration over one that is relative: the absolute sovereignty of truth and the subject, which begins, in desolate solitude, where the turmoil of public opinion ends. [Peter] Hallward rightly sees in this philosophy of politics an ‘absolutist logic’ that leaves little space for multiple subjectivities, shuns the democratic experience, and condemns the sophist to a sort of exile.”¹⁴ As we will see, the “desolate solitude” of the sovereign self that refuses “relations and alliances” and “provides its own norms” is evident in the traditions of both the artistic avant-garde and the political vanguard.

The resurgence of the vanguard/avant-garde matrix must be understood in the context of the perceived inevitability of contemporary neoliberalism. Faced with the ongoing failure of Marxist political discourse to catalyze broad public opposition to capitalism, there is an active search among left intellectuals for new or rearticulated forms of anticapitalist ideology that can both explain this resistance and provide the foundation for a more compelling political narrative. Renewed interest in the avant-garde is also linked to the growing monetization of contemporary art and, in particular, its formalization as a financial instrument (including the emergence of investment funds linked to its market performance).¹⁵ While modern art

has often been integrated with the market, the remarkable expansion of this interdependence over the past two decades has put increasing pressure on the ideological rationales that are typically employed to legitimate art's critical or oppositional role within contemporary society. In the past, contemporary art was considered among the riskiest sectors of the art market due to the unpredictability of the long-term value accrued by a given work through the slow and uncertain processes of historical validation. However, with the dramatically increased levels of capital available for investment, the pressure to rapidly monetize this work and to accelerate, or simply bypass, the conventional mechanisms of critical and art historical evaluation has been irresistible. In this context, contemporary art, far from challenging the imperatives of bourgeois capitalism, has emerged as one of the single most reliable sites of capital investment.¹⁶ We might say, then, that the avant-garde, or some version of it, is a necessary corollary to the dramatically expanded market for contemporary art, providing the frisson of transgression necessary to keep the "brand," as New York art dealer David Zwirner describes it, fresh and exciting to wealthy consumers who prefer high-yield investments that carry a whiff of cordite.¹⁷ Notwithstanding the cynicism of the art-world nomenclature, the desire for a renewed concept of the avant-garde, like the desire for a "reenergized" notion of autonomy, also reflects a genuine interest among critics and artists in understanding the complex interconnection between political resistance and cultural production today. As a result, ongoing efforts to develop a coherent theory of avant-garde art can reveal a great deal to us about contemporary artistic production more generally and, in particular, about the potential for *any* form of art that can resist the overwhelming appropriative powers of the market.

Here I will be approaching the avant-garde as both a discursive system (defined by a specific model of political change and subjectivity, and a set of interrelated cognitive mechanisms) and as a performative matrix involving the deployment of objects and actors with assigned roles, in which these mechanisms are acted out. The dispositif of the avant-garde is organized around a dual structure. On the one hand, it is defined by an outwardly oriented gesture of pure negation, directed against the reified structures of daily life. On the other hand, this gesture is incubated within the consciousness of an artist who is impervious to any "external" influence or determination. Here autonomy is produced through the conjunction of a unique, autopoietic creative activity (art) that sets itself decisively apart from other forms of knowledge production, and a specific form of subjectivity, embodied in the artistic personality, which is endowed with unique forms of cognition

and agency.¹⁸ The autonomy of the artistic personality is founded on their capacity to transcend systematic forms of social domination and semantic convention to which others unconsciously submit. As I noted above, this entails a process through which forms of either critical or habitual consciousness are spatialized, via metaphors of “inside” and “outside.” The artist is understood as existing outside a given hegemonic system and is therefore able to reveal the hidden structural determinants of individual experience to those who remain trapped within that same system. While the artist possesses a unique rhetorical power over the consciousness of others, this capacity remains unilateral rather than reciprocal, as any external determination of the artist’s own subjectivity (to be constrained or acted on by others) would entail an unacceptable violation of their creative freedom. How did this defensive, immunological model of the self originate? And what are the political and aesthetic consequences of identifying emancipatory thought so fully with a form of consciousness that seeks to “abstract itself from all particularity,” as Badiou writes?¹⁹

Overview and Chapter Summaries

Given the breadth of this study, it will necessarily sacrifice a great deal of historical specificity. I hope to compensate for this loss by providing some sense of the continuity of aesthetic autonomy as a broader discursive system that is integral to the experience of modernity. This continuity can be traced through three distinct but interrelated phases. In the first phase, autonomy emerges in conjunction with a European bourgeoisie eager to assert its political independence from existing forms of absolutist rule. In the second phase, autonomy reemerges in vanguard artistic and political discourse during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to ensure the integrity and purity of revolutionary struggle against what was seen as an irredeemably corrupt capitalist system. And in the final phase, autonomy in contemporary art practice seeks to preserve a mnemonic trace of a now moribund revolutionary consciousness for some future moment of political transformation. As this outline suggests, aesthetic autonomy bears a complex and shifting relationship to concepts of resistance and emancipation across the past two centuries.

While a significant part of this study will be devoted to a historical analysis of aesthetic theory and artistic subjectivity, it is also concerned with issues that remain central to artistic practice to the present day. I will contend that many of the core evaluative tensions that define contemporary art (the relationship between art and adjacent areas of cultural production, the capacity

of the artwork to convey some form of meaningful social or political critique, and the institutional complicity, or independence, of the art world itself) are rooted in the discursive system of modern aesthetic autonomy. My inquiry is centered on the particular forms of subjectivity and consciousness mobilized by the experience of modern art, and through the personality of the modern artist. As I discuss below, modern art will define itself in opposition to the instrumentalizing forms of identity associated with the rise of capitalism, in which the world is reduced to a set of resources to be exploited and consumed. At the same time, in seeking to challenge the appropriative autonomy of the bourgeois self, we will find artists claiming a form of creative subjectivity that makes its own demands for absolute sovereignty. Thus, the untrammelled freedom enjoyed by the artist is necessary precisely because they possess a unique capacity to transcend the ideological constraints of the existing capitalist system and envision its utopic reinvention.

In his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Friedrich Schiller provides one of the most cogent early diagnoses of European society in thrall to the “economic self-interest” inculcated by the rise of the market system.²⁰ As a result of this dehumanizing system, “whole classes of men uphold their capacities only in part,” as Schiller writes, “while the rest of their faculties scarcely show a germ of activity.”²¹ Schiller’s prescience is notable. Even in the context of the rudimentary forms of modernization evident in late eighteenth-century Germany, he was able to detect the tectonic shifts that would transform Europe during the coming century as society was increasingly driven by utilitarian calculations of profit and loss. Moreover, Schiller helps us recognize the damaging effects that this transformation will have on human interrelationships as we come to view others not as our equals deserving respect and compassion, but rather as a kind of raw material. In the state of crisis that defines modern life, as Schiller writes, “every man seeks for nothing more than to save his wretched property from the general destruction, as it were from some great conflagration.”²² Echoes of this original critique will resonate throughout the history of modern art. Thus André Breton, writing more than a century later, will contend that “wherever Western civilization is dominant, all human contact has disappeared, except contact from which money can be made.”²³ For Schiller, the solution to this crisis entails a comprehensive reinvention of the human self, which will be accomplished by our therapeutic exposure to beautiful works of art. Through this process of “aesthetic education,” we will move from a predatory form of subjectivity to one in which we experience, and feel, our underlying kinship with other selves.

If modern political life is defined by the struggle over how the individual relates to the social in the face of incipient capitalism, the philosophical discourse of the aesthetic is concerned with how we come to both feel and think this relationship, and how we come to imagine new forms of connection to other selves, capable of transcending this banal, materialistic enclosure. The concept of the aesthetic, I will argue, provides us with a unique vantage point from which to identify, and challenge, the deleterious effects of modern capitalism on the human personality. In this respect it shares certain essential features with evolving forms of Marxist theory in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the following chapters I will trace the relationship between these two discursive systems: between artistic production and political action, between the artistic avant-garde and the political vanguard, and between the realms of aesthetic philosophy and Marxist theory. We encounter formative critiques of the capitalist system, and its associated modes of bourgeois selfhood, in both the modern avant-garde and in Marxist theory. Each of these traditions, as we shall see, also seeks to transcend this system, whether through the incremental reformation of individual viewers or through the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system. And each is defined by the desire to usher in a new social order in which self-interest would be replaced by a noninstrumentalizing openness to others. What unique forms of subjectivity and critical knowledge are generated across these two domains? And what are the key points of disjunction, displacement, and differentiation between them?

There is a rich intellectual tradition devoted to the relationship between avant-garde art and revolutionary transformation in the areas of aesthetic philosophy and critical theory.²⁴ Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* helped to inaugurate a renewed interest in these questions during the 1980s. In his book Jameson argued that modernist literary texts constitute "a revolt against . . . reification and a symbolic act which involves a whole Utopian compensation for increasing dehumanization on the level of daily life."²⁵ This emancipatory potential is not openly thematized at the level of literary content. Rather, it is carried in the complex formal structures of the works themselves, in a manner that is often inaccessible to the average reader. It requires, then, the intervention of the critic to reveal this "political unconscious" and to bring it into our conscious awareness through a process of ideological "decipherment." There are a number of themes here that will be important for my subsequent analysis of the avant-garde, including the compensatory relationship between artistic production and revolutionary change, the central role played by formal mediation in preserving the art-

work's political meaning, and the underlying bifurcation between the reader and the critic. Jameson's book exemplifies a diverse body of scholarship in which the literary text, or the physical artwork, expresses a form of revolutionary political consciousness that cannot yet be realized through practical action. This perception will be evident in a number of thinkers discussed in the following study, especially in the work of Theodor Adorno. This remains a valuable and illuminating tradition. However, I will offer a somewhat different path through this familiar terrain. In particular, while I will occasionally discuss specific works of art, my primary concern is not with the artwork qua object and its associated hermeneutic conventions. Rather, I am interested in tracing what I term the "social architecture" of the aesthetic. By social architecture I refer to the ways in which the concept of the aesthetic has been constituted historically around a set of a priori subject positions (of artist and viewer, movement and public), defined by specific forms of cognitive agency and interpretive competence. In this sense I am less concerned with the ontology of the work of art than I am with the ontology of the artist. I will be concerned, as well, with the relationship between artistic production and the forms of revolutionary praxis that, in Jameson's account, it symbolically preserves.

These questions will bring us once again to the concept of autonomy, which plays a central role in the traditions of both Marxist and aesthetic thought. As we know, aesthetic discourse during the Enlightenment undergoes a fundamental reorientation. Rather than art serving to provide a form of moral instruction (*docere et delectare* in Horace's maxim), the work of art will become entirely autonomous and "complete in itself," as Karl Moritz contends. In this view, art's significance does not derive from its practical effect on the world, or the viewer, but from the fact that art as such has no outwardly directed purpose at all.²⁶ Here the "utility" of the instructive artwork becomes a surrogate expression of the relentless utilitarianism of the nascent bourgeoisie.²⁷ In this capacity the autonomous artwork comes to symbolize a condition of individual freedom that mirrors the aspirations of the modern political subject, finally freed from external coercion by god and king. By the same token, it comes to symbolize a resistance to the means-end rationality of the capitalist system that is gradually displacing these sacral authorities. Of course, as we see in Schiller, the autonomous work of art does seek to "instruct." It simply approaches this task through a different set of cognitive protocols, entailing the transformation of the underlying structures of human consciousness. Thus, it is precisely by abjuring any ostensibly "external" validation that the autonomous work of art gains the

capacity to awaken in the viewer an intuition of our fundamental connection to other selves (through a prefigurative *sensus communis*, which can overcome the rampant self-interest promulgated by the market system).

In the following chapters I will explore the translation of this paradigm of aesthetic autonomy into the mid-nineteenth century, where it will be renewed in the radical sovereignty of the avant-garde artist. “I alone,” as Courbet claimed, “have the power to represent and translate in an original way both my personality and my society.”²⁸ Here the expressive freedom of the avant-garde artist serves to anticipate the utopian forms of selfhood that will one day be universally available, when society is finally liberated from capitalist domination. We encounter a variant expression of this form of autonomous subjectivity in the personality of the vanguard leader who sustains the as-yet unrealized insurrectional potential of the masses in the form of revolutionary theory, while possessing a singular ability to penetrate the veils of ideological mystification that otherwise confound the benumbed victims of capitalist exploitation. These are, of course, highly complex, internally differentiated discursive systems; it will be the work of the coming chapters to more fully describe their tangled interrelationship. However, they are united at a broader level by a similar structure. In each case, in the figure of the avant-garde artist and the vanguard revolutionary, we encounter a spatial paradigm defined by an enclosed domain of contemplative purity, and an “external” world of corruption and political disorder from which this reflective consciousness must remain fundamentally separate and over which it is destined to exercise a transcendent cognitive mastery.

To be autonomous means to be self-governing or to give oneself norms. But norms are, by definition, shared social constructs. How, then, does the autonomous subject engage in the consensual creation of norms rather than simply imposing their self-generated values onto others? Here we encounter a characteristic tension between autonomy as marking the individual’s freedom from external coercion and a form of autonomy that enables that same individual’s sovereignty over other selves. In the first part of the book, I explore the tension between autonomy as freedom and autonomy as mastery through the work of Kant, Schiller, and Hegel, exploring the crucial linkage between the autonomous concept of the self developed in the Enlightenment and the ontology of European colonialism. I then explore the ways in which this tension is both challenged and reinforced in the emergence of a concept of the aesthetic, outlining a composite model of aesthetic autonomy in which the actual moment of reconciliation (of self and other) that is prefigured in the aesthetic encounter is both deferred, until a future moment of utopian

social emancipation, and displaced into the formal and representational matrix of the artwork. In this view, any attempt to transform the existing social order now will be premature, as evidenced by the revolutionary Terror in France (a sign for Schiller and Hegel of humanity's political immaturity). Next, I will outline a four-part structure that describes the key features of aesthetic autonomy as a discursive system. This structure is carried through the book as a touchstone to gauge the ways in which aesthetic autonomy is both sustained, and transformed, over time. I then explore the relationship between the Enlightenment concept of aesthetic autonomy and the new modes of autonomy that emerged in the nineteenth century through the rapprochement between vanguard politics and avant-garde art. Rather than seeing the avant-garde discourse that emerges at this time as a repudiation of the Enlightenment aesthetic, I examine the underlying continuities between the two discursive traditions. These are organized around the central value assigned to art, and the artistic persona, as the vessels for an entirely unique form of critical and prefigurative insight. Here the anticipatory reconciliation of self and other evoked by the experience of beauty is replaced by a deliberate undermining of transcendence, in the avant-garde assault on the viewer's consciousness, even as the sovereignty of art and the artistic persona remains paramount. The perceived cognitive incapacity of the public, evident in Schiller's critique of the French Revolution, finds its corollary in the perception that the proletariat is incapable of revolutionary transformation and requires the oversight of a vanguard party.

In the second part of the book I examine the reciprocal influence between Bolshevism and avant-garde artistic production during the early twentieth century. In particular, I focus on the diffraction patterns that are produced in the overlap between the avant-garde artist and the revolutionary theorist. Each of these figures claims a transcendent power to comprehend the complex totality of capitalist domination and cultural production, and each can be seen as modifying, and carrying forward, certain key features associated with the discourse of autonomy outlined in the first section. In particular, they reflect the symptomatic tension between autonomy as freedom from constraint by the world that exists beyond the domain of the self, and autonomy as sovereignty over that same external world, which is at the core of philosophical aesthetics. Precisely in order to precipitate a new political order capable of nurturing a genuine form of social harmony, the vanguard leader takes on a merciless and unilateral authority, seeking to destroy an existing system of government through unrestrained violence and revolutionary terror. The modern avant-garde is structured around a similar

disjunction. Here the artist, in seeking to challenge a bourgeois culture defined by the arrogant mastery of the natural world and other human selves, nonetheless takes on an appropriative relationship to the individual viewer, whose subordinated consciousness will be subjected to a violent, transformative assault. In this manner the prefigurative dimension of the artist's expressive freedom reveals its necessarily instrumentalizing corollary, evident in Schiller's description of the "political artist," who takes humanity as a passive "material" onto which to impose his redemptive will.²⁹ We find this paradigm reiterated in Maxim Gorky's poignant observation in 1917 that "the working class is for Lenin what iron ore is for a metal worker."³⁰ The discourse of the avant-garde will thus normalize a form of sovereign authority (in assigning to the artist, or revolutionary theorist, certain exemplary modes of transformative agency and self-actualization), while simultaneously gesturing beyond sovereignty to a mode of being in which the very "self" that is naturalized in the avant-garde personality is called into question. I link these traditions with a revised concept of aesthetic autonomy in the work of Theodor Adorno during the 1960s and contrast his approach with an alternative aesthetic paradigm developed by C. L. R. James, rooted in the experience of anticolonial resistance and the complex imbrication of race and class. I then outline a series of projects, from the "Prolekult" movement and the struggle for Indian independence during the 1920s and 1930s, to artistic practices developed in conjunction with new social movements during the 1960s, that exemplify this alternative paradigm.

In the third part of the book, I explore the interconnection between Adorno's aesthetic and the concept of a neo-avant-garde that was introduced during the 1990s, associated with the academic art criticism published in the journal *October*. Critics such as Hal Foster and Benjamin Buchloh came to identify the forms of conceptual and minimalist art that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a displaced expression of the radical energies created by the Russian Revolution of 1917 (after which the journal is indirectly named). This paradigm will be subsequently renewed in the work of critic and historian John Roberts, who develops a concept of aesthetic autonomy for the contemporary moment inspired by the legacy of Adorno. As Roberts argues, art demonstrates its authenticity by refusing any direct contact with processes of social or political change and focusing its critical powers instead on the reified institutional and ideological structures of the art world itself. I then examine the practical expression of this neo-avant-garde paradigm in the work of Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn, focusing on his acclaimed

Gramsci Monument, which was staged at a New York City public housing project in the summer of 2013. Here many of the core themes associated with an avant-garde paradigm of aesthetic autonomy take on exemplary physical and institutional form. In *Gramsci Monument*, Hirschhorn sought to effect a utopian transcendence of class and racial difference, even while employing the lives and daily interactions of the public housing residents as a compositional material intended for consumption by an international art world defined precisely by class and racial privilege. In the conclusion I reflect on the implications the discourse of avant-garde aesthetic autonomy has for our understanding of the potentials and the constraints of contemporary art more generally.

As I suggested above, contemporary efforts to revive a concept of aesthetic autonomy are motivated by the fear that art's unique, critical potential is in danger of being subsumed by the inexorable appropriative powers of neoliberal capitalism. This sense of impending crisis is, of course, entirely familiar. Art's emancipatory potential has always been at risk, from the market, from the vicissitudes of popular culture, and from the instrumental demands of social and political change. In fact, we might say that the very function of the modern avant-garde is to symbolically enact an embattled and (and ultimately futile) resistance against the implacable forces of ideological domination. Alana Jelinek captures this mythos in her insistence that "Art is not political action. Art is not education. Art does not exist to make the world a better place. Art disrupts and resists the status quo, and if it fails in this prime objective it only serves to deaden a disenfranchised society further."³¹ Of course, art must fail; it cannot avoid failure because the task assigned to it in the avant-garde tradition (to "disrupt" the status quo) is impossibly abstract. The fragility of art's emancipatory potential is not an unfortunate side effect. It is, rather, essential to the ontology of art itself; to evoke some absolute and inviolable form of resistance that cannot be realized in the current moment. The meaning of art, in these terms, never lies in the forms of criticality that it can generate here and now but rather, in its meta-performativity over time, acting out an incipient radicality, its inevitable co-option, and its eventual rebirth, which are seen as symbolizing an irrepressible human desire for utopian change. This entails, in turn, the necessary autonomy of art itself from the very social mechanisms necessary to produce the change it claims to embody ("political action," "education"). In this manner, autonomy understood as a capacity for critical distance from the ideological norms on which political domination depends is collapsed

into the institutionalized separation of artistic production *from* the world in which those norms are generated. This is the slender thread that links the aesthetic paradigm introduced in the Enlightenment with the most recent manifestation of neo-avant-garde artistic practice. My goal in this study is to understand how a paradigm of aesthetic autonomy that originated more than two centuries ago continues to exercise such a decisive influence on the ways in which we envision the potential of art today.

DUKE

NOTES

Introduction

- 1 See <https://theautonomyproject.org/>, accessed June 22, 2022. The Autonomy Project was launched on April 19, 2010, and featured a series of seminars and two summer schools, as well as a “newspaper” publication, all available online. Supporters included the Dutch Art Institute, the Grizedale Art Centre, John Moores University, Lectoraat Kunst en Publiek Ruimte, Platform Moderne Kunst, the University of Hildesheim, and the Van Abbemuseum. The events were organized by John Byrne (John Moores University), Steven ten Thije (Van Abbemuseum), and Clare Butcher (independent curator).
- 2 See <https://theautonomyproject.org/>.
- 3 See https://theautonomyproject.org/autonomy_symposium.
- 4 Lütticken, “Three Autonomies and More,” 38.
- 5 Ahlers, “The Puzzling Spectrum,” 45.
- 6 Rancière, “Aesthetic Revolution.”
- 7 Roberts, *Revolutionary Time*, 54.
- 8 Brown, *Autonomy*, 37, 180.

- 9 Rancière, *Aisthesis*; Hirschhorn, "Tribute to Form," 52; Bishop, "Another Turn," 22.
- 10 Léger, *Brave New Avant-Garde*; Rasmussen, *After the Great Refusal*; Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde*.
- 11 See, for example, Budgen et al., *Lenin Reloaded*.
- 12 Žižek, "Repeating Lenin."
- 13 Badiou, "Destruction, Negation, and Subtraction."
- 14 Bensaïd, *Think Again*, 105.
- 15 See, for example, the benchmark Mei Moses Index, accessed June 22, 2022, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/the-sothebys-mei-moses-indices>. Total sales of contemporary art were almost \$3 billion in 2022.
- 16 Burgos and Ismail, "New York Apartments Top Gold."
- 17 Paumgarten, "Dealer's Hand," 78.
- 18 The term "autopoiesis" was introduced by the Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela in 1972 to describe self-regulating natural systems. See Maturana and Varela, *Autopoiesis*.
- 19 Badiou, "Fifteen Theses."
- 20 See Schulte-Sasse et al., *Theory as Practice*, 153.
- 21 Schiller, *Aesthetic Education*, 33.
- 22 Schiller, *Aesthetic Education*, 27.
- 23 Rosemont, *What Is Surrealism?*, 76.
- 24 Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*; Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*; Bennett, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*; Bertram, *Art as Human Practice*.
- 25 Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 42.
- 26 See Hess, *Reconstituting the Body Politic*, 49–50.
- 27 For a detailed discussion of the "ontological rehabilitation" of the arts in the German Enlightenment, see Buchenau, *The Founding of Aesthetics*.
- 28 Courbet, *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, 116.
- 29 Here we encounter the characteristic slippage in Schiller's account between the artist, operating in the realm of semblance, imposing their will on passive compositional material, and the "statesman artist," who works in the realm of the actual but ultimately depends on the same instrumentalizing orientation. See Redfield, "Aesthetics, Sovereignty, Biopower."
- 30 Gorky, *Untimely Thoughts*, 89.
- 31 Jelinek, *This Is Not Art*, frontispiece.

1. Freedom and Sovereignty

- 1 Schneewind, *Invention of Autonomy*, 4–8.
- 2 Macpherson, *Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*.
- 3 Shapiro, *Evolution of Rights*, 53.