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Embracing Autonomy

The autonomy of art and literature is one of those ideas that virtually everyone on the Left seems to have strong opinions on. It doesn't necessarily imply that there is any degree of consensus on its political importance or even possibility - indeed, there doesn't seem to be a universally accepted account of what autonomy *is* or *could be* - rather, it belongs to a limited set of notions that those of us on the Left seem to take position on almost by default; as if intuitions about the political function and social status of art could be easily derived from a more general set of views or claims. It's not that we are *excited* about autonomy as a theoretical issue anymore - in a positive or negative way - rather, we all seem to have already made up our minds about it, before the conversation can even begin.

This may also explain, at least to an extent, why for the most part the autonomy of art remains in practice an abstract and somewhat ephemeral notion. Its certain canonical instances notwithstanding (see e.g. Taylor 1980), more often than not the long debate on autonomy has been marked by political vagueness, theoretical imprecision, and instances of purely linguistic differences being mistaken for meaningful ones.

In situations like this - when largely intuitive arguments are expressed in consistently unclear terms - it is only a uniquely powerful voice (or perhaps a uniquely significant political event) that can breathe new

life into a stagnant debate, forcing us to update our theoretical framework and reevaluate some of our deeply held convictions. In our opinion, such a voice has emerged in recent years from a group of critics and intellectuals who reconcile Marxist commitments with what is sometimes called an “intentionalist” account of meaning and interpretation. This has resulted in a theoretical framework that encourages precision and clarity, while producing insights that are simultaneously political and aesthetic in nature - what has been variously called a “social ontology of art” or a critique of the “political economy of form”. Indeed, from this standpoint, to assert the autonomy of art is to defend the political as such, while to criticise it is to implicitly endorse market absolutism (see Brown, Bradić 2021). Meanwhile, the political importance of art seems to lie not so much in its role as a socio-political stimulus - its alleged ability to push us towards certain actions - but rather in something like the cognitive dignity of the artwork (Brown 2020a); its ability to reveal, through its very form, the more fundamental structural tensions in the world around us. This allows the very idea of beauty - the ultimate *normative* idea in art and literature - to gain a newfound political importance:

Today, we might speculate, it's only insofar as art seeks to be beautiful—seeks, that is, to achieve the formal perfection imaginable in works of art but not in anything else—that it can also function as a picture not of how, if we behaved better, we might manage capitalism's problems, but rather of capitalism as itself the problem. (Michaels 2015, 42)

This approach to autonomy has been the object of various debates, symposia and polemics (see e.g. Vishmidt 2020, Petrovsky 2020, Durao 2020, CLCWeb 2020, Lotz 2023, Hitchcock 2020). While we believe that a discussion about its deeper foundations is an obviously valid academic pursuit, the aims behind this issue of *Theoretical Practice* - both political and theoretical - are quite different. Instead of investigating the general theoretical framework developed by authors such as Michaels, Brown, and others - and contrasting it with other existing models - we have invited prospective authors to submit articles based around specific *interpretative* claims or insights supported by this particular framework. In choosing such an approach, we seek not only to test the practical applications of the theory, but to push the overall debate forward - past the acknowledged points of disagreement and towards a more interesting conversation on its specific implications. Hence our hope is that this issue of *Theoretical Practice* will contribute

to an ongoing intellectual project - one that we believe to be among the most interesting tendencies on the international Left today.

The account of autonomy around which this number of *Theoretical Practice* is centred remains rooted in a specific argument on the nature of meaning and interpretation, as well as a particular account of intention itself. In order to facilitate the debate - and to make the articles in this issue more accessible to readers potentially unfamiliar with the original argument - we provide below an outline of the argument's main points. This is followed by a brief summary of the articles in the issue.

[O]f course, the work of art can also have one thing that the commodity and sheer matter cannot. And that one thing— the only thing about the work of art that is not determined by its buyers, the only thing about it that belongs only to it, the only thing about it that's not reducible to the commodity it otherwise is— is its meaning. (Michaels 2015, 102-103)

This and similar observations made by Walter Benn Michaels in his 2015 book *The Beauty of the Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy, Economy* were, in a way, a logical conclusion to critical, philosophical, and historical work on meaning and intention previously undertaken by himself and others (see e.g. Ashton 2011, Brown 2012, Cronan 2013). According to Michaels' seminal account of meaning and interpretation, which he developed together with Steven Knapp (see e.g. Knapp & Michaels 1982, 1983, 1987), the meaning of the work of art/literature and the intention of its author are necessarily (or by definition) strictly identical – i.e. they are just two names for the very same thing. Essentially, this claim stems from the recognition that only intention allows us to identify text as text, or to define its boundaries: once the reader recognises something as meaningful, they logically have to posit an author behind it; and if they recognise something as accidental, they cannot perceive it as meaningful (anymore). There is no language - or literature, or art - before or outside of intention, which can only mean that the meaning of any given work is entirely and strictly what its author intended. Hence, whenever we acknowledge something as language (or literature, or art),

we simultaneously (if not necessarily consciously) posit an author behind it; and whenever we interpret, we speculate on said author's intention. Crucially, according to Michaels and Knapp, this is not what interpretation *should* look like, but rather, what it *is* - always, by definition - regardless of any theory one may or may not subscribe to.

Michaels and Knapp's argument had a profound impact on a variety of voices across the humanities and social sciences, including ones that merged elements of aesthetics with political theory (many "intentionalist" authors have since affiliated themselves in some way with the academic journal *nonsite*). In *The Shape of the Signifier* (2004) Michaels himself pointed out how a certain theoretical commitment to the material shape of the literary text, and the experience of a reader - at the expense of meaning/intention - entails a political commitment to the primacy of identity over class:

[O]ne way to put what I am arguing here is just to say that the commitment to the materiality of the signifier—the commitment to the idea that the text consists essentially of its physical features—was fundamental not only to the very few people who understood themselves actually to have made that commitment but also to the larger number of people who were critical of the materiality of the signifier and also to a great many people who had never even heard of the materiality of the signifier.

Another more controversial way to put it would be to say that this view of the ontology of the text carries with it—entails—a parallel or complementary view of the position of the reader. I am arguing that anyone who thinks the text consists of its physical features (of what Derrida calls its marks) will be required also to think that the meaning of the text is crucially determined by the experience of its readers, and so the question of who the reader is—and the commitment to the primacy of identity as such—is built into the commitment to the materiality of the signifier. What this means is that figures whose deepest commitments are to categories of racial or cultural difference (e.g., the political scientist Samuel B. Huntington and the novelist Toni Morrison) belong to the same formation as someone like de Man, who couldn't have cared less about culture. To put the point in an implausible (but nonetheless, I will try to show, accurate) form, it means that if you hold, say, Judith Butler's views on resignification, you will also be required to hold, say, George W. Bush's views on terrorism—and, scarier still, if you hold Bush's views on terrorism, you must hold Butler's view of resignification. (Michaels 2004, 13-14)

[I]nsofar as exploitation is at the core of class difference, class difference is ineluctably linked to inequality, where cultural difference, of course, is not.

Cultures, in theory if not always in practice, are equal; classes, in theory and in practice, are not. From this standpoint, the rise of culture, or of the so-called new social movements, or of the problem of identities and identification, or—most generally—of the problem of the subject has functioned as the Left’s way of learning to live with inequality. (...) [T]he effort to imagine a world organized by subject positions instead of beliefs and divided into identities instead of classes has of course, under general rubrics like postmodernism or poststructuralism or posthistoricism, been widespread. (Michaels 2004, 17)

In this sense, *The Shape of the Signifier* provided a robust defense of class analysis and (a version of) socialist politics - as well as a critique of identity politics, both in its conservative and liberal version - that was explicitly based on an “intentionalist” account of meaning and interpretation. Later, in *The Beauty of a Social Problem* (2015), Michaels set out to prove that a work of art/literature may - by becoming pointedly, purposefully indifferent to the experience of its audience (and insisting instead on its own meaning, form, and autonomy) – shift our attention away from the inherently liberal politics of experiences, affects, and identities, and towards the structural, i.e. class-based, inequalities that shape the very foundation of capitalist societies. This interest in the relationship of class politics to identity politics has been shared by other *nonsite* authors - crucially among them, Kenneth Warren (see e.g. 2020) and Adolph Reed jr (see e.g. 2001; Reed & Michaels 2023).

Michaels’ account of meaning/intention and its relation to experience was influenced to a significant degree by the work of Michael Fried (whose distinctions between art and objecthood (Fried 1998), and theatricality and absorption (Fried 1980), remain among the key points of reference for the articles published in this issue of *Theoretical Practice*). In turn, Michaels’ argument has served as an important influence for various other works in the theory and history of art, including the comprehensive account of aesthetic autonomy under late capitalism recently put forward by Nicholas Brown (2019). Offering a fascinating re-reading of Hegel, Adorno, Lukacs, and others, Brown shows that in a market society, in order to assert its (partial) independence from the commodity form, a work of art/literature has to subsume its status as a commodity under its own meaning, as if the former was a part of the work’s material support:

That the work of art is a commodity like any other is, from the standpoint of the market, not false. The commodity character of the work of art is indeed part of its material support. The moment of truth in contemporary aesthetic ideology

has been to make this aspect of the support inescapable. After postmodernism, autonomy cannot be assumed, even by works produced for a restricted field. It must instead be asserted. (How much the postmodern period will appear in retrospect to have been shot through with this assertion—how much the postmodern discontinuity will turn out to have been an illusion—is matter for further research.) Since the structure of the commodity excludes the attribute of interpretability, any plausible claim to meaning—to art as opposed to objecthood—will immediately entail the claim not to be a commodity like any other. The originality of the present moment is that the concept of medium or material support must be expanded to include the commodity character of the work. (Brown 2019, 22-23)

This working through, rather than around, the commodity status of the work implies an aesthetic strategy that – being modeled after Hegel’s *Aufhebung* rather than a straightforward, and ultimately futile, refusal to engage with the market altogether – is a far cry from naive and elitist fantasies about a potential revival of the “true” high art:

The problem Autonomy is meant to answer (...) is how works of art can insist on a meaning “after modernism”; that is, after restricted fields are no longer credited as deflecting the commodity character of art; when works of art are understood to confront the market directly as commodities; when, in short, aesthetic production is understood to have “become integrated into commodity production generally.” (...) Art that denies its imbrication with the market is, no matter how ugly, just selling you a pretty story; art that fails to account for its imbrication with the market is selling you something else. (Brown 2020b)

What Michaels, Brown and others prove, is that the autonomy of art and literature should be of vital interest to all self-declared socialists and communists today - *precisely* because of its relationship to the market. Their account of autonomy implies a readiness to defend elements of the Modernist tradition - a thought which in itself remains anathema to many allegedly progressive parts of the academia. Just recently, in *Red Aesthetics* (2021), Todd Cronan offered a re-reading of parts of the socialist canon - including Brecht, Eisenstein, and Rodchenko - from an “intentionalist” standpoint, suggesting that “red aesthetics is an explicitly political form of modernism that aims to capture the complex and changing modernity with an equally complex and changing mode of representation”.

Among the chief implications of the “intentionalist” approach to autonomy is that aesthetic autonomy should be seen, first and foremost, as inherent to the work of art, rather than the work of an artist. What lies beyond the domain of the market is not, as various unwitting heirs to romanticism would see it, the “creative process” –the causal, material process of which the work of art is the ultimate result – but a specific feature (i.e. meaning) that the work of art possesses by its very nature (or by definition). Thus what various “intentionalists” offer is a renewed focus on ontological rather than purely sociological perspective – which in turn seems particularly refreshing in the context of various debates on the contemporary Left, where the issue of autonomy is often reduced to the relationship between an artist and a wider regime of labour.

Moreover, the very blurring of the line between the autonomy of art and the autonomy of the artistic process may be seen as an ideological byproduct of what Stanley Cavell famously called the “bad picture of intention” (Cavell 1976; see also Cronan 2020, Siraganian 2017). This “bad picture” mistakes the meaning of the work for its external cause – by treating authorial intention in purely causal terms – and ultimately reduces the work to its objecthood. In other words, a work of art/literature is seen as nothing more than a material *effect* of its author’s intention. Such an approach may be in turn easily combined with various misguided forms of materialism and egalitarianism to produce a politics of art that is nominally democratic, progressive or socialist, but which nonetheless denies the work of art its basic means of resisting commodification. If this is indeed the case, what is urgently needed – especially among those of us on the Left – is a critique of the kind of allegedly materialist criticism that draws (sometimes unwittingly) on the “bad picture of intention”. Examples of this include Ruth Leys’ critique of “the turn to affect” (2017), Cronan’s critique of “affective formalism” (2021), or Siraganian’s deflationary and demystifying approach to AI-generated “art” (2021).

While various debates about Brown’s *Autonomy* have so far focused mostly on evaluating the merits and potential flaws of the author’s general approach to autonomy, the upcoming issue of *Theoretical Practice* seeks to focus instead on the logical next step, i.e. a further in-depth

analysis and critique of specific strategies that works of art have historically adopted in order to assert their autonomy under capitalism. While Michaels, Brown, Cronan, and others provide us with plentiful examples of such works and strategies, the list remains by its very nature ever incomplete – and thus we have invited fellow critics and researchers to investigate other important instances of autonomy in its non-trivial form, i.e. the cases in which the works of art and literature have actively reasserted (or rejected, or otherwise thematised) their autonomy, as it relates to the market and their own status as commodities.

Davis Smith-Brecheisen's *The Pivotal Decade Revisited, or the Contemporary Novel of the Seventies* offers a reading of two novels – Percival Everett's *So Much Blue* and Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers* – which share to an extent not just their ostensible subject matter, but also, according to Smith-Brecheisen, the way they thematise art itself, or the relation between certain moments in art history and political history. Specifically, they're both contemporary novels set in the 70s, and both remain interested not just in the political upheavals of the period, but the corresponding aesthetic shift from modernism to postmodernism as well. By identifying literalist/postmodernist positions in the novels in question – and highlighting the ways in which these positions are ultimately criticised within the novels' own logic – Smith-Brecheisen shows that *So Much Blue* and *The Flamethrowers* offer not only a critique of the principles of “indexicality and immediacy” in art, but also a completely different way of conceptualising the relationship between the political and the aesthetic, that goes beyond the idea of art as expressing a certain *experience*: “if speed is something that everyone can understand, and pulling the trigger is something very few can, the point of the argument (...) is that having an account of either would not help us gain a clearer account of the structures of speed and violence that characterize the world system”. Drawing on Fried, Brown, Ashton, and Lukacs, Smith-Brecheisen suggests that the resulting reassertion of art's autonomy opens the path to another, better (or more accurate) representation of that historical moment: “No less, if what differentiates these works by Kushner and Everett from those of their contemporaries is the effort to overturn the commitment to unwinding the ontology of the work of art, the assertion of an internal aesthetic logic, or self-legislating form, is the means through which the work of art can render a picture of the period that does not depend on atomized experiences of a world system defined by US financial hegemony.”

Sibyl Gallus-Price's *Why Photography Mattered (1847) As Art More Than Ever Before* – with its title an obvious play on Michael Fried's *Why*

Photography Matters as Art as Never Before, an important point of reference for Gallus-Price – offers an in-depth interpretation of César Aira’s *An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter*, as well as a wider commentary on the relation between picture/photography and the historical transition from Modernism to whatever it is that comes after. The article is built upon two intertwined arguments or lines of thought: on the one hand, Aira’s reflection on the nature of art and the work of an artist (which he offers through the medium of a novel, specifically the story of the painter Johan Mortiz Rugendas’ visit to Argentina and his near-death experience); on the other hand, Rosalind Krauss’ attack on Modernism, which began with her “mobilizing the indexical qualities of the photograph”. Ultimately highly critical of both Aira and Krauss, Gallus-Price highlights the similarities between the two – how Aira recasts a landscape artist as something close to Krauss’ photographer – as well as some crucial differences: “Aira, raising the stakes on (...) Krauss’s notion of the photograph, imagines an art that coincides not with our ideas or even strictly our experience but an art that coincides with the artificial landscape made internal, one in sync with the cognitive plasticity of our brain, thought in itself arrested in perpetua.” This leads Aira, according to Gallus-Price, to abandon the idea of a work (at least in any meaningful sense of the word) altogether – in favour of an account of art that is purely causal and almost automatic: “In writing and forgetting, Aira abandons the work of the novel and the work of art, and like Rugendas, his 19th-century post-accident counterpart, conjures art as a kind of automaticity, an accumulation beholden more to an architecture of aleatory causal forces than to composition. (...) This is what it means to turn the painter — or in Aira’s own case, the writer — into a conduit. Each time he writes he’s struck by lightning — automatic writing.” The politics of such an aesthetics is, as Gallus-Price suggests, ultimately Deleuzian – and entirely compatible with the notion of post-Art.

Eugenio Di Stefano’s article on Carlos Reygadas’ film *Serenghetti* (*The Rules of the Game in Carlos Reygadas’s Serenghetti*) offers both an in-depth interpretation of a single film, as well as comments on the state and theoretical foundations of certain traditions in film criticism. Di Stefano shows how *Serenghetti* – an ostensibly, or superficially, non-fictional movie about a game of football – can, by insisting on a certain idea of fiction (as well as its own fictionality), offer a critique of anti-intentionalism and anti-representationalism that underlies much of slow cinema scholarship (and, more generally, contemporary cultural theory as such). Drawing on Michael Fried’s famous distinction between theatricality

and absorption, Di Stefano highlights the ways in which the film in question “mobiliz[es] (...) antitheatrical elements to assert its status as a work of art”; meanwhile, a more critical reading of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s work allows him to draw attention to difference between watching a game and interpreting art. In fact (as Di Stefano points out, while referencing Michaels and Stanley Cavell), it is the very difference between a game and a work of art – and the risk of conflating the two – that ultimately allows Reygadas to reassert the autonomy of his work: “the point is not that Reygadas simply intends to capture a game, but rather that he intends to use the game as a subject matter to transform the film into an independent and unified whole. That is, the idea here is to transform the film from the experience of the game into an object that needs to be analyzed in its status as an artwork.” In this sense, Reygadas’ work offers something like political critique: “*Serenghetti* should not be understood as an escape from neoliberalism in Mexico today, but rather as offering a repudiation of this ideology by emphasizing interpretation over mere experience.”

Adam Partyka’s *The Boundaries of an Organism: Purposefulness and Autonomy* offers both historical and theoretical commentary on the organicist conception of art – and more specifically, the well-known metaphor of the work of art/literature as a living organism. Starting with Coleridge, Partyka shows how the Romantic version of said metaphor did not – perhaps somewhat contrary to our intuitions – imply a severance of the link between the work and the author, but quite the contrary: “Speaking of a work of art in Coleridgean terms of organic unity, one never disarticulates it from the author. Rather, the organic metaphor so conceived is a very means of securing the place of the author, whose task, modelled after the process of divine creation, consists in transferring onto a poem a certain quality, initially characteristic of the creative process—a quality of organic form.” Tracing its subsequent transformations, Partyka then shows how the meaning of the same metaphor was all but reversed, or turned upside down, by New Criticism – where the comparison between a work of art and a living being suddenly came to imply the former’s complete functional independence of the author. Partyka draws on Fried, Ashton, and Michaels to criticise this reversal, before showing how the anti-intentionalist version of organicism was later inherited by postmodernism (or literalism). Finally, Partyka returns to Kant to both highlight the possible roots of Coleridge’s ideas, and to offer a more comprehensive account of the organicist notion of art. Referencing Brown – and drawing parallels between Kant’s “determining idea”, Coleridge’s “internal law”, and Anscombe’s account of intentional

action – Partyka discovers important similarities between all of them: “This is not to say that either Kant or Coleridge defended an Anscombian understanding of intention, or that they shared Fried’s commitment to frame; it is rather to say that they both inquired into how beauty and form are possible, and the notions of purpose, unity and normativity they found indispensable to this task point to the same conceptual dependence of meaning upon intention that is revealed in the writings of Anscombe, Fried, Cavell, and, notably, Michaels. This is why it seems appropriate to say that modern organicism—the one that secured autonomy—was always about frame, and it was always about intention, variously dubbed.” This “intentionalist” version of “modern organicist” aesthetics – notably different from the postmodern version – carries some political importance, to the extent that it furthers our understanding of art’s purposiveness, its autonomy, and its ability to resist the market.

These four articles are aimed at developing our understanding of autonomy, and pushing the current debate forward. Meanwhile, the last part of the issue is directed specifically to our Polish readers, in an attempt to make the general framework of the debate more accessible to them: it is a Polish translation of the first chapter of Nicholas Brown’s *Autonomy: the Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism* (translated by Łukasz Żurek and edited by Paweł Kaczmarski). We trust this translation – one of the few “intentionalist” works now available in Polish, beyond the flawed 2011 translation of Michaels’ seminal *The Shape of the Signifier* – will encourage our Polish colleagues and comrades to become more invested in the ongoing debate. After all, what is at stake – art’s place in a market society, its irreducibility to commodity status and its ability to signal opposition to market absolutism – is at least as important to the countries of the former Eastern Bloc as it is to everyone else across the world.

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