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Freedom from power - the problem of talking them down

At a dinner a few weeks ago with a few curators, artists and philosophers, the old topic of autonomy came up. In a basement simulacra of a German Beirkeller in uptown central Tokyo a curator handed out some leaflets on her central curatorial project: autonomy and art. Later, after some beer and chat she listened to the philosopher's innocent incredulity as to why on earth anyone was talking about autonomy – especially in art. As a dedicated Luhmanite systems theorist and a self confessed no-nothing when it came to art, he emoted vigorously that there was no such thing and that it was just as well. He went on to say that the idea of autonomy was a recent fad in the grand scheme of things and with it those ideas that we can make connections between it, power and freedom.

Increasingly arts practices have matched this exact philosophical (or even anti-philosophical) premise. Sharing this rejection of autonomy we see a new ontology of our communications as an open field. This is an art that rejects the need to secure an emancipatory politics, which no longer envisages a set of transcendental guarantees to rest art's political agency upon, and, namely without conditioning political agency upon autonomy. In light of this, art has increasingly understood itself as *a part of* the political field rather than something that is instrumental to it, or distant from it. Instead art is seen as an ongoing fluctuating process of interpretations, of communications and dialogues. This is marked by a turn to affect, to the experience, and to the absolute de-automatisation of the artwork. Now the space of communication is open, unfixed and diverse. It could take us anywhere – a route of potentiality to new hybridities, new pluralities and new formations.

The turn to affect therefore has attempted to overcome a theory of representational power and to take in to account the indistinction between not only aesthetics and politics but primarily culture and politics. It has also tried to overcome the secret autonomy that is relied upon and reinstated in a theory of the deautomatised work - the paradox, like it or not, that art has often found itself in. Its here where we can see how the anti-aesthetic of actions from around the 1960's has shifted from an erasure of art objects to the idea of objects as actions in themselves – a return to and development of a phenomenological theatre of objects. These spaces of art are dedicated to affect in a kind of democratic materialism. Here the experience of art is the 'art experience'. The integrity of objects is based on their performative or speech making qualities. To think through this thoroughly deautomatised system then, we don't need to dispose of objects, we simply think objects as communications, as experiences. Therefore, rather than an anti-aesthetic in a denial of the object we instead see the object as a mechanism.

This is now the quite current understanding of the ontological field - a field of objects in action – a new physicalism. Our singularity is plurality where we have worked through and out of autonomy to reside in this field of interpretation. However, despite all of this, what stays with us throughout is that nagging question of autonomy.

When we think about autonomy we think about power, and necessarily the power to 'name self'. This is the power to self-represent. This characterises autonomy as a condition of power where that naming designates a being 'separate to' or as 'distinct from', or that individual identities are somehow not constituted or affected by others' interpretations. As we have seen, building a politics upon the concept that power, as being equivalent to 'freedom from affect', has been thoroughly negated now in many arts practices. In brief, this is centrally because the foundational disconnectedness between culture and politics that had traditionally provided the grounds for discrimination are now understood as unstable.

However, despite the acknowledgement that identities are correlational and conditioned upon each other, self-naming does not disappear from the political scene. Most remarkably, we see this ‘naming of self’ in this description of the ontology of affect: at the very locus point where art suggests that it, more than any other thing can deliver to us the non-representational experience in a demonstration of inclusion; right here in art’s attempt to state its case in and as a ‘natural’ realm of interpretation.

Consequently, rather than think of the autonomy of particular artworks we now are led to the autonomy of art as a category itself – as a system of objects that are distinct in nature from an ‘everyday’ politics of exchange. This system now makes a representation of de-automatised space. It encircles the realm of openness in a secular field of operations. In art’s determination to reveal its openness, we see in its place the closure of art – *the determination of deautomatisation is the autonomous claim*. What stands out here is that this organisational aspect of art directly contradicts the hopes that it holds within it. This dream of art’s connection to the ‘real’ of absolute deautomatisation demands that art makes a mirror of what it sees as the ‘nature of world’. So basically, the trouble with this theory is that culture re-situates those old divides between culture and politics. Paradoxically in re-staking its claim for the space of the heterogeneous real, art withdraws itself from the field of experience and action into the field of fiction and of representation that obtains the privileged position of looking down on the world, but is also weak and ineffectual to it. This is the paradox of *its self-exclusion* from the political field altogether, where the orthodox conditions of ethics and aesthetics are realigned precisely in the assumption that the *description* of self transcends any *naming* of self.

What I’ve outlined here in this small argument is the problem that this ontology of affect inscribes the totalisation of socio-political space whereby it smuggles in its own abstract idealisation of language. As we have seen, this invites the problem that this theory of affect in an experiential field is an idealisation of reason itself - a rationalising of the political as material ‘experience’ that prevents a taking account of its own idealisation. Because this self-picturing goes in under the cover of ‘demonstration’, art’s inability to take this naming as a point of exclusion into account now becomes central.

Recalling the philosophers exasperation – that we need not be so worried about autonomy – we never had it in the first place – we can now identify deeper problems when we see how this space, without such atomisations and without transcendence, participates within the world as a description of it. Here, I’d like to ask if art can get over the problem of this desire to demonstrate a renewed political faith through this concept of correlationalism. I ask this because these activities harbour a massive contradiction. First there is the secret fantasy of art’s innate autonomy, which it believes, should be *relinquished* whilst on the other hand, art’s power is hinged on *establishing* this secret power through knowing self, which we see clearly in these systems that inscribe that ontological claim.

What is left open for some work here is to be understand this process of self description as re-description, where the naming of self is eclipsed by the mechanism of organising self – where organization is an act of interpretation. This is the calling of objects into my, or your, interpretative field in as much as I interpret you into mine, etc. All this tells us quite clearly that any delivery of art’s openness, potentiality or spontaneity is not in opposition to the systemisation of objects. This does not mean that things ‘simply exist’ in fluid relation to one another, but more to the point that these relations are and have been conditioned upon each other in a series of forced relations that are just as prevalent for the curatorial project as it is in our Japanese Bierkeller. In this new ontology, once a signifier of bad power, the autonomy of naming is no longer the primary category of power because systematic organization is now *the condition of power*. This line of thinking now warrants a discussion of how, if the concept of art’s autonomy is

also art's weak and unrewarding fiction of the political, art can move past this ethics of self-revelation towards new understandings of the power relations it could configure. Can the production of new exclusions by art determine new possibilities for it?

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