
When 'Interplay is the Content of the Work'—A Response to Nicholas Brown's *Autonomy*

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Recommended Citation

Archias, Elise. "When 'Interplay is the Content of the Work'—A Response to Nicholas Brown's *Autonomy*." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 22.3 (2020): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3910>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

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CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>
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Volume 22 Issue 3 (September 2020) Article 2

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<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss3/2>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 22.3 (2020)**

Special Issue: **A Symposium on Nicholas Brown's *Autonomy*. Edited by Mathias Nilges.**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss3/>>

Elise ARCHIAS

When 'Interplay is the Content of the Work'—a Response to Nicholas Brown's *Autonomy*

I hold the anachronistic, but still familiar, mid-century view that everybody still invested in creating a civilization in which human beings are not only vectors of power competing for dominance, but also engaged in projects oriented toward shared meaning, has to defend against the almost total dilution and absorption by spectacle of whatever comes near it. (Spectacle in its classic definition, the reader will recall, is the image realm where "commodity fetishism... reaches its absolute fulfillment." (Debord, 26) Everything precious or strongly motivating or beautiful... can be turned into a dumb image of itself—a profaning reduction to a few simple effects that insults the intelligence and dulls the capacity for sensuous understanding of whomever looks at it.

This repeated collapse into image has been accepted as a fact of life since the 1960s, and most art made since then has registered this fact in some way, whether negatively, ironically, or with celebration. Nevertheless, I am wary of artworks that speak the language of spectacle too well, or otherwise foreground their commodity status, even when the artists who make them articulate intelligent critical intentions for their work (as in the case of Hito Steyerl, for example). It is hard for me to see where performance of symptom ends and self-conscious realism begins, and the symptoms themselves seem to risk a potentially unredeemable capitulation to the thin excuse for public social form that spectacle offers. Is not the right strategy to confidently defy spectacle with what it thinks it has killed? Or at the very least refuse to spend our energy learning well enough to cleverly riff on the elaborate systems of codes that constitute the commodity form's constraining, difference-embracing language?

Well, like the field of contemporary art that he takes as his subject, Nicholas Brown's answer to this question in *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art Under Capitalism* (2019) is "No." In keeping with the way art history since 1960 has played out, Brown agrees that artists must risk performing their imbrication with the market—anything else denies the pervasiveness of the commodity's instrumentalizing logic in the capitalist economy in which we are all steeped and from which there is no escape. But Brown's argument distinguishes itself from most contemporary art and criticism, and implicitly urges people who think like me to consider the possibility of a less enervating path forward than refusal. Brown's book offers a framework for singling out and affirming the rare work of art that embraces its commodity status in order then to negate it and assert its autonomy from the commodity's instrumentalizing logic. It does this by making prominent and available formal features that belong only to the work of art because they have no function outside of it. In this response, I offer an understanding of Brown's criteria for judging contemporary art that I have come to agree with and appreciate, but also what would need to be added in order for it to be a more convincing and trustworthy critical system for me. My reservations hinge on the fact that the dialectics of art include qualities, or the qualitative, and quality must be placed on an equal footing with idea, not subordinated to it. Otherwise, we are only symptomatically performing our capitalist age's quantification and abstraction of value.

In Brown's words, a work of art asserts its autonomy by demonstrating that it is a "self-legislating artifact," which means "its form is intelligible, but not by reference to any external end" (31). In other words, art's form reveals the ways it is contained within a set or system of formal decisions that may be in dialogue with the conventions (the history) of the medium or genre, but they are not determined by any purpose or demand brought to it from outside the work. All works of art possess such autonomy—it is key to their definition as art—but Brown favors works that foreground their own formal autonomy, even thematize it, over works governed by other kinds of goals such as representing the way something in the world looks as accurately as possible or getting the viewer to interact with the art object in a particular way (pull a handle, say, or walk a maze). Such goals are shared with other human enterprises like biology or mechanical engineering, and thus do not point to what is special about art. Art's specialness, its ability to stand for, by concretizing, the possibility that another logic besides the leveling, instrumentalized logic of the commodity *even exists* today is of crucial political importance for Brown.

The most compelling quality in a work of art is usually at the site of a meeting of the artist's intention and the material she did not create. Denying the importance of the ways the world's particularity shows up in art — taking its place as a crucial part of the form — is like giving the whole realm of sensuousness and feeling over to spectacle, over to the logic of the commodity, because the profiteers are so good at manipulating us with it.

It is our only hope if we are to keep pushing from the left for another economic principle than the monolithic one we have.

My favorite example in the book of an artwork that showcases its own autonomy is Jørgen Leth's film *The Perfect Human* (1968), in which two performers do ordinary things in fascinatingly particular ways within a tightly controlled formal schema that determines setting (a plain white room), cinematography (only fairly long takes allowed), and genre (the voice over sounds like one from an ethnographic documentary).

My least favorite example of an emphatically autonomous work of art, though helpfully illustrative of Brown's point, is Charles Ray's *Hinoki* (2007), an extremely detailed copy of an enormous dead oak tree lying down, carved in light red cypress wood by Japanese artisans trained to replicate deteriorating wooden monuments. The sculpture reveals its status as an intended form rather than a natural one because several chunks of cypress were required to simulate the original oak, and the places where they are joined together are prominently visible in the final sculpture. I'll return to my reasons for not favoring this work below.

The reason the assertion of formal autonomy by works of art is so important today, Brown argues, is that it models "a taking of sides" against the commodity, from which, again, "emancipation" is not an option (181). Such works of art insist on the possibility of a meaning separate from the capitalist market in a world in which all other institutions that govern and support the generation of meanings in public social life—our governments, schools, and museums, for example—"justify themselves, as best they can, with reference to the market, which means they are subordinate to the market, even when they in principle regulate it" (181-182). In the contemporary world, we explain the worth of everything we and others do in terms of its ability to bring us in proximity to wealth. (I recently learned the term "wealth adjacent," used by museum professionals today—again, accepted as a fact of their lives, at times with a certain pride). We in university humanities departments feel the limits of such a criterion keenly, as the value of the skills we teach are nearly impossible to assess in dollar amounts.

I feel a kinship between Brown's *Autonomy* and my own book, *The Concrete Body* (2016), at the level of our work's motivations. My book argues that the most important aspect of the performance art works made by Yvonne Rainer, Carolee Schneemann, and Vito Acconci in the 1960s is not that they collapsed the boundary between art and life when they used the ordinary body as a material, but rather that they continued to make *art* even though they were using a material that pushed the quality of literal, nonart presence in their work to an extreme limit. In spite of initial appearances, their performance artworks were in keeping with an older, modernist model at a time when this model was being rejected on the basis of its connection to elitist wealth and its being too abstract and not sensorially immediate enough. Immediacy, like "popular culture," was associated with "lowness," and identification with "lowness" was rapidly displacing working- and middle-class consciousness, to the benefit of capitalism's highest earners. I did not use the word "autonomy" very often in my book, but I was certainly trying to show the ways each artist's formal schema (designed in accord with their varying ideas about unifying social abstractions like everydayness, sensuous understanding, or public desire) shaped their found (or otherwise uncontrolled) materials in a way that "calls for an interpretation" (Brown 4). *How* they structured the work is key to the work's meaning, in other words. To not consider these structures, and only attend to the immediate realness of the body, is not to understand the work's positive assertions alongside its negations and performance of symptoms. In this area, Brown and I affirm contemporary works of art for similar reasons.

Where my critical judgment of autonomy is different from Brown's is the much bigger role I give to material particularity and other forms of contingency in my understanding of why the works of art I find compelling are compelling. For Brown, these aspects must be clearly "subordinated to the logic of the work" (222), whereas for me, the form's ability to work with or through or adapt to the contingencies of materials and genre is a criteria for its trustworthiness as a form. A form that does not seem to take the constraints that lie outside of the artist's or the discipline's control into account feels suspicious to me. It seems naively enamored with its own abstract system, potentially brittle and isolated. Formulating the structuring abstraction of course takes intelligence, training, and discipline, and absolutely has value in itself, but to stop at the blueprint phase puts off until some unspecified future point the hard work of negotiation between the many concrete levels on which social meaning also plays out in practice. For me, the best art does not wait; rather, the version of such work that happens in an artist's engagement with physical materials is essential to its thought.

In spite of this difference in our critical values, nearly all of the examples in Brown's book that I am familiar with strike me as smart and trustworthy in their engagement of both a strong structure and a nuanced feeling for particularity and texture. Ben Lerner's *10 04*, Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's

Threepenny Opera, Leth's films that I already mentioned, and David Simon's *The Wire* all conform to my understanding of modernist, Marxist dialectics, too. Only Ray does not.

In Ray and in Brown's account of Ray, "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art," to quote Sol LeWitt's foundational definition of conceptual art back in 1967, and any materiality in the work has to be broached with ironic distance, or quoting Lewitt again, "in a paradoxical way" (83). For many art historians, conceptual art's discursive episode has always felt symptomatically limited—the artistic expression of subjects irrevocably damaged by spectacle's traumatizing barrage of lies about the sensuous dimension of meaning (Meltzer; Stimson). Like the conceptual artists, Ray makes it seem as though he has defensively forgotten what moderns in the early twentieth century understood deeply: that any idea is immediately vulnerable once one begins trying to execute or realize it in the world. Ray lets nothing of this vulnerability of ideas show. The artist pursues forms; the sculptures resemble things and people in the world but they are approached in an objective way rather than as a subject with a feeling body and desires would approach them, drawing upon that subject's experience of flourishing and of suffering. Based on conversations with Ray, Hal Foster once compared Ray's recent work to sarcophagi and mummy cases — coffins, I would add, for the burial of complex public feeling.¹ We know of course that Ray had a process involving his own felt motivations, a negotiation of shared terms, and the overcoming of physical obstacles, but all signs of or for any such living practice are sealed away beneath a hard, flawless shell. Most of the sculptures in his 2015 exhibition at The Art Institute in Chicago began with a photograph that was digitally turned into a mold for casting the work, the surface then polished and etched with mechanical exactitude. Even when the labor is performed with hand tools, as in *Hinoki*, it is a positivist copy and intentionally devoid of interpretation. As when in the presence of minimalist cubes, we are left alone with our own feelings by Ray's work, our own private appreciation of the objective qualities on display in this impressively executed but ultimately very reduced aesthetic experience. In keeping with his own historical conditions, Ray's work feels even more symptomatic than minimalism of the double-down on the privatization of feeling by the liberal art-buying class in the late capitalist neoliberal economy. The rich with humanities educations today seem to like being told they do not have to bring their feelings into public. If they did, the conversation that their guilt, aggression, and exhilarating access to freedom and pleasure would generate might motivate the building of new structures and move the culture toward new kinds of strength, rather than remaining stuck competing at the animal-power levels of force, charisma, and capacity for accumulation. Indeed, members of the globally wealthy class have supported Ray's art generously. In my seven years in Chicago, I have never seen a show at the Art Institute with as much empty real estate dedicated to it as the Ray show.

Differences of opinion about Ray aside, I wonder if we might think of Brown's (and my) investment in the category of art generationally. For a while now I have been trying to think about how the insights and teachings of the "Sixties generation" (those whose sensibility was formed in equal parts by a training in modern European thought *and* the anti-institutionalism of 1968) were received and adapted by those who took them as their mentors. Generational relationships enter *Autonomy's* discussion in the dynamics between Lars von Trier and Leth that become the brilliant subject of von Trier's film *The Five Obstructions* (2003). Leth (born in 1937) belongs to the Sixties generation. Von Trier was born in 1956, a late baby boomer, but he is young enough to be an "admirer" of Leth, and to devote considerable time and energy to "sabotaging" Leth's film *The Perfect Human* in *The Five Obstructions* (Brown 154). Leth was unknown to me before reading *Autonomy*, and he came as a welcome revelation, as I have had to work fairly hard to draw out a Marxist dialectical understanding of art from Sixties generation artists and mentors (Rainer, Acconci, and Schneemann figure as examples of course, but also to some extent my own beloved mentor T.J. Clark). This has been challenging because in writing they themselves tend to emphasize the negative, critical, concrete, or "low" side of their work more than the abstract ideas, positive proposals, and desires contained within its equally strong formal structures. For von Trier to know he wants to mess up the dialectic of Leth and push it toward the side of the "wounding, errant detail" (155) is a useful fact, because it means he functions as one of the younger proponents of the contemporary push to refuse the dialectical thinking of modern critical theory coming out of the Enlightenment tradition, in favor of an anti-formal anti-institutionalism born in reaction to the gradually increasing imbrication of democratic states with the profit-oriented priorities of capitalism's highest earners since the nineteenth century. The older Sixties generation may talk this talk as well, but they never push the dissolution of boundaries or the negation of conventions to the point where it takes over the work. As Brown foregrounds, Leth poses the dialectics in his work against what Leth refers to as von Trier's "Pure romanticism" (156). Brown explains: "Where von Trier wants to move Leth from 'the

¹ Charles Ray Panel Discussion, with panelists Anne Wagner, Michael Fried, Hal Foster, and Richard Neer, The Art Institute of Chicago, May 2015.

perfect' to 'the human,' understood as opposed conceptions of the work of art, Leth wants to use the opportunity to crank up the dialectic between 'the perfect' and 'the human,' between universal and particular, understood as contradictory aspects of the same thing, whose interplay is the content of the work" (156).

For Leth to understand his difference from von Trier, and what's more to fight it out with him, separates him from someone like Rainer who, since the 1980s, will usually claim, in agreement with her younger postmodern interpreters, that the main point of her work lies in its political motivations—to fight against the oppression of particular groups of people, or to point out other abuses of power—even though she is *also* always composing brilliantly ordered abstractions out of beautiful, nuanced, ordinary details in her performers and soundtracks. The theory driving the work that she published circa 1966 is, furthermore, especially keyed to draw out and make available this ordinary texture as a "quality" for audiences to see and feel (Rainer 270).

The two films by Leth that Brown discusses, *Stopforbud* (1963) and *The Perfect Human* (1967), have a lot in common with Rainer's 1960s work insofar as they are tightly structured (visibly constrained at times) by both conventions and ideas, but are also, in their detail, by turns completely delightful *and* painful to witness. Watching *The Perfect Human*, I automatically start wanting to describe the male actor's dancing and the strange things happening on his face while he is eating—they are hard to read and attractive because of that. Their quick changes suggest complex thoughts are happening; this is exciting and feels respectful of my capacity for sensuous attention and understanding. Brown's writing registers similar felt responses: Powell's expressions while performing are "apparently involuntary, occasionally grotesque, and anything but expressive in the usual sense"; and Claus Nissen's performance in *The Perfect Human* of "thinly veiled vulnerability" is "projected by. . . a fleetingly troubled expression, an ambiguous grimace interrupting a love song" (157). Brown simply and beautifully sums up one interpretation of the work like this: "The film...concerns what subjectivity, irreducibly bound up in particularity and difference, looks like when perfection is imposed on it. . . ." (160). "What subjectivity looks like when perfection is imposed on it" is a wonderful, dialectical phrase, pointing strongly to the weird, impossible but necessary projects that art takes on. Notably avoided in this passage, though, is the fact that subjectivity comes off as fairly alienated in *The Perfect Human*, its vitality and sociality barely eking past the externalities through which it must appear.

In his final argument, Brown insists that the details do not matter equally to the abstract structure. They are there to be "subordinated," not exert reciprocal force in the dialectic: "any wounding detail can be integrated into the structure of the film, subsumed under its fundamental tension between 'perfect' and 'human'" (157). Brown goes on, "the success or failure of Leth's conversion of externally imposed contingency into internal consistency marks the strength or weakness of his response" (158). He makes a similar point earlier in the chapter about *Stopforbud*, which I will not review to save space (153-154). In his narrative of "conversion," Brown asserts structure's triumph over particularity in spite of the fact that he quotes Leth and summarizes his theory of art to be aiming for a dialectical play between physiology, wound, detail on the one side, and formal plan on the other. With this in mind, I would not say the particular habits of movement of Nissen or the facial expressions of Powell in *Stopforbud* are subordinated to the plan. I don't believe either film expects me to dismiss these bodily nuances as mere illegible static. They are given a space within the structure and are thus dependent upon it in order to appear, but they are deeply affecting. It seems crucial to the success of the work of art, or "the workness of the work" (154), that I care about them, that I feel them as communicating something importantly small, that I feel something like love, but different, because I don't actually care about the individual on the screen in a personal way at all. This ability to generate a kind of impersonal, abstract feeling is crucial to the structure convincing viewers it is trustworthy. It is necessary, in other words, for us to believe that it is structuring something real that it has had to accommodate in some ways. For Leth to make available feeling and form in *this* dialectical way is very different from the ironic, thwarting, defended, entombing approach to materials in Ray's sculptures.

Brown's values place him in good company, though. I once asked Rainer about the display of particularity in her work, trying to convey my admiration for her ability to put the quirks of her performers' habits on stage in an unchaotic way, and she replied with something like, "Well of course that's there." She was not interested in talking about it, presumably because for her, all dance offers the pleasure of individual performers. Her invention was the structure, and her intentions were political. Creating a space that could adequately accommodate the particular was not, for her, the important part of her intention. I always took that as a sign of her taking for granted the kind of sensitivity to nuanced material qualities that the Sixties generation took as a given, and though her response prevented us from connecting over her art, I was also envious of that "of course" attitude. From where I sat, born forty years later, it has become a capacity that I cannot count on in any given room full of people. Maybe

in the bubble of New York city, surrounded by other artists who had also internalized modern art so much they did not see what from it needed to be preserved while they were unseating the white patriarchs—maybe in that context, one could assume the capacity for ordinary sensuous understanding would not be lost, but out in critique-dominated academia in the early twenty-first century, the specialness of art's being a *concrete* abstraction is something very few people seem to get besides art historians. Retrieving the specialness of art for contemporary thought would be in my view the best thing Brown's and my generation (born in the 1970s, and mentored by the Sixties generation at the height of their mid-career glory) could contribute to this story.

It may be that I am just asking whether art is a site for thinking in which some of the terms are understood primarily as *qualities* (with qualities taking a different form in our thinking than concepts). The most compelling quality in a work of art is usually at the site of a meeting of the artist's intention and the material she did not create. This meeting between ideas and the world is simply how I understand practice. I worry that denying the importance of the ways the world's particularity shows up in art—taking its place as a crucial part of the form—is like giving the whole realm of sensuousness and feeling over to spectacle, over to the logic of the commodity, because the profiteers are so good at manipulating us with it. Feeling can be instrumentalized, in other words, so we stop engaging with it, even though we pursue and make sense of it in our everyday lives, maybe only privately, for different ends.

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