

## The Minimal Politics of Autonomy

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## Myka TUCKER-ABRAMSON

### The Minimal Politics of Autonomy

"Why should the commodification of the work of art be a problem?" (2). This is the question posed by Nicholas Brown's much anticipated book *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art Under Capitalism*. The problem, much discussed in literary studies, boils down to this: since at least Immanuel Kant, aesthetic philosophy has defined artistic practice as "purposiveness without purpose" (8). That is, for art to be art is it must be a "self-legislating artefact" (6); it must act purposefully but for no other purpose than realizing its own ends.

Art, in short, must be an autonomous object. Art's status as a self-legislating artefact, Brown argues, is diametrically opposed to the commodity, which gains its meaning and value not through its internal qualities, but rather through its satisfaction of external ends: namely the desires of the consumer. This means that if art is commodified, it is by definition no longer art. It also means we can no longer interpret it. As Brown warns, "if works of art were commodities like any other, desires represented by the market would be subject to analysis and elucidation, *but interpretation*

*of the work itself would seem a pointless endeavor*" (8-9, emphasis added). Amongst other things this means that if we cannot establish the autonomy of the work of art, those of us who study literature would have to retrain as sociologists.

The problem may appear to be ontological or vocational, but it is also a historical one that raises urgent questions for those of us who are committed to the political potential of art. Brown traces the problem of art's increasingly shaky claim to autonomy back to Michael Fried's famous 1967 screed against minimalism, "Art and Objecthood" (6). Here, Fried argued that minimalism's claim to be merely an object, and its transformation of artistic practice from the artwork itself into the audience's experience of the work, turned minimalism into art's enemy and other: theatricality. The reason that this relatively specific, if highly influential critique of a predominantly Anglo-American art movement in the 1960s is relevant to Brown's quite ambitious Marxist intervention into the entire field of aesthetics is that Fried's argument, for Brown, is historical. It is "fully derivable from the Marxian problematic of the real subsumption of labor under capital" (7). Presumably building on Fredric Jameson's claims in "Periodizing the 60s" that with the "eclipse of culture as an autonomous space or sphere, culture itself falls into the world [...and] becomes coterminous with social life in general" (199), Brown argues that this crisis of autonomy in the 1960s allowed for a "tremendous liberation of formal energies, made possible precisely because the old forms are no longer required to respond to interpretive questions" (19). Also like Jameson, Brown emphasizes that this unleashing of energies came at a cost. Where the neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s saw it necessary to attack modernist claims autonomy as elitist, and to erode the barrier between art and life by "the smashing of the institutions" (29), this eruption ultimately collided into, and became complicit with neoliberalism's marketization, or subsumption, of art and life. Put bluntly, art jumped from the modernist pot into the late-capitalist fire. And this, Brown argues, means that our entire conception of art and politics too must change: in a period in which the neo-avant gardism seems to sing off the same song sheet as the neoliberals, it is claims not to avant gardism, but to old-fashioned, modernist aesthetic autonomy that "assume a new vitality" (21).

Brown's book, then, aims to make this claim for the autonomy of art under present conditions. He does so by arguing that autonomy can be established when artists—broadly construed here to include sculptors, filmmakers, novelists, tv show producers, and musicians—"suspend [art's] commodity character" (8) through a self-conscious engagement with medium or genre that, in turn, suspends its use value. And here we get to what is assuredly the most challenging, and scandalous, set of claims that Brown makes. First, that artworks are not "emancipatory" and have "no political efficacy of their own" (37); and thus, that the job of aesthetic scholars is "not to make extravagant claims for the social impact of art" (37), but "simply to establish the specificity of art and to determine whose side it is on" (37). And second, that explicitly political art is, by nature, not art, but "turns instead into a consumable sign of opposition" (182).

***Why rush to align politically committed art with commodification? Why turn away from the utopian dimensions that were present in Brown's earlier work? Why dismiss outright any potential of political commitment and aesthetic form working together? And why return to a modernist claim for autonomy, without acknowledging how claims to autonomy themselves have always been entangled in political projects, from the French Revolution on?***

As I said, scandalous.

Brown defends this proposition by explaining that, the problem with politically-committed art is that it "open[s] up a chasm between form and content. Artistic means and political ends are separate. If we are judging the political content, the artistic means appear inessential" (37). Moreover, he argues, in a society like ours that is thoroughly saturated and shaped by the commodity form, "any use value is immediately exchangeable [and] conversely, only through exchange is use value socially ratified" (4). Because a political "message is an external end," which is a use-value and use values have become "immediately subject to the logic of consumer sovereignty" (38), politically-committed art is not art. Thus, he argues, our defense of art cannot operate at the manifest level of content, or of the artist's intention, but has to occur within the artwork itself and the ability of the artwork to escape the bind of being "mere expressions of the opinions of their creator" (38) to be an autonomous object displaying "the inseparability of form and content" (38). Hence the focus on questions of form and medium as the grounds through which autonomy can be established.

In his chapter "Modernism on TV," Brown recalls Lars von Trier's film about his attempt to challenge fellow Danish film maker, Jørgen Leth's film *Det perfekte menneske* (The Perfect Human). In the challenge, von Trier establishes five different sets of protocols that Leth must respond to by remaking his initial film: for instance, the long shots that make up the original film must be replaced with extraordinarily short takes. "The film," Brown argues, "is itself an allegory of the restricted field" (154). Trier's challenge also appears to allegorize the challenge Brown sets himself in this book, as he too puts into play a set of protocols and strictures to model what he calls for: an internally coherent criticism, able to account for the autonomy of the artwork and determine which side the artwork is on, without relying on biography, political referents, or historicism. These strictures assuredly lead to often exhilarating and wildly creative accounts of how to think politically about contemporary culture.

Brown's claims are all the more challenging given his carefully chosen examples of artworks, many of which seem to directly index aspects of what is alternately called neoliberalism, financialization, deindustrialization, or the real subsumption of capitalism. To point to one such cluster of texts, in chapter 4, "Modernism on TV," Brown analyzes the container ships off the dock of Louisiana in *True Detective*, the famous Season 2 of David Simon's *The Wire* about the Baltimore's Port, and Jeff Wall's photographs that juxtapose ports and modernist domesticity in Vancouver. From these materials one could easily imagine a chapter on post-industrial aesthetics, but of course that is not what Brown gives us. Instead, the book turns on the game of determining, through form, which objects are art and what side that art is on. Brown determines that Wall's paintings and *The Wire* are art with a liberatory political valence where *True Detective* is mere "entertainment" (71). In a move that echoes that of Lukács in *The Historical Novel*, Brown justifies this delineation by arguing that while *True Detective* depicts what we could understand as the transformation of "industrial production" and those "left behind by it" (71), this depiction is turned into mere "backdrop, with no thematized relationship—not even one of severance—to the gothic murder plot in the foreground" (71). Thus, *True Detective* has no internal purposiveness. It is mere theatricality. In contrast, Brown argues that *The Wire* is a work of art, both because it formally, via genre, asserts its autonomy from the market and because this same context, namely deindustrialization or the shedding of labor, is marked on the show's inner logic. As such, he claims, while the explicit politics of *The Wire* may not be radical, the "logic of its form"—which he argues is organized around the "failure" of civil society "to confront the effects of the shedding of labor" (177) across all five seasons—"demands a radical politics" (177). Similarly, Brown argues that Wall's paintings ascend to the level of art for their ability to both provide the appearance of "just-thereness" or immanence, that is always undercut by the staging of different and incommensurate positions which "model the concept of totality" (66). Here Brown argues, that Wall's paintings depicts "class conflict," but in such a way that Wall is also able to stake its claim "to immanent purposiveness" and thus its autonomy from the commodity" (69).

In all of these readings we can see Brown's distinctive and compelling operation in which both the politics and the status of the object/work of art have to be established not via content or context, historicism or commitment, but rather on the level of form. But this method also raises some questions. For instance, and at the risk of being overly simplistic, can we determine "what side" art is on without grappling with questions of history, context, and commitment? Take Brown's claim that *The Wire* demonstrates civil society's failure to confront the "shedding of labor." This is assuredly true, but without some reckoning with *The Wire*'s political context and its creator's own commitments, we risk misreading the political implications and desires of the show. Writing in the wake of David Simon's revealing comments that those in Baltimore's streets protesting the police's murder of Freddie Gray need to put their bricks down and "go home" (qtd in Zirin), sports columnist and self-professed *Wire* fanatic, Dave Zirin, wrote a "mea culpa" of sorts. Where previously, like Brown, he had defended the *Wire* as

"revolutionary," he now realized it was just "just a cop show:" that it downplayed systemic police violence; that it dismissed or ignored the grassroots initiatives in Baltimore that were organizing to confront precisely what Brown would describe as "the effects of the shedding labor," which includes fighting against poverty *and* police brutality; and that it worked to re-entrench the status quo by limiting its gaze to a very specific vision of the official post-war politics of the state and the union. Moreover, we can consider *The Wire's* absorption of wire-tapping, drones, and other new technologies of counterinsurgency into the very formal structure of the show, which become the medium through which the viewer's desire to gain insight into the corners of Baltimore and/or to cognitively map the scene of Baltimore was satisfied. The tethering of the viewer's voyeuristic desires to these new technologies of surveillance works to prepare and condition its viewer to support and align itself with the massive post-1990s security state that, as Chris Chen has argued, came "into being to manage the supposed civilisational threats to the nation — by policing black wageless life, deporting immigrant labour, and waging an unlimited 'War on Terror'" (np).<sup>1</sup> In short, the *The Wire's* formal and aesthetic innovations, the very things that for Brown make it radical art, are tethered to its political commitments to, and nostalgic mourning of, a very specific kind of post-war state-centered politics at a moment in which that state was becoming (even more) hyper-militarised.

Indeed, one problem with Brown's singular focus on commodification is that art is only recognized as art insofar as it speaks directly to the market, which undercuts works of art whose relationship to capitalism is mediated through other facets such as state violence, and other forms of dispossession. This becomes particularly evident in the chapter that speaks most closely to literary scholars, Chapter 2, "The Novel and the Ruse of Work," where he examines novels that explicitly tackle questions of the art and commodity: namely, Ben Lerner's *10:04*, Jennifer Egan's *A Visit to the Good Squad*, and Tom McCartney's *The Remainder*. Here, his readings are organized around the problem of experience which, Brown explains, is also the problem of the market. Brown explains that both *A Visit* and *10:04* "produc[e] the market internally as a risk to be courted, understand the problem of experience as a version of the problem of the market" (81). The risk that they court is in raising "the possibility that *10:04* [like the other novels] is a pure art commodity selling us our own self-selection into the co-op of those too smart to be liberals and too sane to be anything else" (87). After all, novels more than any other form, are simple commodities: mass-produced, marketed and sold. How, then, can novels be art? Brown's solution is that novels are able to suspend their commodity character so by both an "ironizing of ends external to the logic of the work" (82) and by "invoking the institution of art," through their own frame (112). Thus, these novels continually hold the question of experience, and with it the commodity, at bay.

Brown's reading of these texts is superlative, but it is less clear how these readings would be applied to the genre of the novel as a whole. Consider the texts he engages with. All are rarefied, postmodern, American novels that are explicitly about the problem of art, the market, and the novel. All, in other words, belong to the "mode" that Paul Crosthwaite helpfully terms "market metafiction," a term he uses to describe texts that are concerned with how "fictionality solicits or spurns the approval of the literary marketplace" (3). But given Brown's dismissal of content-based readings in the chapter of television, surely we have to ask if Brown's claim would work if applied to novels that operate outside of this mode: either market metafiction novels that have a more explicitly political engagement, such as Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers*, or to novels or memoirs whose interest in experience is tethered to a different aspect of capitalism, not the market, but the capitalist state: say, for instance Arundhati Roy's *Walking with the Comrades*, a work of reportage on the Naxalites in India or Saleem Haddad's *Guapa* about the experience of the Arab Uprisings.

If Brown's argument was simply that all art needs to have some aspect of conscious engagement of form, or if the book simply set out to establish which elite, anglo-American artforms and which popular cultural artefacts are art and which mere entertainment, that would be one thing. But that is not the book's claim; instead, *Autonomy* is resolute in its claim that politically committed art is not only not art, but a mere commodity (no different than a Park Slope Co-op bag he puts it slyly). Thus presumably *10:04* is art and *Flamethrowers* is a commodity. But given his archive, this claim raises some serious questions about method. In stark contrast to his last book, *Utopian Generations*, which made the strong case that we must read British modernism and African novels of decolonization as dialectically connected, and unified by an investment in a certain utopianism, *Autonomy's* examples are a heady mix of pop culture and elite, postmodern art, sourced almost entirely from the industrial powerhouses of the UK, US, Germany, and Brazil. And, moreover, utopia here is nowhere to be found. This is not incidental

<sup>1</sup> The ideas here are largely taken from conversations with Molly Geidel who has been making this claim for years and will hopefully be publishing them soon.

but baked into the book's Friedian origins, which itself was concerned with the status of minimalist gallery art. The question then becomes, why take this singular, and discipline-specific intervention, though admittedly a highly influential one in the field of art history, and treat it as a general law of all aesthetic production across genre if what it gives us is a lens in which we can interpret *10:04* and *The Wire*, but not, say, *The Uncomfortable Dead* or *Sorry to Bother You*, that is cultural productions that are explicitly aligned with mass movements?

Moreover, Brown's claim that Fried's "Art and Objecthood" is "derivable from the Marxian problematic of the 'real subsumption of labor under capital'" (7) overlooks the quite significant body of work that has challenged whether Marx's use of "real subsumption" itself can be derived into a theory of culture. Dave Beech, to name just one critic, has made the strong case that whilst it seems to make sense to use the term "real subsumption" to describe how the market has shaped processes and practices outside of productive, value-producing labor, this is not in fact accurate. "Marx," Beech writes "refers exclusively to the *formal and real subsumption of labour under capital*. Marx does not write about the subsumption of society, nor of any other abstractions" (17). And this is because, Beech argues, "for Marx subsumption is a *mechanism* through which capital exerts its power, first by purchasing labour power and then by reorganising production according to its own specific needs, through the division of labour, the use of mechanisation and so forth" (17). It is not my goal here to wade into the deep waters of the real subsumption debates, though I would ask why Brown does not engage them, but rather to point out that what appears as a series of logical and necessary premises and outcomes are a series of interpretive and political choices made by Brown.

I want, then, to pose a series of questions about the premises of Brown's book, which I think need to be addressed: What are the stakes in turning away from the rich body of work, going back to modernists such as Walter Benjamin and avant gardists like Guy Debord, who similarly wrestled with questions about art, politics, and commodification, and towards the much more narrow and conservative questions posed by Michael Fried? Why rush to align politically committed art with commodification, instead of engaging the important conversations about the complicated relationship political or activist art has always had in relationship to the risks of aesthetization or spectacularization? Why turn away from the utopian dimensions that were present in his earlier work? Why dismiss outright any potential of political commitment and aesthetic form working together? And why, return to a modernist claim for autonomy, without at least considering how claims to autonomy themselves have always been entangled in political projects, and thus the risks such a strategy might contain?<sup>2</sup>

In the brief space I have left, then, I would like to draw on two counterpoints to Brown's model that offer alternate models for thinking about contemporary art and politics, models that share Brown's concern for questions around commodification, but which refuse to give up on commitment, solidarity, or utopianism. Like in Brown, practices of art, and the division between art and produced objects or commodities is at the center of Kristin Ross's *Communal Luxury*, which devotes an entire chapter to the Commune's conception and democratization of art. This, she argues, was key to its legacy. Turning to the calls and manifestos of the commune-formed Federation for Artists, as well as its mode of operating, Ross argues that what was remarkable about them was not just their demand for "the autonomy of art and artists vis-à-vis state power" in the form of a "total freedom from state subsidy" (51), but rather their complete democratization of the artwork. As she explains, "At a moment when artists, menaced by the precariousness of their situation, might well have attempted to protect their status, the Federation instead chooses to address the issue directly and subvert the hierarchical relation between art and industry" (54). Practically speaking, this meant welcoming workers such as cabinetmakers or even shoemakers into the federation. In doing so, she argues, they eschewed questions of evaluation or value, questions that could always be appropriated by the market, and instead focused solely on the "process of making and onto the artist, whose labor generates value. All art, in their view, was artisanal and skilled in its production and in the socialization of its makers [... In short] they simply went about increasing the number of those who counted as an artist" (58). It was this context that led to Napoléon Gaillard's famous re-conceptualization of his designing of a barricade as a work of art that he could "sign" by having himself photographed in front of his creation and later, his insistence that he was an "artist-shoemaker" (55).

Brown would likely argue that it is precisely this gesture—eroding the barriers between art and everyday life—that becomes subsumed into the market in the post-1970s world. But what makes Ross's description of the Artists Federation particularly relevant to our discussion here is her claim that "the

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<sup>2</sup> In this vein, Sarah Brouillette and Joshua Clover, for instance, compellingly argue that we understand autonomy as a "bourgeois fetish" (np).

world of the Communards is in fact much closer to us than is the world of our parents" (3). What makes it closer, she argues, are the same conditions that Brown identifies with our moment of full-subsumption: namely the shedding of and casualization of labor that create informal and precarious patterns of labor and migration. But it is also the explosion throughout the 2010s of "the figure and phenomenology of the encampment or occupation" in places like Oakland, Greece, Cairo, and Spain (2) that make the Commune relevant. Because Ross's focus is not on the commodity status of art, but the process of its making, she is able to at least pose the question of what utopian potential might still exist in contemporary art practices, when rooted within social movements.

It is also this question that Boris Groys takes up in his most recent book, *In the Flow*. Groys like Brown starts from the proposition that we are no longer in the era of either Debord's spectacle or Adorno's culture industry in which art "was made for the masses" and "wanted to seduce the masses, to be consumed by the masses" (111). Rather, Groys argues that transformations in "technical means of image production and distribution" (111) as well as in our understandings of what is and is not art have created a new situation in which artwork is not understood as "an object produced through manual work by an individual artist" but rather is "an effect of the choosing, placing, shifting, transforming and combining of already existing images and objects" (111). This practice, he argues, is carried out globally via Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, or YouTube, which means that "contemporary art has become definitively a mass cultural practice" (112). This shift, which he roots in the modern class structure in which "everybody has to work and everybody has some leisure" (113) has created a situation in which "the contemporary person operates partially as art producer and partially as art consumer" (113).

This situation has clear resonances with the one that Ross describes during the Paris Commune in which the line between what is art and who is and is not an artist was eroded, and in which the practice of art had been universalized. Groys is no accelerationist or techno-utopianist, and does not shy away from the key roles that both commodification and the monopoly capitalism associated with platform corporations like YouTube and Instagram have played in the process. But, in forefronting the relationship between art and transformations in technology and class structure and composition (as opposed to focusing exclusively on the market), Groys' diagnosis is significantly different from Brown's. Groys argues that if "the whole world is a field of possible artistic action, [...then] art potentially takes responsibility for the entire world – whether through action or inaction" (120). In other words, for Groys, it is through art's commodification, its tumbling into the world, that its political potential persists.

In staging Groys against Brown, however, I've returned us back to all-too familiar ground: the autonomy or mass culture debates waged by Adorno and Benjamin in the 1930s. This was inevitable I suppose. Brown after all titled the article on which his book is based, "The Work of Art in the Age of Real Subsumption under Capital." But the terms have of course changed. Part of the excitement of Brown's book comes from its claim that mass cultural forms such as genre fiction, tv shows, and popular films can also achieve autonomy through a process Brown describes as the "aestheticization of genre" (25). But those mass cultural forms that Brown brings in are not the forms that have revolutionized our cultural and political moment: the tik tok videos, twitter essays, internet art, reality tv shows, and YouTube series that have been made possible by the digital technologies and platforms that are at the center of Groys' work and which remain largely absent or untheorized in Brown's book. This is reflected in the title of the article, which transforms Benjamin's focus on a technological transformation, mechanical reproduction, to a temporal marker of capitalism: "real subsumption."

The other key way Brown changes the terms of the argument, however, is to mute the political claims and stakes of such an argument. *Autonomy* hinges on the argument that a "claim to autonomy is today a minimal political claim" but one that is "the precondition for any politics at all other than the politics of acquiescence to the status quo" (34). When Brown's article came out in 2012, such a minimal claim could, perhaps, resonate. But in our current moment of ecological collapse and disaster nationalism creeping into full-blow fascism, that is given the complete evacuation and collapse of anything resembling a status quo, we simply do not inhabit a world where claims to either the status quo or a minimal claim to politics is feasible. It is our current moment of fascism's resurgence under wholly new conditions—as Richard Seymour notes "whereas interwar fascism consciously modelled this relationship on messianic religion, it is now modelled on Twitter, YouTube, and the dynamics of online celebrity" (2020)—that make Brown's return to this debate about autonomy and mass culture all the more resonant. But this also means that Brown's argument needs to account for the new techno-political context of digital fascism, and not just more abstracted questions of subsumption. And given the climate in which we find ourselves, one cannot help but feel that if the strongest case that can be made for art and our interpretative acts is that it can give us a "minimal claim to politics," we might be best served by becoming sociologists – or just joining a union.

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