

Late Postmodernism

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Nicholas BROWN**Late Postmodernism**

In a moment I will adopt the fiction that I do not know Elise, Tim, Christian, Marina, Fabio, Myka, and Fred. But before I do I will say that being read with such careful critical attention by six of my contemporaries, and one of our teachers, at a time when a half-century's worth of capitalism's chickens is coming home to roost, has been an unexpectedly moving experience. I am grateful to them.

Elise Archias highlights a problem that is undertheorized in *Autonomy*, namely the role of sensuous experience in art. To clarify what is at stake, I will begin from where we unequivocally agree, and see how far we diverge from there. Archias knows infinitely more about art and conceptual art in particular than I do, so I will take her word that Sol LeWitt means it when he says that in conceptual art "the idea becomes a machine that makes the art."

This is not how artists or anyone else ordinarily proceed. (Not even Sol LeWitt; but that he thinks he does has consequences). The "idea" is not a separate "what" that precedes my doing or making something, but a modality of the action itself: it is what makes it an action, rather than just something that happens. I write this paragraph knowing that I am almost certain to revise it heavily later. (I did). During that later process of revision, I will be changing my words to realize better the "idea," which I can provisionally name—as I conceive it now, it is to clarify the differences, if any, between Archias's

The movement from formal to real subsumption is a real dynamic but only an ideological fact: the shift from Adorno's claim for the artwork's "dual character" to the claim that the artwork is a commodity like any other. The insistence on judgment and interpretation is not exactly a weapon, since what an artwork can compel (a conviction) is different than what a job action can compel (a behavior). But a successful job action depends on convictions. Both oppose, but in different ways, the universal commodification of human life.

theoretical coordinates and my own—but which I cannot produce in advance of the paragraph itself. As I begin to write my response to Archias, I suspect those differences will turn out to be small, but I will not really know that until I work through the issues in writing; until I work through, that is, a whole welter of structures (linguistic, logical, historical, and rhetorical, for starters) that from the standpoint of my putative "idea" would appear to be contingent. But in the case both of small revisions (better saying what I mean) and of large ones (figuring out what I mean), to realize my idea successfully does not mean to execute a program previously decided upon. Indeed, the idea does not have an effective separate reality, only an ascriptive, immanent one. (Only apparently paradoxically, immanent and ascriptive are in this case aspects of the same idea. I will return to this apparent paradox in my response to Thorne, below).

The problem with the conception of art as something cranked out of an idea-machine is that, in Archias's words, it bypasses "the form's ability to work with or through or adapt to the contingencies of materials and genre," which is "a criterion for its trustworthiness as a form." This is both true and crucial. The cognitive dignity of art—whether it any longer exists in "its highest vocation," as Hegel insisted it did not (*Vorlesungen* 25, *Aesthetics* 11)—hinges on whether the successful negotiation with some resistant matter in hand—anything from functional harmony to the French Revolution—can serve as, in Robert Pippin's words, a "sensuous-affective marker of truth" (135).¹ Or, as Archias puts it, what "happens in an artist's engagement with physical materials is essential to its thought." This is undertheorized in *Autonomy*, which is why Archias writes of the eloquence of form's interaction with contingency in order to oppose it to my own insistence that "these [contingent] aspects must be clearly 'subordinated to the logic of the work.'" (The "clearly" is Archias's, by the way, not mine). But there is no opposition between Archias's statement and my own.

Archias writes that "quality must be placed on an equal footing with idea," and if I understand her correctly she means by this also that contingency and form must be placed on an equal footing with each other. In reading Archias's response I have come to regret my frequent recourse in *Autonomy* to the language of domination and subordination in this context, but they were always meant as approximations of Hegelian *Aufhebung*: "these contingent aspects," I meant to say, "must be

¹ Translations from Hegel (*Vorlesungen*) will be mine, with references to the Knox translation (*Aesthetics*) provided.

aufgehoben by the logic of the work." There is nothing I can do about that now; but that aside, I do not think Archias is as committed to such "equal footing" as she insists she is. It is undoubtedly true that negotiation with contingency, struggling with a matter in hand, cannot be perceived, much less judged to be successful or not, much less come to bear cognitive weight, if it disappears into the form. Put another way, form immediately loses its power if it appears to be imposed on the material from without, if the work of art appears to emerge from an idea-machine. But Archias also insists that artists shape or frame their contingent materials in a way that "calls for interpretation." This implies that those materials are, in the work, essentially related to the work in a way they were not before. Raw materials, by definition, do not call for interpretation: "found (or otherwise uncontrolled)" materials do not, as simply found or uncontrolled, mean anything. (Alternatively, they can be made to bear an indefinite number of meanings, which is the same thing). Only within the work do they mean something determinate. This does not mean that they cease to be legible as having been found or in some other way left to their contingent development. But what it means to be legible as anything at all (rather than simply being what they are) is to bear a meaning; in the work, they are other than they were; they are, in the terms I used in *Autonomy*, subordinated to the logic of the work.

What does this look like when brought to bear on Charles Ray? On both Archias's and my account, form must operate with, as Hegel says of human action in general, "a light touch," a "ruse" (in Hegel's unpleasantly gendered description, a feminine quality that might nonetheless tend to counteract the agonistic language that predominates in *Autonomy*) if it is to convince us that something is being revealed of the matter in hand. I think what Archias is pointing to, insightfully, is that such ruses are characteristic of Jørgen Leth's genius, in a way that they are not characteristic of Ray. It is worth noting that of the pieces exhibited at the Charles Ray show to which Archias and I both refer, the ones I thought were most powerful (*Hinoki*, *Unpainted Sculpture*, and *Tractor*) were the ones that are least well described by Archias's astute description of the sculptural mode that dominated the exhibition.

But consider Ray's 1986 *Ink Box*. It looks like a solid black plexiglass cube, three feet to a side, but it is actually a five-sided steel box open at the top, painted glossy black with automobile paint and filled precisely to the rim with black ink. We are dealing with a domination of materials that appears almost cartoonish in its gratuitousness: you might depict a box with ink, but ink does not look like a box. The similarity with Tony Smith's *Die* (six feet to a side) is obvious and intentional. *Ink Box*'s relation to other such "minimalist cubes" is of course parodic: it looks like a shiny black cube, but it is not, it is a box filled with ink. In other words, it is depictive: in a sense, drawn with ink. If *Die* is stubbornly and mutely the object that it is, *Ink Cube* is illusionistically something other than it is, and also, in its reference to *Die*, clearly about that difference.

Why, if the reference is primarily to *Die*, are the dimensions exactly half those of Smith's sculpture? So you can touch the top: better, since it is in a museum and you cannot touch it, so you can want to touch it. Why? Because you want to verify that if you did you would stain your finger and the surface would shimmer glossily in concentric circles. What it depicts would dissolve into what it is. The tension between idea and material is, in *Ink Box*, not immediately legible in the sensuous materials of the sculpture, but rather becomes insistent through a cognitive operation that is—and herein lies the genius of the piece—no less sensuous, and no less material, than the ink and steel and paint. Ray's raw material in *Ink Box* is not primarily the steel, ink, and paint; it is you, or better, "your own feelings." This is the contingent reality that Ray cannot dispense with or dominate but can only "turn aside with a light touch." Rather than being "alone with our own feelings," we are, with Ray and with everyone else who encounters the sculpture on the terms on which it insists, acutely aware of the dialectical interplay of the literal and depictive. Better, "our own feelings" turn out not to be ours at all, but, for a moment, "subordinated to the logic of the work."

Although it is not the focus of her essay, Archias retains, I believe, the skepticism of her initial question: "Is the right strategy not to confidently defy spectacle with what it thinks it has killed?" The answer is not "no." Institutional or para-institutional buffers against the anonymous market—restricted fields in the Bourdieusian sense—persevere here and there against the onslaught of the market. We are participating in one right now. Artistically ambitious jazz musicians, subsidized by session work outside the field, have managed to retain important aspects of a restricted field; what we call classical music has subsisted on patronage for four hundred years. Constantly under threat from the anonymous market, restricted fields are nonetheless not residual phenomena; they are precariously liberated territory. Alisa Weilerstein and Christian McBride can confidently go on doing what they are doing not because their work is not a commodity; rather they can confidently go on doing what they are doing because an institutional or para-institutional relation to the market means that in the work, the problem of the relation to the market does not have to come up. It is important to emphasize that this is not for immediately sociological reasons, but for normative reasons that respond to sociological conditions.

What you hear at the Vanguard does not count as jazz because it is at the Vanguard; rather, you go the Vanguard to hear music that understands itself, and is understood, to contribute to the idiom. Once you are there, you are supposed to decide for yourself. This contribution is a claim made by the music, a claim that is immanent to, indeed identical with, the music itself. The claim to be a contribution to a normative field—something that commodities, for reasons Archias seems to grant but that I will return to later, ordinarily cannot be—is not made possible on the basis of externality to the market, but is rather the artwork's account, under the normative conditions that pertain to artistically ambitious jazz, of its relation to the market.

The problem *Autonomy* is meant to answer, however, 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." Musically, what happens on a good night at the Vanguard or at the CSO is more substantial than what happens in a good White Stripes song. But what happens at the CSO and the Vanguard does not produce helpful answers to the problem of *Autonomy*, because it does not have to ask it.

Absent an institutional mediation—a mediation that is present, even if not thematized, in the work itself, which has somehow to claim its place in the restricted field—the violence exerted by the anonymous market is immediately present. Once one has entered that force field, there is no easy way out; if one is acting in defiance one is no longer proceeding according to immanent exigencies. This is, again, not because art must ultimately be bought and sold. "Rather," altering Hegel's words a little, "our whole spiritual formation is such that the artist herself stands within a world thus characterized by the commodity form, with all that entails. No artist could, merely by resoluteness and force of will, abstract herself from it." (*Vorlesungen* 25, *Aesthetics* 11. Hegel is talking about reflection, not the commodity form). 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.

Uncharacteristically, at the end of her comments on Ray, Archias takes up a deflationary, anti-interpretive stance toward his work: the imbrication of art with the market—which exists—becomes a reason not to understand it as art. But where imbrication with the market is understood to be universal, every artwork must presumptively contend with this stance. While there may be family resemblances among the possible answers artists might devise to counter the challenge to meaning posed by the market (*Autonomy* tries to name a few), there can be no prescriptive or a priori understanding of what such ruses might look like. (As Fredric Jameson points out in his response, *Autonomy* proposes a diagnosis, not a program). The point is rather that artists have no choice but to devise them. A commitment to craft—mammal hair in a Disney film—is usually nothing more than a professional commitment to good work product. But a commitment to craft—Prince's "Kiss"—can also be so emphatic that it stands as a rebuke to the good work product that surrounds it.² But such commitment to craft is, in its opposition to good work product, itself a version of "performing [the work's] imbrication with the market," another ruse to claim meaning while making its way in a market that forecloses it.

Tim Lanzendörfer begins by saying he thinks my account of genre is wrong; he ends, if I am not mistaken, by saying that my account of genre is right. Obviously I prefer the latter stance. More soberly put, I thank Lanzendörfer for formulating explicitly what is merely implicitly, and therefore inconsistently, the account of genre that operates throughout the relevant chapters of *Autonomy*. Lanzendörfer is right to point out that my account of genre is thin. From the standpoint of *Autonomy*, genre is not in itself of interest. Genre is only of interest when artworks make it of interest. (Genre in the robust sense of an aesthetic solution to a historical-representational problem, developed in Georg Lukács and notably in Roberto Schwarz's recently translated *To the Victor Go the Potatoes*, is not presently at issue). For this reason the account of genre that counts in *Autonomy* is the one made by the work itself; prior, external accounts are from that standpoint irrelevant. This is because genre is an ascription, one that customers and critics and network executives make, but also one that artworks make. *Autonomy* is about how artworks exist when a direct relationship to the market would tend to render their existence impossible. The "desire to preserve distinctions between literary fiction and genre

² "Kiss" displaced Falco's "Rock Me Amadeus" for the number one Billboard spot in April 1986. For a dramatic illustration of craft as a rebuke to good work product, see Prince's guitar solo on "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" at George Harrison's induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. (www.youtube.com/watch?v=6SFNW5F8K9Y). Prince knows exactly what he is saying; everyone else on stage does too, and most of them do not like it. Dhani Harrison, to his credit, is into it. Having been born in 1971 is another contingency to be negotiated.

fiction" in "literary writers who adopt popular genres" (Rosen)—a phenomenon represented in *Autonomy* by Cormac McCarthy—is not a mode of making art possible; it is only an appeal to a different market niche.³ The attempt to make genre fiction "literary"—in itself therefore always an attempt to "preserve distinctions"—involves a disavowal of genre that can only be made in bad faith: it is, in a word, kitsch. Artworks can only make genre of interest—apparently paradoxically, asserting a moment of autonomy from genre—when their internality to the genre is unreservedly avowed. The claim that a time-travel flick can have only one of two endings might be true (I think it is), it might even be a more or less rigid constraint on the genre, but it is also—so goes my argument—a claim that *The Terminator* makes, and the film can only make it on the basis of having made the logically prior but temporally simultaneous claim that it is itself a time-travel flick. Someone might come along and make a film that has time travel in it but that does not end in one of those two ways, and that might be a time travel film and it might not, and it might make a claim about the time travel genre (it might make the time travel genre of interest) or it might not. It might just be a shite movie. (*Looper*). You have to watch it and figure it out.

Since we are dealing with normative claims and not, in Jeremy Rosen's phrase, "established but variable recipes" (which, to be clear, do exist), there is no essential distinction to be drawn, from the standpoint of *Autonomy*, between the "materiality of the canvas" and the "non-materiality of both harmonic resolution and of genre fiction." They are both material in that they present artists with real constraints, and they are both non-material in that these constraints are normative all the way down. Easel painting does not have to be a thing, and the flatness of the canvas does not have to be a crucial problem for it. But if you are an aesthetically ambitious mid-century painter, you are going to have either to take on the problem of the flatness of the canvas, or make a really good case, in your painting, that there are more important problems.

Fichte begins his *nova methodo* by asking readers to "Think of anything at all, the wall for example" (29). There is nothing obviously self-referential in such straightforward, object-directed mental activity. But in short order Fichte produces from it, *in ovo*, the entire self-reverting structure of consciousness as he understands it. Thinking about the wall requires a previous distinction between subject and object, an "I" to do the thinking; since the "I" is not a positive feature of observed reality, such a distinction requires that the "I" must already have been posited. "Thus, in this very act of consciousness, I posited myself as both the subject and the object of that same consciousness... I simply posit myself" (30-31). The self-reverting structure of consciousness is simply presupposed in any conscious activity, and this is true whether or not it is present to mind in that activity.

Christian Thorne makes the potentially perspicuous observation that *Autonomy* gravitates toward works that can be described as having a reflexive relationship to their own status as artworks and commodities. "Simple self-referentiality," he writes, is *Autonomy's* "most basic requirement." If Fichte's "simply" (*schlechthin*, not *einfach*) and Thorne's "simple" are the same, then Thorne gets this right. But such a "requirement" is not exactly prescriptive and certainly not a personal preference. Rather, it describes a structure of entailment that is best summed up in a kind of future perfect: works that successfully suspend their own commodity character will be found to have produced an account of their own status as artworks and as commodities, whether or not that awareness is present to mind as we experience them. This structure embodies what Adorno called the "dual character" [*Doppelcharakter*] of artworks. On one hand, art is a simple "*fait social*" (351). That is, in the "total exchange-society" (335) that Adorno saw as the secret tendency of societies like ours, and which is the avowed ideology of the now-teetering center-right consensus, the artwork is just a commodity. But at the same time, for Adorno, an artwork, by being "formed according to its own immanent law... silently denounces... a state of affairs that tends toward a society characterized entirely by exchange, in which everything serves some heteronomous purpose [literally, "everything is merely for another": *in ihr ist alles nur für anderes*, which might also be translated, much more loosely but still faithfully, as "everything is condemned to be merely useful"] (335). In short, "the work of art takes up as its object its own relation, as an object, to empirical society" (335). If we think of the artwork as an active taking-up of its own empirical situation, such doubleness is going to be built in, and for the same reason that consciousness for Fichte always bears the structure of self-reverting activity: "Every representational act is an act of self-positing" (Fichte 31). *The Terminator* can only make a claim about the time-travel genre because it has already posited itself as a time-travel flick. But it is not as though *The Terminator* is formally very similar to, say, Spike Jonze's and Charlie Kaufman's *Adaptation*. Nor, conversely, can self-referentiality serve as any kind of formal guarantee of such Adornian doubleness: latter-day *Star Wars* movies are self-

³ See Brown, *Autonomy* 93-95.

referential, but that is just part of the limited pleasure they produce; that is, self-referentiality in *Star Wars* movies is nothing more than a moment of their heteronomy, being-for-another, or use-value.

Other than that, Thorne seems, even at the sentence level, to have understood surprisingly little of *Autonomy*. A catalogue of instances where Thorne has misconstrued my argument, at times so spectacularly as to court a suspicion of bad faith, might be cathartic for me but would be deadly boring for everyone else. So I will try to restrict myself to a few of the areas where Thorne gets things wrong not about *Autonomy*, but about the world.⁴

The first of these is his understanding of meaning, which he equates with use: "A Thomas McCarthy novel has *no* advantages in this regard over a tube sock or a travel mug, and Brown can only believe that it does by arguing repeatedly, contra Marx, that it is usefulness, not doubleness, that makes something a commodity." Thorne forgets for a moment that the logic according to which use-value is the necessary and sufficient condition for exchange, and therefore the necessary and sufficient condition for a product's commodity-character, is abundantly available in Marx. "The only condition for [a product] to be stamped as a circulating member of the world of commodities is that it actually have a usable form, a use-value" (Marx 430).⁵ Marx's point is that in societies whose metabolism takes place by means of the market, any use-value will immediately take the form of a commodity. That's all.

This means, as Thorne correctly notes, that it also immediately has an exchange value. To realize its exchange value, a product must have a use; for a product to be socially ratified as useful, it must be exchanged. But the dual character of the commodity is not the dual character of the artwork, because meaning is not the same as use. The reason for this is simple. Meanings are normative ascriptions. Uses are not. Meanings are not a special kind of use, but something other than use.

When I first moved to Chicago, the street vendors on Maxwell Street used to hawk cheap tube socks in one hand and cheap pornography in the other. You might disapprove of the implied use for tube socks, but it would be weird to say that customers misunderstood tube socks, that their account of the tube sock was unconvincing, that they mistakenly ascribed to tube socks a use they do not have. They simply found a new use for tube socks. But we can and do insist that novels can be misunderstood, that a person's account of a novel can be unconvincing, that a student or a colleague or a friend can ascribe a meaning to a novel that it does not have. A novel of course also has a use and therefore is exchangeable: it has the ordinary doubleness of the commodity. But it is also has the dual character of the artwork insisted upon by Adorno. Adorno and Brecht agree at least on this, that works of art are capable both of having a use (e.g. entertainment) and of being about that use. Brecht, not I, made the observation that in *Mahagonny* fun is also an inquiry into fun. I only said it was also true of a White Stripes song. If you really think meaning is identical with use, then you think that all readers of a novel are entitled to their own private meanings just as all buyers of tube socks are entitled to their own private uses, and in that case literature professors and seminars really are useless. As far as the commodity-character of the artwork is concerned, that is not wrong. But if you believe that is all there is to it, then there is nothing further to talk about. Other people's interpretations will be as little relevant to you as other people's dreams.

Autonomy is the translation into the aesthetic domain of Hegelian "negativity": the fact not that artworks (or artists) are free from external circumstances, but that precisely those external

⁴ Oh twist my arm. If I were going to make such a catalogue I would begin with places where Thorne ascribes to me ideas that are the opposite of the ones I affirm (his "the position of the working class... [is] now filled by quality television and smart novels" vs. my "unlike unions... works of art have no political efficacy of their own" [37]; similarly with the idea that "the old paths still work, that new ones aren't needed"; at one point he even ascribes to me an idea opposite to my own that is apparently his, namely that "we search art for the possibility of our freedom," while what I say is that "the work of art does not promise emancipation" [181]); or where he ascribes ideas to me that are clearly marked in the text as belonging to someone else ("the confusion in which everything is lost" [135] being a paraphrase of Caetano Veloso's lament, cited at length on the previous page, that musical innovations in Brazil become "lost in the confusion" [134] of the market); where he makes false characterizations of my argument (as when I am supposed to "roll my eyes over *Avatar* because of some dumb thing its director once said in an interview," when in fact the dumb thing its director repeatedly said in interviews confirms that he knew and acknowledged what my analysis otherwise shows); or when he dramatically misses the point ("The autonomy that he is after is thus not our autonomy from an insinuating system but the artist's autonomy from us": well, yes, because when the insinuating system is the market, and we are customers, then the insinuating system is us). Not strictly belonging to the list would be a few instances of pure bizarrerie, as when there is supposed to be some relevant confusion about *Autonomy*'s relationship to Italian *autonomia*.

⁵ "Das Produkt des individuellen Kapitals, d.h. jedes selbständig fungierenden, mit eigenem Leben begabten Bruchstücks des gesellschaftlichen Kapitals, hat irgendeine beliebige Naturalform. Die einzige Bedingung ist, daß es wirklich eine Gebrauchsform hat, einen Gebrauchswert, der es zu einem zirkulationsfähigen Glied der Warenwelt stempelt."

circumstances are actively taken up by artworks (or artists) in ways that are irreducibly normative; that is, that are in their very being—before any judgment or interpretation—subject to judgment and interpretation. (Anyone's judgment and interpretation. Professional critics, exegetes, and theorists like Thorne and myself have a role to play, but I cannot see how that is problematic or even not uncontroversially true.) Thorne asks, "When irony comes to us in the form of the commodity, can we be sure that the commodity always loses"? This is symptomatic. First, the commodity always wins: the work of art can only, rarely and with difficulty, suspend the sovereignty of the commodity form within the artwork itself. What that suspension means is simply that it can plausibly claim to mean something. But that is a claim; it is subject to judgment and interpretation, which are moments of each other. Not to the action of formal magic bullets.

Meanwhile, I am intrigued by Thorne's detour into Kant but not persuaded of its relevance. The chassis *Autonomy* is built on is not Kant's account of aesthetic judgment, but an account meant to revise and displace it, namely the thoroughgoing reorientation of the Kantian terms that Hegel (whom, despite Hegel's centrality to the book, Thorne does not once mention in his critique) accomplishes in the beginning of his *Lectures on Fine Art*. Hegel's redescription of aesthetic judgment is entirely of a piece with his general stance with regard to the Kantian system; it is operative throughout his *Lectures*; it informs a great deal of subsequent Marxist thinking about literature and the arts; and it does all the work that Thorne accuses me of not doing. I explain it on pages 12-13.

What Hegel introduces there, a basic dialectical concept of whose pertinence Thorne seems, once again, momentarily to have lost sight, is the category of immanence as it applies to art. Thorne thinks we have two choices: autonomy belongs to the artwork, or it belongs to the artist. If it is the latter, the artwork is a "telegram" of the artist's intention, and we do not need the artwork. If it is the former, the artist's intention looks like an external demand, and we do not need intention. Both versions assume that intention is external to action. I suggested above, in agreeing with Archias's assessment of a certain model of conceptual art, that this picture of intention is unsatisfactory. Intention is what makes something an action; intention is immanent to action. When we ascribe meaning to a work of art, we ascribe intention to the artist. That's it.⁶ This is one aspect of what the category of immanence means in the dialectical tradition. And indeed this aspect, which is quite orthogonal to Kant's interest in beauty, is crucial to Hegel's redescription of it, enabling the whole subsequent body of his lectures (not to mention *Autonomy* and a great deal else besides). "The beautiful... exists as purposive in itself, without means and purpose [that is, artwork and intention, materials and meaning] showing themselves as different, severed sides" (*Vorlesungen* 87, *Aesthetics* 59). Kant's "purposiveness without purpose" has been redescribed as purposiveness without external purpose. That is, Hegelian beauty is purposiveness whose purpose is entirely immanent to it: purposiveness with a meaning (an internal end), but not a use (an external end). The whole mare's nest of problems that Thorne is determined to explore evaporates at a stroke. Things get a little more complicated, since there is some ambiguity in Hegel's lectures as we have them about whether he is talking about a real unity of form and content or merely the appearance of unity. But everything we know of Hegel suggests that he should be talking about a real unity, and whatever the case, I am talking about a real unity: one that is, as always, ascriptive, that is, one that is a determination of judgment and interpretation and therefore subject to dispute. It is also precisely in such unity that Archias (and if I am not mistaken, Durão) find not a guarantee but an index of potential artistic value: a "criterion for [the] trustworthiness [of] a form." What this looks like in practice might be modestly suggested by the latter part of my response to Myka Tucker-Abramson, below.

Categories like "middlebrow," meanwhile, do not mean anything. Or rather, they do not mean anything important; they are still the class markers they always have been, and they can be used to throw shade up or down the scale of consumable goods. When modernist institutions were understood to protect artworks from the demands of the anonymous market, one could be forgiven for thinking that "highbrow" stood approximately for something like that, and "middlebrow" stood approximately for the more aspirational reaches of the anonymous market. (The word "middlebrow" itself seems to date from the mid-1920s, precisely in the context of aspirational culture consumers failing to catch on to modernist developments). In the period immediately preceding high modernism, it was commonplace for ambitious artists to lament the access they perceived their predecessors to have had to a large and general audience; suspicion of such ambitions only makes sense in the modernist period, when a restricted field

⁶ This is true (in fact, more visibly so) even when we judge that an artwork has failed to realize its intention. This is what makes immanent critique possible. It is also true when the artist's intentions are not on all fours with each other, when history ironizes for us what the artist intended, and so on. This gets complicated, but not very. See Brown, *Autonomy* 11-12, 82, 91-102.

has been established. But today we understand that art cannot escape the pressure of its commodity character. Again, this not because everything must be bought with cash but because "no artist could, merely by resoluteness and force of will, abstract herself from" the pressure exerted by the universality of commodity exchange. Contemporary aesthetic ideology, correctly grasping that commodity exchange is the mode in which things come to count as socially existing in capitalist societies even when they do not circulate immediately as commodities, insists that artworks are not only commodities, but commodities like any other. (The time when the internet looked like a lever for decommodification was brief and anomalous, and is now twenty years behind us. The period when the internet looks like a lever to monetize formerly enjoyably gratuitous activities like your cat or your sex life has already lasted longer). When we acknowledge this, we acknowledge that the line between art and non-art runs not between different classes of consumers but through art itself; only the work of judgment and interpretation can make the distinction. (As we have seen, even works produced in a restricted field confront this problem in a different form). "Kitsch," Adorno wrote, is "a poison that contaminates all art" (239). To put it another way: Dude, relax. It's all dad rock.

It is with some relief that I turn to Marina Vishmidt and Fabio Durão. Not so much because they seem to agree with some of the major claims of *Autonomy*, but because in doing so they situate the book in ways I had not thought to do, draw implications I would not have been able to draw, and bring to the center lacunae that had been, at best, in my peripheral vision. They each, if I understand them correctly, offer one substantial critique, and I have responded elsewhere to slightly different versions of them.⁷ Here, I will only acknowledge that each of them points to a real weakness in the book. For Durão, *Autonomy* "fails to fully unpack the main implication from its own findings, namely that autonomy is not only the precondition for the work to stand on its own... but a vehicle for the production of new knowledge, in its most emphatic form a kind of knowledge that could not be obtained otherwise." This is simply true. The only adequate response would be to try to follow in the direction that the criticism points, namely toward the recuperation of the cognitive dignity of art. This would consist in, on one hand, the theoretical justification for the claim that art in its "highest vocation" is not "a thing of the past," and on the other, the extension of the interpretive line, running from Hegel to Lukács to Roberto Schwarz, that cashes out this claim. Meanwhile, I do not think Vishmidt is quite right to endorse, as she seems to, the idea that "there is no space left for an autonomy of the subject," at least in the specific sense I have used the word "autonomy." Disagreements like this one could not take place without autonomy in that specific sense. But if I understand her correctly, her main point is that *Autonomy* has no more substantial conception of a Left politics than "join your union and support the expansion of public goods." I share Vishmidt's impatience, but I do not have an answer for it. "Public goods" would have to be fleshed out to include full employment, a living wage, universal access to healthcare and education, expansion of collective labor rights, environmental security, freedom from discrimination, and other long-established social-democratic goals, but such goals can be thought of coherently not as reformist measures but as a real step on a long march. This is in part because they constitute a Left program that will make life better, in part because history is pedagogy and even in the medium run capitalism will not be able to accommodate them. If I am not mistaken, the relative obscurity of Vishmidt's final sentence suggests that promising concrete alternatives are not thick on the ground.

Myka Tucker-Abramson's sympathetic and wide-ranging critique deserves a sympathetic and wide-ranging response. But if I wanted proleptically to sum up mine in a sentence, it would be this: There is no reason to view joining a union as an alternative to disappointingly modest claims for the direct political effectivity of art. First, obviously, because one would presumably join one's union anyway. But also because the reasons one would want to join a union are the very reasons one ought to be suspicious of readily consumable political art. If one is concerned about the violence exerted on workers by the labor market, one might reasonably be expected to be concerned about the pressure exerted on meaning by the cultural market.

The claim of *Autonomy* is that artworks call for judgment and interpretation, and that this call itself is under violent assault from the hegemony of the market, which is objectively hostile to judgment and interpretation. (That is the point of the invisible hand's invisibility). It is then not quite right to say that I "dismiss outright any potential of political commitment and aesthetic form working together." ("Working together," however, might be taken to suggest that they are separate in themselves, as though form were the packaging and political commitment the product it contains; if so, that would be

⁷ See Brown, "Things Recognized Without Having Been Seen," along with the critiques that essay responds to, at nonsite.org.

a problem for obvious reasons). The point is that political art too must plausibly solicit interpretation if it is to avoid deflation into a mere consumable sign. Like Archias and Thorne, Tucker-Abramson, who claims that for me "art is only recognized as art insofar as it speaks directly to the market," perceives a prescriptive impulse where there is none. Since acute readers are reaching this conclusion I must take responsibility for it, but the point was never that artworks cannot take on state violence or immiseration if they like. The point is that, one way or another—explicitly or implicitly, entailed or presupposed—they have to take on their commodity status whether they like it or not.

For this reason the problem of autonomy is relevant to all the works Tucker-Abramson mentions as outside of *Autonomy's* admittedly narrow scope. Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You* is extraordinarily suggestive in this regard and would certainly have been included in the film chapter if I had seen it in time.⁸ *The Uncomfortable Dead's* four-handed technique might be a gimmick, or it might be a successful ruse to turn the mapping effect of the detective novel toward a compelling account of Mexican history in the shadow of the Dirty War. Deciding which of these is the case is the work of judgment and interpretation. But if *The Uncomfortable Dead* is understood to be automatically good because it has a congenial account of Mexican history in the shadow of the Dirty War, then "political commitment and aesthetic form" are seen as "working together" precisely as separate elements, and that would be bad criticism. (To be clear, I am not suggesting that Tucker-Abramson makes or would be sympathetic to anything like this claim; I am rather pointing out what it would mean for *The Uncomfortable Dead* to be outside the scope of *Autonomy's* problematic, rather than simply outside the field of its objects). Bad criticism because all it could say about the work is that it conformed to an external standard, which is a low bar not only critically, artistically, and theoretically, but also politically. But also bad because such criticism is, despite seeming to make a judgment (but in fact only making a mechanical determination), non-normative: any container will do as long as the message it contains is congenial. It coincides therefore with our common sense, which holds that novels are not entities that solicit interpretation, but things that have a use.

This common sense is an ideology in Roberto Schwarz's precise phrase: "an illusion well-grounded in appearances" (18). It is not false that a declining rate of profit forces capital to search out opportunities for exploitation in every nook and cranny of human experience. But the redescription of this political-economic phenomenon as the ubiquitous ontological claim that, in Dave Beech's skeptical words, "art is, always has been, or has recently become nothing but a commodity" (1)—is precisely what *Autonomy* (with Beech) is arguing against. For this reason, the problem of whether Marx's technical description of the logic of the "real subsumption of labor under capital" can be adopted as a theory of culture is interesting but largely irrelevant.⁹ Culture is not immune from the real subsumption of labor under capital in the strict Marxian sense. Unions can directly oppose this dynamic with varying degrees of success. (For example, the Broadway musician's union, AFM Local 802, has been engaged in a decades-long struggle to constrain the shedding of musical labor made possible by an increase in the organic composition of capital in the theater industry—that is, it opposes replacing musicians with ever more sophisticated music sequencing software). Artworks themselves, not so much. They have no material levers to operate. But they can register their struggle against an "impossible situation." The movement from formal to real subsumption is a real dynamic but only an ideological fact: the shift from Adorno's claim for the artwork's "dual character" to the claim that the artwork is a commodity like any

⁸ The novel chapter could have been written using all twenty-first century African examples. Recent francophone novels like Fiston Mwanza Mujila's *Tram 83*, Abdourahman Waberi's *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique*, and Alain Mabanckou's *African Psycho* are all concerned to come to terms with their status as African novels in an international book market, which manifests itself even the title (English in the original) of the last of these. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* would take the place in that imaginary chapter of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as a pseudo-serious pseudo-solution to the impasses that status imposes, with the historical novel taking the logical place of modernism. Meanwhile I cannot recommend highly enough Mongane Serote's *Gods of Our Time* and Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* as novels that are both, though their politics are different, deeply political and profoundly committed to formal immanence. But I do not think the chapter would have been better that way. The relationship between African literature and its North American and European counterparts is nothing like what it was for the period discussed in *Utopian Generations*: the differences today tend to the quantitative and empirical rather than the qualitative and dialectical. Establishing this would have added another layer of complication, without adding anything to this analysis, though it certainly merits working out somewhere else.

⁹ There is no reason that Tucker-Abramson should be expected to know this, but I do address elsewhere the scholarship skeptical of whether "Marx's use of 'real subsumption' itself can be derived into a theory of culture." There is an inside-baseball version of the irrelevance of the real subsumption problem, having to do with the different but dialectically related mechanisms Marx proposed for the tendential subsumption of human activity into commodity production; for this I refer readers to Brown, "What We Worry About When We Worry About Commodification."

other. The insistence on judgment and interpretation is not exactly a weapon, since what an artwork can compel (a conviction) is different than what a job action can compel (a behavior). But a successful job action depends on convictions. Both oppose, but in different ways, the universal commodification of human life.

Tucker-Abramson astutely infers my likely objection to finding political possibility in the erosion of the "barriers between art and life." When "life" is life under late capitalism, the erosion of barriers between art and life is just more late capitalism. When utopia is on the political horizon, as it was during the Commune (my example in *Autonomy* is the Brazilian left in the early 1960s; in *Utopian Generations* it was the Soviet revolution and the African anti-colonial movements), then the project of making art immanent to life—that is, not to present life, but to a redeemed future life—is yes, absolutely, utopian. That specific social situation is the history, not just the context, in which vanguard aesthetics and vanguard politics coincide. That situation does not much resemble ours. As described by Tucker-Abramson, Groys's version of this argument, apparently grounded in the loopy idea that the "modern class structure" is that "everybody has to work and everybody has some leisure," is best passed over quickly, and the best way to pass over it quickly would be to point out that if YouTube stands both for Seymour's feared fascism and Groys's hoped-for communism, that's because YouTube just embodies the logic of the commodity, which provides what the customer is looking for. Artworks, whether they compose or cut and paste or cite or frame or use any other procedure or set of procedures, differ from this logic, because they solicit a taking of sides.

This being the case, Tucker-Abramson understands, like Archias, that any theoretical differences that matter are going to have to cash out in competing interpretations; for this reason perhaps the best way to clarify our differences will be to focus on a work about which Tucker-Abramson and I apparently disagree, namely *The Wire*. Tucker-Abramson does not have the space to offer a full-dress reading and it would be unfair to judge her remarks by that standard. In attempting to get her to switch sides, I will only point out a few aspects of her reading that seem significant. It may be that we have different ideas about what constitutes interpretation, and if so I would like, if possible, to get her and others to see the virtues of mine.

If I am not mistaken, Tucker-Abramson accepts my reading of the historical substance of *The Wire* as "civil society's failure to confront the 'shedding of labor.'" There are four aspects of the show, however, that Tucker-Abramson finds problematic. First, representational inadequacies: not enough police violence, not enough grassroots activism. Second, there is a narrative focalization on institutions, namely tattered state institutions and a stevedore's union that is fading into obsolescence, and for whose midcentury world not only characters but the show itself is said to be mourning. Third, the show gets its mapping work done through a voyeuristic reliance on surveillance technology, which "prepares and conditions its viewer to support the... security state." Fourth, we are reminded that the show's commitment to institutions ("state-centered politics") takes place during the militarization of the carceral arm of the state.

What unites all of these aspects is that, even when they are "formal," they are not mediated by the form of the whole. That is, the emphasis is not on what they mean—because they mean anything at all only as mediated by the form of the whole—but rather on what they are. The show's plot—what gets its surveillance apparatus going in the first place—depends on the criminalization of drugs; but the show itself is committed to depicting the effects of that criminalization in all their destructive absurdity. Decriminalization, on the other hand, is depicted as a positive and even Utopian possibility (Hamsterdam). It would be hard to claim that *The Wire* supports the intensification of the war on drugs. But if this is on my view a pretty solid claim, it is an interpretive one. The fact that the emphasis on state institutions coincides temporally with a moment when state carceral institutions are being militarized (but also privatized!) is supposed to take the place of interpretation, or throw suspicion on the interpretation offered. But that is just context, not history. History enters the work of art not by the procedure of relating the work to facts chosen from the infinite web of potentially relevant data, but as the material on which it works. The material on which *The Wire* works is the postindustrial city; that is, in concentrated form, social life under a capitalism where the tendency to shed labor has begun to be felt as a crisis. The criminalization of drug use is understood by *The Wire* as a disastrous technique for managing the effects of shed labor, that is, a repressive instrument for managing the reserve army of the unemployed. The intensification of that logic could only be an intensification of its disastrous character. In other words, the very logic of the show opposes the militarization of the police.

But there is no reason to trust me on this when we can just watch the show and decide for ourselves. When, in the final episode of the first season, a SWAT team is assembled to arrest Avon Barksdale, they are viewed with contempt by both the criminals and the cops ("delta-force motherfuckers" to one, "boys" breaking out "toys" to the other). As the SWAT team prepares to enter, McNulty and Daniels, without

military-style gear and with weapons holstered, call them off and, in a scene so quiet (and deliberately anticlimactic) as to be almost intimate, arrest Barksdale without incident. The implication is that military-style equipment is not a necessary instrument of public safety (and it is worth noting how much *The Wire* is an outlier here, since in cop shows of every stripe the militarized wing of the police is almost universally represented as not only necessary but glamorous, visually exciting, and narratively climactic) but rather an instrument of violence, whose insistently marked gratuitousness in practical terms can only suggest that it serves instead a repressive spectacularity.¹⁰

We on the Left have every interest in being skeptical of the notion that we are passively "conditioned" by what we watch on TV. It seems to me profoundly anti-dialectical, insisting that we are influenced directly (affectively?) by what we see, not by what it means: as though *Romeo and Juliet* would condition us to tolerate suicide, rather than produce for us the image of love as a loss of self in another so total that all other social strictures fade to nothing. Narrative focalization is, meanwhile, in itself merely a formal feature among others; the question is: what does this narrative focalization do, how does it work? The institutional focus in *The Wire* is in the service of a tragic logic: institutions that can no longer handle the contradictions they were designed to mediate end up hastening their own demise. The implication is that these institutions can only survive by changing themselves radically: the police by creating a safe space for addicts instead of enforcing drug laws; the union movement by including everyone ("Everybody needs a union"), most significantly the reserve army of the unemployed (the dead eastern European economic refugees, destined for the sex industry, who "needed a union"). Perhaps *The Wire* can be fairly characterized as mournful. But certainly—in its very form—it is not committed to a politics of nostalgia. The only way *The Wire* would count as nostalgic is if mediating institutions like unions were, as such, thought to be a thing of the past. That view exists but I do not believe Myka Tucker-Abramson subscribes to it.

Finally, representation can never do justice to the object represented. That things are left out of a representation is not in itself informative. The question is rather: what do these representations mean? Why are things represented one way and not another? It's true that "no kids from the projects ever die in custody in the show," but if memory serves, very early in the first season a kid from the projects is blinded after being pistol-whipped by one of the main cop-characters, named Prez; Prez's colleagues and his commanding officer cover up his misconduct and he suffers no similarly life-altering consequences. Is Prez's fearful and aggressive, out-of-control policing exceptional or synechdochic? Such questions can only be answered by relating these representational elements to the movement of the whole. If we are concerned mainly with bad and good representations, we are, again, in an undialectical universe where we are concerned mainly with unmediated elements that match or fail to match ideas we already have about the entity represented. The relative lack of grassroots organizing in *The Wire* is seen to be a problem because we already know that grassroots organizing is important. Someone with different ideas about grassroots organizing will have a different judgment about its relative lack in *The Wire*. It can readily be seen that *The Wire* is completely redundant to this operation. Differing beliefs preceded the work, and survived it unchanged. A meaning, however, to return to Fabio Durão's point, proposes something new, and opens it to judgment. If it does not, then indeed we might as well become sociologists.

The last two sung notes of *The Song of the Earth* (pianississimo, "ewig!"), an E followed by a D in the key of C, do not in themselves even make a melody, in other words they appear in hundreds of melodies. (The first repeated "alright" in the Beatles' "Revolution"; but also "Mary" in their "Let it Be"; "homeward" in "Golden Slumbers"; "pillow" in "Carry That Weight"; "would you lock" in "When I'm Sixty-Four." And so on.) But at the end of the song cycle these two notes are so shattering because they, astonishingly, hold precariously in their threadbare subsistence the remains of everything that came before. If there are no formal magic bullets, there are also no thematic poison pills. Maybe security cameras on TV are bad, because they condition us to the security state. Maybe security cameras on TV are good, because they reveal to us that the security state is already here. As unmediated elements, there is no reason to prefer one version over another. The two statements do not even disagree, they just see the matter differently. To relate them to some particular whole is formulate an account of what they mean; to formulate an account of what they mean is to offer an interpretation; to offer an interpretation is to make a claim about which we can disagree.

¹⁰ For the moment, a clip of this scene is available on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=XaysD0qByUo. The sense of anticlimax, with McNulty apparently wanting to go back to ask Stringer Bell a question but giving up on the impulse, is so palpable as to reflect back on the whole season: it is clear that all of the effort the cop protagonists (and we) have been engaged in is pointless, since Barksdale, or for structural reasons if not him someone else, will be back.

A program like the expansion of public goods or the extension of labor rights and union membership can be understood as a step on a long march only if they are understood as sites of class struggle, as opposed to, for example, the management of politically or ethically unsustainable wealth differentials. The choice between Medicare for All and Obamacare is, for the center-right, a technocratic debate (in fact, decided in advance) about which approach is likely to get the job done better. Capitalism, in the form of the insurance industry, is understood simply as a special interest that will make a public option too difficult to pursue. If, on the other hand, we understand Medicare for All as a substantial decommodification of a sector of the U.S. economy and a democratically popular sectoral refusal of the logic of capital accumulation, then the opposition of the insurance industry appears as an object lesson. Similarly, the complacent or conservative appropriation or containment of a potential "poetics of postmodernity" is a danger. But if the vocation to make art, and to interpret it and judge it as art, is understood as essentially engaged in a life-or-death struggle with the commodity form, then such aesthetic ideologies will have to be seen as, like Schiller's reworking of Kant, ideological mystifications.

If Fredric Jameson's parting admonition is not to get comfortable with postmodernity, his most serious one for the author of *Autonomy*, and the note I will end on, should be familiar: Always historicize! If in *Autonomy* I lean too frequently on the pseudo-category of the "contemporary" (I do) and use "postmodernism" sparingly (I do) this is not because one is meant to substitute for the other, though in retrospect I recognize the danger. To the contrary, the early and crucial invocation of Jameson's *Postmodernism* is meant to establish his periodization as the key-signature of the book as a whole. The point of deriving Friedland categories (art and objecthood) from a Marxian problematic (the commodity-form in its tendential universality), was to provide a kind of rosetta stone that would allow one to move back and forth between political commitments and aesthetic ones: the opposition between art and objecthood is redescribed as an opposition between art and the commodity-form, an opposition that only has its bite in the context of the latter's tendential universality. If you are committed to the idea that artworks are possible, you ought to be committed to resisting the hegemony of the commodity form; if you are committed to decommodification as a concrete step in a long march, you ought (insofar as you give the matter any thought at all, which is of course not a requirement outside of conversations like this one) to be suspicious of any account of art that, in denying its specificity, lines it up with the structure of the commodity. In other words, the struggle *Autonomy* tracks is that of art as, in Brecht's phrase, a "foreign body" within postmodernity.

If art has a real but for it unassailable enemy in the commodity form, it also has a proximate, ideological enemy, namely the post-1968 anti-dialectical theoretical counter-revolution and its American appropriation, whose "spinozist" suspicion of meaning evacuates Adorno's "dual character" and performs the ideological service of theoretically aligning the newly non-specific structure of the artwork with the structure of the commodity. If art is (like everything else) an ensemble of affective relations, or (like everything else) a social precipitate, or (like everything else) a nexus of human and non-human "agency," then it is (like everything else) a commodity. A submerged argument—no doubt too submerged—in *Autonomy* is that postmodernism itself is characterized by a "struggle between philosophers and artistic producers." If in this struggle the victorious camp among the philosophers plays a counterrevolutionary role, the role artists play is far more complex: among the pasticheurs have been those determined to turn aside the logic of postmodernity with a light touch. If there has been, within Jameson's Marxist demarcation of a postmodern era, a "contemporary" acceleration and coming-to-consciousness of this dynamic, this appears first as historical only in a Hegelian, not a Marxist sense: a shift from quantity to quality, from in-itself to for-itself. But the deepest Hegelian wager is that the world is intelligible because real relations are logical relations and vice versa. The apparently idealist phase-change within postmodern culture must then be seen in terms of the suddenly evident bankruptcy—as we reap the whirlwind unleashed by capitalism's more than half-century of successful offensives—of the ideological cousins of "spinozist" philosophizing, namely third-way politics and the center-right economic consensus, both of which have run up against limits that are nothing if not material.

In the face of this crisis of postmodernity, which has already dragged on long enough to be called late postmodernity, a "return to aesthetics" is of course neither desirable nor possible. But *Autonomy* does, as Durão notes, call for a certain return to the aesthetic. Such a call should not be taken to endorse renewed attention to an ahistorical essence, but rather to say that it is for historical reasons—precisely in the crisis of postmodernity—that the radical origins of the aesthetic, to which Jameson aptly calls our attention, become relevant in a new way. The invention of the aesthetic—developed over no more than thirty years between the *Critique of Judgment* and Hegel's lectures on fine art—is essentially related to the invention of politics in the French Revolution, a relation that is mediated by the working-out of the

manifold consequences of the Idealist breakthrough that Marx is heir to, namely the discovery of consciousness as an active principle in a world not of its own making. When the commodity form achieves a real hegemony and ideological universality, grounded in the desperate effort to squeeze surplus value out of every nook and cranny of human activity, then the insistence on judgment and interpretation, operations hostile to the commodity form, acquires for the first time a politics of its own.

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