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AUTONOMY IN ART

THESES OF THE PHD DISSERTATION

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The aim of my dissertation is to reconsider the problem of artistic and aesthetic autonomy.

The starting point of my research is one of the social and cultural consequences of the Hungarian political transformation after 1989: the (re)appearance of the art market, and of the market value of artworks. This finished the period of the (economic) autonomy of the arts under János Kádár — in a moment when the arts and the artists became (politically) free. This, however, resulted in a serious confusion with regards to the correct usage of the category: artists, critics and historians had vastly different things in mind when asked about autonomy. Thus, it looked important to reconsider the idea(1) of autonomy in a systematic fashion.

I started out by testing the available theories. I was curious what art history or aesthetics could answer when questioned about the autonomy of kitsch painting. Could these disciplines convincingly argue against such a nonsense? My conjecture was true: there is nothing in the market that could help refute such a claim.

Next, I reviewed (mostly anglo-saxon) aesthetic theories of artistic autonomy. My aim was to find out the possible cause of this predicament: this inability to defend autonomy against kitsch. How can it be possible that one of the more important categories of aesthetic thinking, with a long history and respectable tradition cannot answer a fairly trivial question?

First, I looked at the more standard approaches of aesthetics. Then I turned to the autonomy theory of Göran Hermerén, a Swedish philosopher, who is an

excellent representative of analytic aesthetics. Following is a list of my (more problematic) findings:

- (1) Hermerén is not clear with regard to the logical status of autonomy: it can both be normative or descriptive (or, in other terms, material or ideal.)
- (2) Hermerén understands artistic autonomy exclusively as a quality of artworks, groups of artworks, their relations, and their histories or criticism.
- (3) Hermerén's answer to the problem of autonomy centers on the possibility of distinguishing artistic and non-artistic, aesthetic and non-aesthetic qualities.
- (4) One possible consequence of the claim of artistic autonomy is the need to take artistic and aesthetic components of a work into consideration as causal features when interpreting an artwork or a group of artworks or artistic movements.
- (5) The central criterion of artistic autonomy is that artistic or aesthetic elements should not be reducible in their entirety to non-artistic or non-aesthetic elements.

Summing up the findings of this initial research into the problem of artistic and aesthetic autonomy, I should point out that the major obstacle in aesthetic thinking (as regards this question) is that the category of autonomy is taken to be atomic, not further analyzable. Another such finding was discovering that aesthetics (especially its analytic approach) is curiously mute with regards to the autonomy of the person (artist, critic, or historian). It also became clear that not

only is autonomy theoretically chaotic, it isn't important or inviting to many – artists and critics alike.

- (i) I had numerous possibilities at this point: (a) Instead of trying a thorough systematization of the various usages of autonomy, I could opt for showing and interpreting them in their historical and cultural variety. (b) Abandoning the project and the ideal of autonomy altogether in favor of the (re)construction of an heteronomous aesthetics also appeared as a viable option.. But having started work in this direction a feeling of unease struck me: aren't we losing too much by giving up even the possibility of autonomy? This feeling of unease led to the third option: (c) reviewing the validity of other disciplines' various autonomy-concepts and deciding if there is something to learn – or even import – from them.

With regards to the shortcomings of aesthetic theories of autonomy I decided listed those areas that a working autonomy-theory of the arts should cover. I found four of them:

- (i) The first such area consists of the various contexts where autonomy can legitimately be predicated. Such “contexts” are of persons, of institutions and of the different types of products: artworks, groups of artworks, whole *oeuvres*; but also reviews, art historical or aesthetic studies and essays, etc.
- (ii) The second area consists of those criteria which could also be used as the test questions of an autonomy claim. Three such criteria are almost always mentioned in the literature: self-reflection.

Self-reflection as a criterion means that the agent acts not simply on the basis of pure instincts, but reviews her (spontaneous) desires, actions, feelings,

evaluations and – based on her system of values and norms – accepts or disowns them. *Rationality* is one guide of such a process: accommodating the various factors, values and norms existing in the different contexts, it helps maintaining the coherence of the agents decisions. *Authenticity* calls attention to the need that an agent should also believe what she says, and even while accepting the lead of another person, she should not be simply a follower.

(iii) The third is the area of values. Here such questions wait for answers as “Why is being autonomous valuable? Why is it better to be autonomous then not being autonomous? The problem of the logical status of autonomy should also be addressed here: Is the category normative or descriptive?

(iv) The last area is somewhat different: here we should reflect on the relation of the above-mentioned perspectives. The paradigmatic question is this: which criteria could be used in which area of autonomy and why such an autonomy is valuable. Clearly, this last perspective is not one to be considered on its own, but during the research it should be constantly kept in mind.

A further preliminary step was to consider the possibility of a definition. My conjecture was right: the various usages of the category are so different over time and place (even in one single discipline, like moral philosophy) that no viable definition seems possible. There is also general skepticism towards definition in the literature.

The first discipline that I turned to with regards to its take on autonomy was moral philosophy. Having reviewed the theories of Gerald Dworkin, Sarah Buss and John Christman I came to conclude that while differing in no few respects,

some elements of their approaches are common. These are “secondary reflection,” “authentic decision,” and “accountability”. These also appeared to be good criteria for the testing of a valid and usable autonomy-conception in the arts. Besides it became clear that the autonomy conceptions constructed should be formal and weak. Luckily these criteria appeared immune to the postmodern and feminist critique of autonomy within moral philosophy. This debate – which has a somewhat similar structure and character as the one that blew artistic autonomy away – is also covered in the dissertation.

Next, I turned to supra-human organizations. Analyzing the various autonomy-claims in or about science, I found the theories of Karl R. Popper, Pierre Bourdieu, and – to a lesser extent – Timothy Lenoir the most promising in helping me construct a theory of autonomy in the arts. Popper looked at the problem of knowledge, Bourdieu at the system of science, while Lenoir reconstructed the institutional status and scope of action of scientists working in pre-WWII Europe. An important realization was the discovery that Popper and Bourdieu can be discussed in the same frame. Another that Lenoir’s *scientist* working in the scientific field (as re/constructed by Bourdieu can also be analyzed by the criteria Dworkin, Buss, and Christman suggested. The findings of the two research projects can be correlated, and used in the context of the arts.

This opened up the possibility of rethinking the autonomy of art and of aesthetics. This rethinking starts with acknowledging that art is a relatively autonomous field, where the agents (artists, critics and historians; individuals and organizations) act. The agents have different amount of (social, cultural and economic) capital, they differ in their habitus, and thus in their positions, and ultimately in their stakes in the larger game. They pursue various goals in cooperation and in competition with other (individual or supra-individual) agents. Along the way they make artistic decisions. They are accountable in

these decisions. And the chain of these decisions – through its coherence or the lack of it, its authenticity or the lack of it – contribute to their professional selves. They are also responsible for that. And this provides the weight of their artistic decisions and the value of their autonomy.

Thus it is possible to think about personal autonomy in the arts and in aesthetics. But not exclusively about personal autonomy — and this I find the most important consequence of my dissertation. Personal autonomy opens the possibility of making autonomy claims about other elements of the artistic field: the artwork and its review, aesthetic experience and art historical interpretation, galleries and magazines. **It thus becomes possible to discuss the various autonomy claims in one unified frame.**

I now turn to the most important consequences of my research.

The value of autonomy

The artistic field

The value of the relative autonomy of the artistic field lies in its undisturbed nature. At the same time, however, it is imperative to discover that while not unimportant, the question of how autonomous the (artistic or scientific) field is not the most important one. It is ways more essential to ask: Do we grasp its essence? Can we find our way on its map? Are we aware of the economic, cultural and social capital we are endowed with? Do we have clear and understandable goals in the field? Do we have a roadmap, a strategy? Do we understand clearly the economic, political, moral, cultural and artistic stakes of our decisions? The decisions only agents can make. Thus the value of the relative autonomy of art the artistic field is that it creates the possibility of considering personal autonomy.

The agent

Autonomy is the agent's capacity to define their nature, give meaning and coherence to their lives (Gerald Dworkin). Artists through their artistic decisions define the nature of their art, give meaning and coherence to their professional lives.

Coherence and authenticity are core to three further consequences of artistic autonomy reconstructed on the model of personal autonomy:

- (i) This way we can answer our initial question: why kitsch is not autonomous: it lacks both the required coherence and authenticity of artistic decisions.
- (ii) It becomes clear that autonomy is not a matter of abiding rules but of having (coherent and authentic) attitudes. It is predicated upon the specific relation of artistic problems and the agent's individuality. Or to paraphrase Kant: Autonomy has no laws only models.
- (iii) It also solves the problem of irreducibility: if the artwork is not created using a scheme, using rules or methods, but the specific relation of the artist's individuality to artistic problems, then the work cannot be reduced to either artistic problems or to the artistic personality.

The product

The autonomy of artworks is predicated on the decisions of their creators. The decision to let the work enter the public space of gallery, museum or magazine. As a secondary reflection on the merit of the work in the context of the whole oeuvre it is the most important sign that the artist assumes the work with all of

its responsibilities. This leads to two further consequences:

The first is this: while true that the work is irreducible to the artistic problems or the creating personality, it can show, even demonstrate the coherence of the artist's professional life, especially when the work is seen together with other pieces by the same artist.

The second is this: the irreducibility of the work creates space for constructive experiences and interpretations. The validity of these experiences and interpretations is the responsibility of the experiencing / interpreting agent.

Selected essays on artistic and aesthetic autonomy:

- 2007 „Művészet és kutatás – minták és minthák”, *Művészet mint kutatás*, szerk. Kürti Emese, Budapest: Semmelweis Kiadó, 115-125.
- 2006 „Lossonczy Tamás és a posztmodern művészet/történet”, *Tanulmányok Lossonczy Tamás művészetéről*, szerk. András Gábor és Pataki Gábor, Budapest: Műcsarnok, 2006, 71-86.
- 2006 „Iparművészet/design és vizuális kultúra: fogalmak és viszonyok”, *Az iparművészet változó szerepe az átalakuló vizuális kultúrában*, szerk. Antalóczy Tímea és Kapitány Ágnes, Budapest: Moholy-Nagy Művészeti Egyetem, 2006, 13-34.
- 2005 „Tét – Kísérlet egy művészetkritikai értékelési keret kidolgozására”, *Vizuális üzenetek tervezése és alkalmazása*, szerk. Kapitány Ágnes és Kapitány Gábor, Budapest: Magyar Iparművészeti Egyetem, 30-40.
- 2004 „Módszeres művészettörténet – Remény vagy valóság?”, publikálatlan kézirat.
- 2003 “Mű, tárgy, használat”, In Kapitány Ágnes és Kapitány Gábor, szerk., *Tárgyak és társadalom II. Kapcsolatok: a tér, a tárgy és a képi kultúra összefüggései*, Budapest: Magyar Iparművészeti Egyetem, 51-56.
- 2002 “Miért szép az észbemetszett kép?”, *Janus X*, 2002 tavasz, 91-95.
- 2002 „Tettek és tétek: Az Európai Iskola modernizmusa”, *A második nyilvánosság: XX. századi magyar művészet*, összeáll. Hans Knoll, szerk. Jolsvai Júlia, Budapest: Enciklopédia Kiadó, 110-135.
- 2000 “A kép politikuma”, *Fénykép az ezredfordulón. Tendenciák a XX. század végi fotográfiában*, szerk. Szarka Klára, Budapest: Magyar Fotóművészek Szövetsége, 143-172.
- 2000 “A megnyert tét: Szabó Dezső *black box* sorozatáról”, *Balkon*, No. 3-4, 29-32.
- 1999 “Taten und Einsätze: Der Modernismus der Europäischen Schule”, *Die zweite Öffentlichkeit: Kunst in Ungarn im 20. Jahrhundert*, Hrsg. Hans Knoll, Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 112-137.
- 1999 “Semirekellők (Könyvkritika Arthur C. Danto *Hogyan semmizte a filozófia a művészetet?* [Atlantisz, 1997] című tanulmánygyűjteményéről)”, *BUKSZ* No. 2. 144-53.

Invited talks on artistic and aesthetic autonomy:

- 2008 „Autonómia és a kultúripar: Adorno, Greenberg és Fried”, előadás az MKE Doktori Iskolájában, 2008. november 18.
- 2007 „Tapasztalat, értelmezés és tét”, előadás az MKE Doktori Iskolájában, 2007. május 2.
- 2006 „Művészet és kutatás – minták és minthák”, Művészet mint kutatás (Konferencia a Magyar Tudomány Ünnepeén), Magyar Képzőművészeti Egyetem, Budapest, 2006. november 24.
- 2006 „Art, Object, and Its Usage – On Antal Lakner’s Works,” előadás a Montclair State University Művészeti Karán, 2006. február 27.
- 2005 „Ki tud jobbat? Megfontolások a magas kultúra – tömegkultúra oppozíciójának státuszáról” előadás a *Populáris és elit konstrukciója a vizuális művészetekben* című konferencián, VIVO Alapítvány, Múcsarnok
- 2003 „Módszeres művészettörténet: remény vagy valóság?” előadás PTE BTK Kommunikáció Doktori Programjának nyitó konferenciáján
- 2002 „Művészet, történet: Éthosz és diszciplína a modernitásban” előadás az ELTE BTK Művészettörténeti Doktori Iskolájában
- 2002 “Titok, tekintet, történet: A leselkedő művészettörténet” előadás az ELTE BTK Művészet- és Médiaelméleti Intézetének *Valóságokk* konferenciáján
- 2002 “Mű, tárgy, használat” előadás a *Kapcsolatok: A tér-, a tárgy- és a képi kultúra összefüggései* című konferencián (Magyar Iparművészeti Egyetem és az MTA Szociológiai Kutatóintézet)