

Reflections on autonomy

Michiel Westbeek, 2016

Abstract

In this article I aim to formulate the development of my understanding of autonomy and its place in my work. From starting my research into autonomy over a year ago, I feel I am closing in on a provisional end point, where authorship and connection (as opposed to application) become a guiding principle. I will demonstrate how I view these notions in relation to my graduation presentation.

Society → Art → Society

During the past months I have made a shift in my thinking. I first thought of the relationship between society and art as one where society influences the art that comes out of it; the more value a society attaches to the individual, to critical thinking, abstract thinking, education and freedom of speech, the more 'free' the art that will flow out of this society. However, I now consider it abhorrent to think of Western society only in these terms, because we often use these as a one-sided rhetoric to convince ourselves we are right. That is why terrorist attacks are invariably explained in the media as 'attacks on our freedom', whereas most research shows they are predominantly retaliations for military intervention. We see Charlie Hebdo as freedom of speech, but a Muslim who is offended by it has to shut up. Also here: society influences art. There are still not many Dutch artists with a non-Dutch ethnic background.

I have now come to realise that the relationship between art and society is more complex than I thought. Art definitely can also influence society. I am thinking of the quote most commonly ascribed to Brecht: 'Art is not a mirror one holds up to society. It is a hammer with which to shape it.' One could see this as a very one-dimensional explanation of art: it is not autonomous, the artwork is subordinate to the social change it can accomplish. However, to understand the quote in these terms means to radically underestimate Brecht. Brecht always, even in his juvenilia, steered away from 'easy' emotion; pushing himself to find artistic expressions for his sensitivity. Consistently throughout his biography Parker also argues that Brecht set himself the task of not just expressing his political views, but in making artistic products out of them.

So how did Brecht propose to change the world? Brecht believed strongly in the idea of the individual. 'Individual' means 'indivisible unit', and we can relate this idea to the eighteenth century. In the age of reason, society was thought to start with individuals, and the act of building and maintaining a society was considered a process of shaping the relations between the individuals. This is still a very common thought. Brecht, however, in a more nineteenth-century view, acknowledges that we are always torn between our inner contradictions. In his theatre he aimed to show this dividuality in his characters – and flowing from this conflicting nature their inability to make the right decisions. The audience was no longer presented with conventional political theatre, which thought them a political lesson, but with a new, strange, Brechtian theatre, which aimed to make them think for themselves. In *Arena And Agora: A Diary About Art, Politics And Theatre* I explore this practice in relation to the Brecht plays *Die Heilige Johanna der Schlachthöfe* and *Mutter Courage* (Entry: 9 April). So the goal the artwork was subordinate to is: allowing the viewer to develop his own thoughts, and the means by which Brecht tried to achieve this, were artistic, aesthetic and philosophical. Does any decent artist work in a different way? Does this way of working endanger the autonomy of Brecht's plays? I am strongly convinced it doesn't.

Autonomy vs. engagement

Engagement without a certain level of autonomy leads to work that easily can stop being art, for two reasons. 1. Without a certain degree of personal autonomy, there is a problem of authorship. The artist, even though he does not have to be the author of all components of the artwork, does bear the final responsibility. If the artist compromises his ability to make decisions in the aesthetic process, we are left with some form of intervention for which no-one can take responsibility. (This is different from the shared responsibility that would occur when the authorship lies with a collective of artists. With a collective, either the collective is the responsible artist, or the individual members are the responsible artists for their respective work. However in the case described above, where the artist compromises his ability to make decisions, there are not multiple authors of the work, there is none. Because even though many people took part in the aesthetic process, they are not equally responsible to the artist, who is missing. There is only a list of participants, but no author, whether that authorship might be individual or collective. There is a gaping hole in the middle of the artwork.) 2. Without a certain level of artistic autonomy, the work will become propaganda, or more social projects remain just that: social projects. The only reason one could, and people generally do, call these social projects artworks, is that the money which paid for it all came from an art fund.

Autonomy without a certain level of engagement (in the form of social awareness) easily becomes escapism. Lijster convincingly argues that complete escapism in art is a very political act, because 1. the artist who escapes from political reality as it is, silently complies. 2. the artist can only retract from the political reality because he is a bourgeois, functioning in a bourgeois world, achieving independence by the bourgeois practice of the 'free market'. In order to 'escape', the artist must have some safe position in the system.

We have seen countless examples in art history of the escapist artist ignoring political reality and (generally his) place within it. I refer for instance to the work of Francois Boucher. In later times, the ideal of Greenbergian autonomy and *l'art pour l'art* has been sufficiently debunked. Greenberg defines the autonomous artwork that refers to nothing but itself, i.e. the completely original abstract artwork. Of course since postmodernism and the introduction of the idea of intertextuality, we know that every artwork refers to other artworks, and every abstract shape is at least akin to other shapes. The idea of *l'art pour l'art* to me seems a simplistic and reductive way of understanding Kant's maxim that the aesthetic experience is one that is unmediated by desire; it is looking at something pleasing without feeling one wants to eat it, possess it, drive around in it etc. One could use the example of looking at a rose or a landscape. However, Kant doesn't state anywhere that the artwork, in order to achieve this, must behave like a rose or a landscape, and can refer to nothing outside of itself. Kant is speaking about the autonomy of the artistic experience, not about the Romantic ideal of the autonomous artwork.

Connections vs. applications

So, even though I am not interested in the complete autonomy of the artwork, I do acknowledge the necessity of partial artistic autonomy. As two things thought to be compromising the autonomy of the artwork, one could name connection and application. For my understanding of art, which I believe still to be autonomous to a large extent, I want to look at the difference between these two terms. The way I see it, there is a difference in connections being made between 'visual art', 'politics', 'theatre' and 'writing' (the connections that I am making in order to produce my works, one could also say 'music' or 'choreography' or 'philosophy' etc.) and connections being made between 'visual art' and 'design', 'fashion' and 'cultural entrepreneurship'. For the former, I think the name

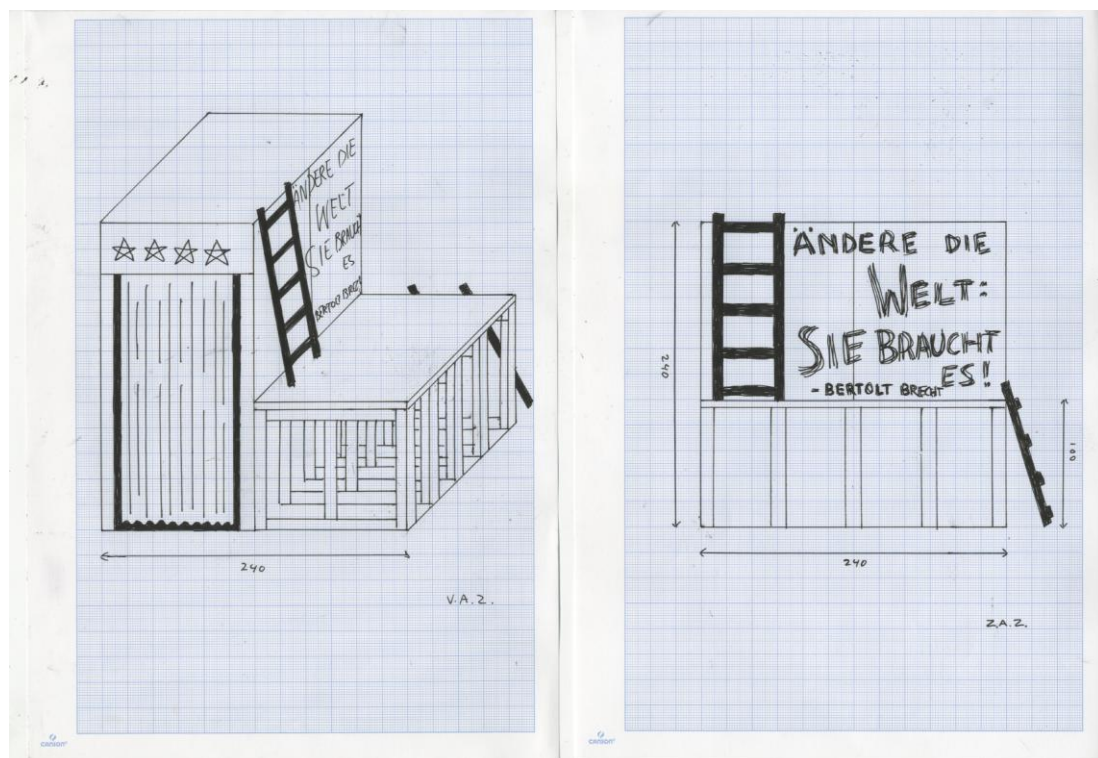
'connections' is adequate. The idea of visual art is widened by this type of connections; we admit at understanding art not in the limited sense of contemporary visual art that we generally use, but as an island that has a place in an archipelago, together with other autonomous practices. This is the expanded understanding of art that I am after: art that connects to other autonomous domains but is able to retain its own autonomy in the process.

The second type of connections I would call applications; they lead to a demotion or a dilution of art: the loss of artistic autonomy. The function, the marketing or problem solving completely govern the aesthetic process. When I explain that my work is not purely visual, but relies heavily on written text (both fictional and non-fictional, both literary and philosophical) and that it is also politically engaged, I sometimes have to deal with the difficulty that the other person does not distinguish between connection and application the way I do. In my recent works I have established an interplay between the visual and the textual, the definitive and the developing, the temporal and the spatial, the existing-before-your-eyes and the representation (for instance in video).

All the world on a stage

My graduation presentation will consist of a number of elements. On one of the walls there will be a television screen showing the work *Het Lied Van Samenleven*, a piece that I made within the context of the music and performance festival *Take It To Your Place 2016*. The festival was about connecting with and celebrating the neighbourhood around the conservatory, which is by coincidence an almost exclusively white, higher middle-class neighbourhood. I wrote a protest song against the idea of the neighbourhood as a dividing principle in our democracy (rich neighbourhoods, poor neighbourhoods, white and coloured neighbourhoods etc.) This will show as a video loop. It is unclear whether this is a video work per se, or a registration of a performance.

But the main focus of my installation will be a stage/object that I am building. This is the sketch:



In the booth on the left, I will show a video work: 'Hakim Of The Border'. This is a monologue I wrote that I made into a video. An actor performs the monologue in a bare and dark art studio warehouse. The story is about a small-time tradesman, who after years of scrounging around finds himself to become a people smuggler in times of war. The video is a work of its own, rather than a pure registration, but it is very close to a theatrical monologue due to the minimal visual elements in the video. There is however a constant shifting of camera perspective, which is the one strong editorial element in the video, serving to remind the audience constantly they are watching a film, just as Brecht reminded them constantly they were watching a play.

So this booth can be viewed as a small cinema. On the outside walls I will hang a banner with a Bertolt Brecht quote: 'Ändere die Welt: Sie braucht es!' ('Change the world: she needs it!') and on the backside I will exhibit a painting. Also, the booth together with an elevated platform in front of it, functions as a stage on which I will perform a text. This text is a combination of a monologue with a few poems. It is partly a meditation on an event that happened on 25 November 2015, when twelve half pig's heads were placed outside a location where a centre for asylum seekers is going to be built, and partly a political pamphlet about the rise of (neo-)fascism. I want to urge the listener/viewer to look inside himself and try to identify with these extreme-right, extreme-nationalist sympathisers, from the Brechtian idea that we are all individuals. We cannot be completely good or innocent in this discussion, and I suggest we should find our 'inner fascist' and listen to the reasons for his rancour. We, as upper middle-class intellectuals, who benefit most from the system we live in – might have something to do with the resentment of the lower-educated, underestimated chauvinist.

I guess what I am trying to say in relation to autonomy is that all these works to some extent consist of connections. A poem is also a political pamphlet, an installation is a stage, a cinema, a sculpture and a display wall in one. A video is both a video and a registration of a theatre piece. All these separate things, to my mind, retain their own identities, their recognisability within the piece at large. The piece at large engages in many different ways many different domains (visual art, literature, theatre, theory, politics) but, I would argue, retains a lot of personal autonomy because my authorship lies at the heart of it (so it has come through a process of design, of making decisions for which I bear full artistic and personal responsibility) and a definite measure of artistic autonomy, because it connects all the aforementioned practices, without demoting or diluting the artistic content. It is in no sense applied, but it is connected throughout.

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