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## **Aesthetic Autonomy and Praxis: art and language in Adorno and Habermas.<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

Aesthetic autonomy has been given a variety of interpretations, which in many cases involve a number of claims. Key among them are: (i) art eludes conventional conceptual frameworks and their inherent incompatibility with invention and creativity; and (ii) art can communicate aspects of experience too fine grained for discursive language. To accommodate such claims one can either adopt a convention based account or a natural kind account. A natural kind theory can explain the first but requires some special scaffolding in order to support the second, while a convention based account accommodates the second but is incompatible with the first. Theodor W. Adorno attempts to incorporate both claims within his aesthetic theory but arguably in his aesthetic theory each is cancelled out by the other. Art's independence of entrenched conceptual frameworks needs to be made compatible with its communicative role. Jürgen Habermas, in contrast, provides a solution by way of his theory of language. I draw upon the art practice of the contemporary Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson in order to demonstrate this.

**Keywords:** Adorno, Habermas, Olafur Eliasson, Brandom, aesthetic autonomy, art, pragmatism, theory of language.

### **1 Introduction**

The concept of aesthetic autonomy can be interpreted in at least two different ways. It can refer to a unique way of engaging with the world that suspends the interests and physical needs that typically characterise physical creatures' orientation to the world. On the other hand, it can describe a convention of the socially constructed institution which is the art world according to which artists are free of external compulsions such as might be forced upon them by religious, political, or moral authorities.<sup>2</sup>

The first notion of aesthetic autonomy, originates in Immanuel Kant's treatment of aesthetic autonomy which is analogous to the way he conceived the concept of moral autonomy; the idea that we can originate thoughts and actions from a realm within ourselves which is not simply an impulsive or instinctual response to external stimuli. We are above nature's determinism in the moral realm and this is extended to the aesthetic realm. The important difference is that in aesthetic judgment, a perception of an aspect of the empirical world is involved but in a peculiar role. The mind redeploys the processes of mind normally involved in the perception of the world such that we experience the world freely rather than determined by the interests and needs of our primary physical natures. As such we experience an aspect of the world as expressive of the ideas that orientate us as moral agents. This is an ahistorical concept of aesthetic autonomy.

The second notion of aesthetic autonomy originates in Hegel's account of art as an expression of the consciousness of an age. As such, art is conceived as a culturally defined institution whose forms are historical. Its autonomy is made explicit in the way art's meaning and significance is understood to be relative to the history of art's forms even though these forms are conceived as expressions of a consciousness both political and social in character. This is a notion of aesthetic autonomy according to

which art is a system whose meaning can only be adequately understood by reference to its historical development.

The notion of aesthetic autonomy that I will be considering in this paper incorporates both conceptions of aesthetic autonomy. This approach is recommended because neither of the former two notions in isolation explains current art world practices. In particular, the first stops short of addressing the evolving nature of art practices and the second has nothing to say about the basis of art's communicability. Attempts to incorporate both as in the aesthetic theory of Theodor W. Adorno, typically result in what I will term a strong aesthetic autonomy. I argue that strong aesthetic autonomy is incoherent. Furthermore, I identify a notion of moderate aesthetic autonomy in the work of Jürgen Habermas which is the notion of aesthetic autonomy that I will defend.

For Habermas, aesthetic autonomy is conceived to accommodate the possibility of conceptual invention. This is the notion that art can transcend its particular milieu by combining aspects of concepts to form new unities relative to the conceptual framework that dominates the relevant community. The conception of art is Hegelian in origin but the possibility of art's communicability is Kantian in origin.

## **2. Current Artworld Practices**

It would be helpful at this point to consider an example of an artworld practice that demonstrates how both the conceptions of aesthetic autonomy available in Kantian ahistorical and the Hegelian historical approaches are inadequate when each are taken in isolation. The Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson's conception of art recalls the analogy between the structure of moral and aesthetic judgment identified by Kant.

This is relevant to understanding Adorno's notion of aesthetic autonomy because the analogy with moral judgment is a precursor to Adorno's notion that through its autonomy, art acts as critique. On face value this seems paradoxical but I hope to show the potential in this view for understanding the nature of art.

Eliasson treats his art's practice as an opportunity for community critique or consensus. Art is a public act which brings the values of a community into view for the kind of evaluation and discussion that presents the opportunity for consolidating or developing shared systems of belief. According to this artist, the individual is not the dominant unit but rather gains significance in virtue of his or her part in the system as a whole. 'The individual no longer comes first, but only exists as part of a plurality. We are individual-collective. Or, as the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy would say: we are "singular-plural"'.<sup>3</sup> Eliasson's studio is testament to this approach. He employs a large group of artisans to bring his ideas to fruition and interacts with experts in various fields to refine his ideas. Permanent staff include: art historians, archivists, architects, technicians, craftsmen and a mathematician. Visitors range from politicians to physicists. Eliasson is a part of many conversations which he considers essential to his art practice.

The points of comparison between the structure of moral and aesthetic judgments is brought out in the following way by Eliasson's practice. Consider that ethical judgments are grounded in community constraints. That is, when we judge ethically, we refer to considerations that take us beyond our own interests and purposes. We exercise reason and expect others to reach the same conclusion as ourselves when they are basing their judgment on the same information. In contrast, our judgments about art typically involve the kind of responses that privilege our feelings above

those of other people. On the face of it, the kinds of judgments involved in each case would seem to have little in common.

However, an ethical judgment based solely on reason allows us to identify the right thing to do but it does not necessarily motivate us to do it. Motivation to act requires endorsement. 'Endorsement' was the feeling associated with the moral law according to Kant.<sup>4</sup> There is a parallel case in the aesthetic realm. An argument for an artwork's expressiveness is not enough to evoke one's endorsement of it. An appropriate *feeling* response is. Such a response constitutes valuing the work.

Ethical and aesthetic judgments have another aspect in common. We expect others to respond in a similar fashion to us when the feeling involved is assumed to be evoked by the artwork's expressiveness on the one hand, or the ethical dimensions of a situation on the other. The point is that when we endorse some aspect of an artwork or ethical judgment, we switch from recognising our response as subjective to treating the aspect concerned as an objective property of the object/situation.

Consider the following example of the reception received by Eliasson's *Weather project* at the Tate Modern (2003). The site-specific installation consisted of a mirrored ceiling that doubled the volume of the Turbine Hall and a semicircular screen, backlit by monofrequency lights mounted on the far end of the Hall that, abutting the ceiling, created the illusion of a sun. Artificial mist was emitted into the space. By walking to the far end of the Hall, visitors could see the construction of the sun and, likewise, the upper side of the mirror was visible from the top floor of the museum. Eliasson explains:

Had I insisted on a universal, maybe religious framework which some people probably also saw in it, it would, I would claim, have been a socially less

interesting or efficient experiment. I try to involve the person who engages in my work at a much more fundamental level. I see the generosity of a work of art in its ability to embrace the fact that people have different ways of constituting the same situation. The situation is just 'hosted' by the work of art. The participants in the situation are what give it its performative and socialising potential. This is fundamental.<sup>5</sup>

Eliasson describes his response to two members of the public who each took *The weather project* to mean quite different things:

I met with an atheist who said it was a very nice critique of God because of its deconstructive and clearly 'fake' nature. The atheist thought it was liberating because it finally gave him the chance to engage in something which was highly spiritual without, however, it claiming a very dogmatic or religious agenda. But at the same time a priest came to me saying that it was very nice to finally see a really, truly religious work of art and then he said the exact same thing. Just like God, it is a construction to carry your love and beliefs in life. ... Both saw themselves in the work. I have come to try to avoid being too specific about the reading of the work because, the two met and they had, I think, an interesting conversation and what was maybe special was that they both included the other's view of the work. It was basically a tolerant situation and I found that in itself was successful.<sup>6</sup>

The meaning of *The weather project* was constructed by social interactions either directly as in the two respondents mentioned above or indirectly by relating the work to relevant background knowledge and experience. The latter would have been originally conceived in virtue of conceptual frameworks internalised through our prior interactions within our particular communities.

Any suggestion that ethical and artistic judgments are subjective often invites a slippery slope argument. If they are subjective, then surely this means they are arbitrary, whimsical, a case of anything goes. The idea seems to be that if an evaluation is based on feeling, then it will be non-rational, unstable and unpredictable. However, as Kant took great pains to explain in the *Deduction of Pure Aesthetic Judgments*,<sup>7</sup> the important aspect of a system of judgments is that the values involved are constrained by the pressures exerted by individuals upon members of a group who each have interests which cannot be met without the cooperation of the group. We need not be aware of the underlying drive for consensus because we are simply predisposed to enjoy the approval of our peers and this exerts unconscious pressure upon our responses. In other words, the key to understanding the structure of both aesthetic and ethical judgments is intersubjectivity. Eliasson has a more nuanced way of putting this. He writes:

I ... find that feelings have a productive, extrovert dimension, which makes them much more communicable than is generally thought. Feelings are inclusive because they open up to other people and our surroundings; the surroundings are thus to a certain extent produced when we feel them, creating an exchange between individual and surroundings that makes the two co-relative.<sup>8</sup>

In the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, Kant explains that there is a kind of feeling that is not an irreducible aspect of experience. Instead, it can be cultivated and formed through interactions with one's community. Typically it will be by approximating one's responses to those of one's peers or those one would like to consider one's peers that feelings are moulded to particular objects or particulars. In this way there is a clear analogy between aesthetic and ethical judgments.

Kant explains that we are defined by our capacity for culture which simply is the predisposition to find a point of commonality with our peers in what we value. This is the same predisposition that makes art possible; the conditions of mind that make ethical judgments possible are the same conditions that make art possible. In this sense, art and ethics are entwined. In summary, there are two ways that aesthetic and ethical judgments are analogous. First, the structure of aesthetic judgments is analogous to the structure of ethical judgments: both require rational deliberation and endorsement. Second, aesthetic judgments exercise the same kind of capacity as exercised by ethical judgments. This is our capacity for being responsive to communion with our peers and for orienting ourselves to the world in such a way that we feel incorporated into it rather than alienated from it. This link between the aesthetic and the ethical is essentially Kant's point in writing the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, popular notions of his formalism notwithstanding.

While we can be confident in the points of analogy between both kinds of judgment, we should also bear in mind the dissimilarities in their purposes and intentions. For example, endorsing an artwork or enjoying a landscape is not like giving money to disadvantaged groups or being kind to one's neighbours. We can clearly see that both kinds of judgment have different aims and objectives. The point is however, as Kant argues, both aesthetic and ethical judgments have similar preconditions and that is our capacity for cultivating a feeling response based in the public rather than the private realm.<sup>9</sup> The point is that Kant's ahistoricity can be easily reconstructed in terms of its application to particular epochs and cultures. The structures of the judgments occupied Kant but we can understand them in terms of particular cultural manifestations. The movement back towards the role of art as public construction rather than individual expression may not exactly fit the shape of



movements delineated by Hegel but it can be understood as compatible with Hegelian historicity more generally.

### **3. Adorno on Autonomy and Art as Critique**

Adorno took certain insights from Kant and Hegel, but did not simply follow in their footsteps as a synthesising agent. He brought to the table a concern specifically with how new ideas can come from old. Art was to serve this purpose in Adorno's thinking. He writes:

the fact that artworks exist signals the possibility of the nonexisting. The reality of artworks testifies to the possibility of the possible. ... Ever since Plato's doctrine of anamnesis the not-yet-existing has been dreamed of in remembrance, which alone concretizes utopia without betraying it to existence. Remembrance remains bound up with semblance: for even in the past the dream was not reality.<sup>10</sup>

However, a dilemma arises when one considers that art both exhibits autonomy and acts as a critique of society. To be critical of a society, art must communicate within the norms and concepts of day-to-day dialogue as Adorno acknowledges when he writes: 'Whereas art opposes society, it is nevertheless unable to take up a position beyond it; it achieves opposition only through identification with that against which it remonstrates'.<sup>11</sup> However, if it operates within these norms and with these concepts, its creativity could at most refer to new syntheses of entrenched norms and concepts. Adorno certainly did not believe that we intuit art without concepts: 'No analysis of important works [including music] could possibly prove their pure intuitability, for they are all pervaded by the conceptual'.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, anyone who claims that art

can be both autonomous and critical owes us an explanation as to how it can be both at the same time.

Adorno maintained that art was both. He did not square this off in his own thinking with some naïve theory of perception. On the contrary, he maintained that all perception was shot through with historically embedded concepts, associations and understandings. He was aware of the *apparent* incommensurability between his theory of perception and his theory of aesthetic autonomy. He attempted to show that both positions were complementary rather than contradictory by locating the source of art's critical function in its aesthetic form. For example he writes: 'The concept of art is located in a historically changing constellation of elements; it refuses definition. Its essence cannot be deduced from its origin as if the first work were a foundation on which everything that followed were constructed'.<sup>13</sup> And most significantly:

The basic levels of experience that motivate art are related to those of the objective world from which they recoil. The unsolved antagonism of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form. This, not the insertion of objective elements, defines the relation of art to society. ... Art is autonomous and it is not; without what is heterogeneous to it, its autonomy eludes it. The great epics, which have survived their own oblivion, were in their own age intermingled with historical and geographical reportage.<sup>14</sup>

And later he writes: 'The need for objective art was not fulfilled in functional means and therefore encroached on autonomous means. It disavows art as the product of human labor, one that nevertheless does not want to be an object, a thing among other things'.<sup>15</sup> Aesthetic form according to Adorno, gave to art its autonomy from entrenched norms and concepts, without removing art from the heat of current

concerns and debates. Aesthetic form provides the vehicle for critique that literal language would preclude.

Another example of Eliasson's artwork comes to mind that nicely demonstrates this point. His work entitled *Your mobile expectations: BMW H2R project*, 2007, was created in response to the BMW art-car project. Since 1975, BMW has been commissioning major artists to convert a BMW into art. Many major artists, among them, Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, David Hockney and Jenny Holzer have accepted commissions. It is instructive to compare an artist's response to a theme with the way other artists have responded to the same theme. In this way, not only the stylistic variations between artists come to the fore but also the artist's conception of art (its scope and purview) can be highlighted by comparing his or her artistic intentions and commitments with those of other artists.

The artists who had accepted this commission from BMW before Eliasson, all more or less decorated the car with their particular style of painting or text. Unfortunately, instead of the artists converting the BMW and all it represented regarding a lifestyle of glamour, high status and celebrity into the context of their own aims and purposes as artists, the transference of associations worked in the opposite direction. It was more a case of BMW car meets Warhol or Rauschenberg. Style was converted to brand. The style served as a sign of the kind of associations that one purchases when one purchases a BMW. BMW wanted to add to their brand a smear of high culture but in the process smeared art with something rather less savoury.

Recall Adorno and Horkheimer's discussion in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

How formalised the procedure is can be seen when the mechanically differentiated products prove to be all alike in the end. That the difference between the Chrysler range and General Motors products is basically illusory strikes every child with a

keen interest in varieties. What connoisseurs discuss as good or bad points serve only to perpetuate the semblance of competition and range of choice. ... But even the differences between the more expensive and cheaper models put out by the same firm steadily diminish: ... The universal criterion of merit is the amount of 'conspicuous production,' of blatant cash investment. The varying budgets in the culture industry do not bear the slightest relation to factual values, to the meaning of the products themselves.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast, Eliasson's response to this project completely usurped the tradition of the BMW art cars. He treated the car project as an occasion for a more immersive experience so that instead of making passive spectators of his audience, he gave them the opportunity to be participants in the intellectual sense. Eliasson treated the project as an occasion for reflection on matters related to the car industry but he did this not in a didactic or boorish way, but in a way which showcased the artness in art; a very powerful way to ultimately make a point if you have the creative nous to do so.

Eliasson and his colleagues replaced the body of a hydrogen powered BMW with a double-layered grid like structure consisting of welded steel rods and mirrors, based on a spiral geometry, which they sprayed with gallons of water in under freezing temperatures. The result was a layered ice-grid which was exhibited in a freezing cold room in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2007. This was not an object to see but an object to experience. According to reports, on entering the freezing gallery space, temperatures dropped, skin prickled, muscles tightened, as one braced oneself against the cold and kept one's balance on the wet floor.

Monofrequency light glowed from within the layered grids of ice. In addition, flecks of light sparkled across the ice, reflected from the gallery lighting. Looking at the object as a whole suggested a strange creature from some other age, a fossilized

echidna or porcupine perhaps. Drawing in closer and looking in through the layers of icicles one could not help but recall a three dimensional Jackson Pollock. Immersion in the work, the onslaught on a variety of senses, primed one for reflection. The object here was once a car; not just any car but an exclusive, insanely expensive commodity employing the most advanced and cutting edge technology. Yet Eliasson converted it into a thing of the past, a mere token of culture returned to nature, a kind of fossil embedded within layers of ice.

The project involved a long research period before the actual form development began. For instance, Eliasson engaged in a series of conversations on mobility, perception, design, and architecture with architects, scientists, designers, and theorists. Moreover, two symposia were organized at Studio Olafur Eliasson: LIS (Life In Space) 2006 and LIS (Life In Space) 2007 as part of the research for *Your mobile expectations*. Architects, philosophers, designers, artists, cultural critics, and scientists convened to discuss various issues connected to the work at the Studio.<sup>17</sup>

Eliasson used the opportunity with BMW to address a topic which is part of our day to day concerns. When Eliasson evokes responses that exercise ethical judgments through artistic engagement, he is making art that acts as critique. As Eliasson states:

I think that through art one can respond to a feeling and transfer it into a physical movement. It becomes a platform on which societal concerns and ideas can take form. You can show alternative systems - you can integrate alternative systems into existing systems. In this way, art operates as a kind of connector between different things.<sup>18</sup>

In the contrast between the approach taken by the twentieth century artists and Eliasson's approach to the BMW project, we see a contrast between art as commodity

and art as critique. Eliasson uses the form of his art to ultimately present a critique of prevailing values. The other artists could not escape their known styles which had already been turned into symbols of the BMW. Eliasson does not become trapped in this way because he never simply manufactures 'style'. The notion of aesthetic autonomy demonstrated in Eliasson's work differs from Adorno's concept of aesthetic autonomy in that Eliasson does not treat art as having a monopoly on creativity and invention. Eliasson speaks of his art as a 'sentence in a longer conversation'<sup>19</sup> as though it simply plays its part along with other communicative media.

#### **4. Types of Aesthetic Autonomy**

For Adorno, 'autonomous' is a term used to designate genuine art. In contrast, popular art is a slave to the dominant cultural forms. Adorno's critique of popular art signals his high hopes for art. However, it is unclear how Adorno envisaged we draw a unified and coherent concept of aesthetic autonomy from the various aspects of his aesthetic theory. Here are variations on the two types of aesthetic autonomy referred to in the Introduction, in reverse order, for the purpose of establishing weak, moderate and strong versions:

(i) It may be that art is not the source of critique but more a facilitator of critique. If the experience of the artwork as critique requires the mediation of concepts and discursive practices, then art at best might consolidate, reinforce and cement a new critical stance but not actually generate it. One might only recognise the critical stance of art if one already has the concept of art-as-critique in one's conceptual scheme. I will call this a weak aesthetic autonomy. Adorno's theory of art bears some

aspects in common with this type of autonomy when he writes: ‘Art desires what has not yet been, though everything that art is has already been’.<sup>20</sup>

(ii) Refining the notion of aesthetic autonomy further, art might draw upon the same non-discursive structures that constitute the grounds for the evolution of new concepts. Just as new concepts evolve across the top of existing conceptual schemes, combining some aspects of existing concepts and discarding others, so art conveys meaning in an analogous manner. In this case, art would provide an opportunity to re-conceive aspects of experience. As such, art would take its place along side other cultural artefacts that engender and occasion the development and communication of values and norms. I will call this moderate aesthetic autonomy. Eliasson’s understanding of his practice implicitly presents it as an example of this type of autonomy.

(iii) Adorno’s theory of art combines aspects of (i) and (ii) but seems to also involve stronger claims about the nature of aesthetic autonomy. Adorno maintains that aesthetic form is the basis of art’s critical capacity in virtue of its non-discursive inner consistency. He discusses the basis of art’s communicability indirectly in various passages such as, for example:

Although artworks are neither conceptual nor judgmental, they are logical. ... Its logical process transpires in a sphere whose premises and givens are extralogical. The unity that artworks thereby achieve makes them analogous to the logic of experience, however much their technical procedures and their elements and the relation between them may distance them from those of practical empirical reality.<sup>21</sup>

And:

In contrast to the semblance of inevitability that characterizes these forms in empirical reality, art's control over them and over their relation to materials makes their arbitrariness in the empirical world evident. ... Paradoxically, it is precisely to the extent that art is released from the empirical world by its formal constituents that it is less illusory, less deluded by subjectively dictated lawfulness, than is empirical knowledge. That the logic of artworks is a derivative of discursive logic and not identical with it, is evident in that art's logic.<sup>22</sup>

Here, art is recognised as employing an inner logic that is nonetheless different from the logic that underpins language. This presents a paradox which is that while the communicative base of art is its representation of everyday experience, it conveys its actual critique not in virtue of representation but in virtue of its particular aesthetic form (whose character depends on its relation to the system of art as a whole). The aesthetic form acts as a critical presence to the norms and conventions of the everyday, and this is unique to art. This constitutes a strong sense of aesthetic autonomy.

If the first alternative is right, then a concept of art whereby art is believed to be the source of critique is simply a convention which imbues art with more significance than it would otherwise have. However, the significance with which this convention imbues art would be illusory. Even so, there may be good reasons for accepting it. For example, it may make us attend to art in such a way that it becomes the focus of ethical debate and in doing so provides us with an opportunity to approximate our responses to those of our peers. In this case, art would be serving an important social role. However, as a convention, our concept of art as critique may go out of fashion even regarding works that were once considered the product of genius. Art and



genius might just be historically grounded categories that respond to particular historical material conditions. While this sounds like the position Adorno's historicism would commit him to, it is not the position he explicitly holds.

If the second alternative is right, art or aesthetic form does play a genuine role in the evolution of conceptual schemes. However, when the basis of communication is conceived by the pragmatist, who grounds language in the practices of a community of language users, art has no greater monopoly on creativity than other discursive practices, such as the legal realm or the institution of science. This would satisfy Adorno's claim that art is critique but not his claim that such critique can only be conducted in virtue of aesthetic form or art's inner logic which he writes is 'derivative of discursive logic and not identical with it'.<sup>23</sup>

The first two alternatives can be defended without positing elaborate foundations or theoretical scaffolding. They can simply piggyback on whatever metaphysical, epistemological and value theory one holds. However, a strong aesthetic autonomy requires something more elaborate. Strong aesthetic autonomy requires an explanation for how art's inner logic is 'derivative of discursive logic but not identical to it'.<sup>24</sup> For example, adopting the traditional metaphysics of the German Idealists we could posit a supersensory or transcendental realm to ground aesthetic form and to show that it was through aesthetic form that our freedom from nature's determinism and categorical imperatives was manifested. Perhaps Adorno in spite of his professed historical materialism had not given up on the possibility of freedom construed in the manner of his predecessors. If we can critique society from within its structures and the grounds for such a critique are provided by the inner logic of art or aesthetic form, the problem is to understand how Adorno thinks this is possible without the conceptual framework of traditional metaphysics.

## **5. Adorno and Strong Aesthetic Autonomy**

Aesthetic autonomy, as construed by Adorno, manifests as a critique of established patterns of value and knowledge. Art is understood to exemplify aesthetic autonomy in two ways. First, aesthetic autonomy is achieved through aesthetic form. Aesthetic form is a form of communication which is other than the discursive structure which defines thought and action within the institutions of society. The idea is that aesthetic form is free of the habits of mind that are driven and compelled by the kind of interests over which we have little control, dictated as they are by survival needs, technical and social. These latter interests have determined the various manifestations of discursive language.

Second, in spite of the above, aesthetic autonomy is grounded in the objectivity that historical processes lend to human endeavours. That is, each new artwork is part of a larger network of artworks. Its significance and meaning is determined by its relation to other artworks. Every selection that an artist makes, as evidenced in the work, represents a commitment of some kind. Each commitment acts as an indirect critique of other works which represent alternative commitments. Hence, a tension exists between each work within the system. It is as if each artwork is related to all other artworks according to a dialectical structure, as thesis, antithesis or synthesis.<sup>25</sup> Adorno refers to the 'critical relation to the previously established, on which their quality depends' as the artwork's 'openness'.<sup>26</sup> The value and significance given to individual artworks is based on their relation to other artworks within this structure.

This dialectical structure gives to artworks their objectivity and truth, quite apart from their relation to the society from which the artwork emerged. This is one of the

ways in which Adorno characterises aesthetic autonomy and it is also the grounds for art's communicability. The meanings of art are created through the historical system of art, not through the language of day to day living. Adorno argues that if artworks can be meaningful, this conversely implies 'the possibility of complete failure'.<sup>27</sup> The dialectical structure provided by the historical development of art provides the objective grounds for the communicability of art; and its unique kind of truth.

The substantive content of art emerges in this tension between an artwork's relation to other artworks and the significance of its nondiscursive communicative base (a tension between the historical and the ahistorical). Representation may be used in an artwork but it is not in the explicit content of the representation that its critical significance is to be found. The problem, however, is that the meaning we attribute to art in virtue of its relation to other works would not escape the conceptual schemes we have internalized through interactions within our communities. What other grounds of significance and meaning are there for Adorno? If aesthetic autonomy refers only to the self-reflexivity of Art-world practices, this reverts to a very weak notion of aesthetic autonomy.

Adorno's notion of aesthetic autonomy implies that one can know the world in a way which is independent of the concepts which are culturally embedded and through which we organise experience. Yet, Adorno explicitly criticized the idea that art could be perceived independently of historically embedded concepts. He thought such an idea was naïve. The power of cultural transcendence with which aesthetic autonomy imbues art, must mean for Adorno, something other than or something tangential to, independence from culturally imbibed concepts and norms.

Adorno shows that he is aware of the apparent incompatibility between aesthetic autonomy and his historicism when he attempts to reveal the basis of the

indeterminate yet communicative content of art. For this purpose he summons up the notion of art's own distinct kind of inner logic. Furthermore, he relates aesthetic autonomy to aesthetic truth or 'truth content' (*Wahrheitsgehalt*). Aesthetic truth, according to Adorno, concerns the structure of a work. 'Of all the paradoxes of art, no doubt the innermost one is that only through making, through the production of particular works specifically and completely formed in themselves, and never through any immediate vision, does art achieve what is not made, the truth'.<sup>28</sup>

We have seen that according to Adorno, a work can be coherent or incoherent. Its coherence is based upon its inner logic; on whether there is a correspondence between the demands of the historically determined materials and techniques with which the artist works and the form with which the artist structures her material.<sup>29</sup> However, what appears to one as exhibiting inner logic may also be dependent on one's experience or the conceptual framework into which one is already initiated.

Materials and techniques are part of history but according to Adorno's aesthetic theory, the aesthetic form of the work apparently is not. We might find it easy to accept that the potential of the historically determined materials and techniques are understood relative to the materials and techniques used in other endorsed artworks. Furthermore, their success within the particular artwork, their significance and value, would be based on how they serve the content to which the artist gives aesthetic form. This is how Adorno seeks to ground aesthetic autonomy such that the aesthetic truth to which it gives rise is not limited to prevailing concepts and norms; or not simply an expression of the prevailing ideology. However, as we have already seen, the objective grounds of aesthetic truth, the basis upon which aesthetic truth can emerge as autonomous from historical concepts and perceptions, is through the work's inner logic. The work's inner logic or its aesthetic form carries the full weight of the

possibility of communication without the determinate logic of discursive practices. However, one should ask whether the experience of an object's inner logic itself has a history?

Could an object that is deemed coherent and meaningful in one century be apprehended as structurally groundless and meaningless in another? Could our conceptual schemes or other cultural learning infiltrate perception and cognition whereby what is perceived as unified, coherent or exhibiting the inner logic peculiar to art forms, is itself historically contingent? According to Adorno: 'The artwork's autonomy is, indeed, not *a priori* but the sedimentation of a historical process that constitutes its concept. ... The more they [artists] freed themselves from external goals, the more completely they determined themselves as their own masters'<sup>30</sup> Given that Adorno was critical of attempts to identify unchanging or ahistorical categories, what is lacking in his account of aesthetic autonomy is a way to ground the possibility of freedom in minds limited to historically contingent concepts and norms all the way down.

## **6. Habermas: a Moderate Aesthetic Autonomy**

Jürgen Habermas was a student of Adorno and like him is associated with the Frankfurt School. While his thought moved further from the German Idealism that arguably still held sway with Adorno, Habermas nonetheless holds a concept of aesthetic autonomy. He replaces traditional metaphysics with a pragmatist theory of language as the grounds for aesthetic autonomy. In what follows I want to consider the implications of this strategy for our understanding of aesthetic autonomy and art as representation.

In a paper Habermas gave on accepting the Theodor W. Adorno prize in 1980 from the city of Frankfurt, Habermas referred to autonomy in relation to art in two different senses. On the one hand, Habermas used the term in a critical sense to refer to the isolation of the worlds of art, science and morality from each other and from the lifeworld; that is, from our day to day life as we experience it.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, another sense of aesthetic autonomy emerges particularly when this paper is considered in conjunction with other papers he wrote on related topics such as aesthetic modernity.<sup>32</sup> The idea of aesthetic autonomy that emerges pertains to a condition (rather than a product) of communicative action. Aesthetic autonomy refers to the synthesis of concepts and norms across domains, and in effect provides a name for the means by which conceptual frameworks evolve.

This of course does not necessarily imply that it is through art that new concepts and norms emerge. It may mean instead that this process, aesthetic autonomy, makes art possible. Its adaptive point might be in its role in ontogenetic conceptual development. As it operates at the borders of all discursive practice, it is a structuring process, regulative rather than constitutive, whereby indeterminate novel concepts and norms emerge across the top of (and combining aspects from a range of) established determinate concepts.

Habermas attributes to art the capacity to express aspects of experience that are unbounded by objective concepts.<sup>33</sup> He writes that if art enters into everyday communicative practice then it 'reaches into our cognitive interpretations and normative expectations and transforms the totality in which these moments are related to each other.'<sup>34</sup> This is the sense in which art can take place across the boundaries and at the edges of conventionally entrenched and endorsed concepts, norms and values. In other words, for Habermas, aesthetic autonomy is interpreted according to

the second alternative, which I called moderate aesthetic autonomy. Aesthetic autonomy is not unique to art; art simply takes its place along with other cultural artefacts that engender and occasion the development and communication of values and norms.

Habermas' interest in aesthetic autonomy does not originate nor remain with an interest in art per se. Instead, he needs aesthetic autonomy to ground a core feature of his theory of language, the possibility of conceptual revision. Habermas' theory of language is central to his philosophy as a whole. It is the basis upon which the plurality of human culture is understood. Consider that for Habermas, the meanings and values language acknowledges and conveys have more to do with the interests of the language users than with the objective facts about the world, even though the latter of course constrain the former.

According to Habermas, the terms and concepts that make up a language precede the objects that they refer to in the world. The terms and concepts are determined by human interests as they emerge within communities of language users.<sup>35</sup> Habermas recognises three types of interest: technical, social and emancipatory.<sup>36</sup> Technical interests pertain to our need to control our environment by understanding it. Social interests relate to our need to form communities, while emancipatory interests pertain to our need to conceive of ourselves as free and autonomous in our actions and thoughts. While these human interests are constant, they manifest in a variety of ways in the context of different communities of language users. Consequently, the relation of concepts or words to the world is not fixed.

For Habermas, discursive practices get their traction on reality through the interaction between the social and natural realms in lived experience. When our concepts (and hence our terms) lead to failed predictions, frustrated actions and so on,

they are revised. However, the nature and degree of disparities we perceive will be contingent to a significant extent on the conceptual framework we bring to bear on such occasions and this depends on the cultural perspective of the percipients. This idea is exemplified in Eliasson's response to a question concerning the public's reception to his work:

When you ask me why people like some of my work, I think it's because occasionally, but not always, they have a sense of something that they have already thought about, which means they bring a lot to my work. They use the work to make a thought or an experience or a perception explicit.<sup>37</sup>

The idea is that knowledge is a human construction, not simply a revelation of what's out there. The relation between word and world comes out of language use not art.

For Habermas, the social and objective worlds are ontologically distinct. If they were not distinct, there would be a necessity to the way language evolves. On the contrary, for Habermas, there is no necessity to the way language evolves even though it is constrained by the principles of discursiveness and human interests. The problem with pragmatist accounts of language is the possibility of revision. As the semantic relations between words and the world are the outcome of social practices, the problem which arises for the philosopher of language is how any particular community can move beyond their original and current conceptual scheme and terms of reference. Certainly Habermas recognises that our conceptual apparatus can be challenged when it rubs up against a reality which it does not adequately address. However, our interpretations of this incompatibility will always be limited by the concepts we have at hand.<sup>38</sup>



If language depends on social practices, and social practices in order to evolve need language, we should all be trapped within a cycle where revelation and paradigm shifts are impossible. The only way to avoid this would be through some kind of foundationalism which would usher in other problems. In any case, Habermas rejects such an approach. Habermas implicitly recognises that his account needs a non-discursive yet formal communicative structure whose role is to accommodate the possibility of the emergence of new concepts and norms. This would make room for a capacity for synthesising across concepts and norms; a synthesis whose structure would be derived from somewhere other than our prevailing conceptual repertoire. It is not the objective world that provides the basis for revision, if we conceive of the objective world as something outside of us, but the plasticity of the processes responsible for our communicative practices.

On Habermas' account, the nature of our concepts is contingent on the particular historically and materially situated human interests of the language users. However, for Habermas, norms and concepts evolve not due to a determined pattern but due to a more open ended and socially contingent development of human interests. It is due to the contingency of this development that there is a place for a notion of aesthetic autonomy in Habermas's formal pragmatics. Aesthetic autonomy for Habermas is a process or capacity that allows a cross-fertilisation between and across categories. In virtue of this capacity, the grounds of communication are flexible and not locked into a static set of discursive practices. The term 'aesthetic' names the very process by which it is possible for sense perception and the construction of meaning to acquire a history. It is not subject to history itself (that is, the process named 'aesthetic' is a universal human capacity). Aesthetic autonomy can be understood as a formal

component of Habermas's formal pragmatics. Understood in this way, aesthetic autonomy is compatible with Adorno's historical materialism.

Not all pragmatist theories of language support aesthetic autonomy. In order to bring out what it is about Habermas' pragmatism that is conducive to at least the moderate form of aesthetic autonomy, it is instructive to compare it with certain key features of an alternative pragmatism, such as Robert Brandom's normative pragmatics. Pragmatism of all stripes is characterised by a thesis on the order of semantic relations between word and world. The central idea is that language practices take precedence in the order of semantic relations. Relative to more traditional analytical theories of language, the pragmatist theory is nonobjectivist. It answers the question concerning the nature of language not by virtue of what language means but by virtue of what it achieves for its users, that is, what it does.<sup>39</sup>

Like Habermas, Brandom holds a non-objective theory of language according to which the meaning of a word does not exist prior to the use of the word. The important difference between Habermas and Brandom for our purposes, is that Habermas thinks each particular manifestation of language development is contingent on factors at least in part peculiar to the particular community of language users. In contrast, Brandom treats the path taken in the evolution of language as necessary. For Brandom, the structures of the world impress themselves on discursive practices such that as language evolves, our concepts more closely approximate the way the world is.<sup>40</sup> According to this picture, there is no ontological distinction between nature and the social world. Hence, Brandom does not need to explain the revision of concepts because he envisages the process of language evolution as a revelation of structures in the world. This revelation occurs in the course of our attempts to satisfy our needs which would involve acting in the world according to our conceptual schemes.

Brandom's position provides him with an independent basis for the possibility of acquiring new concepts. The meaning of language develops through use, but its substantive content is constrained by its underlying structure which reflects structures in the world (due to evolutionary adaptations presumably). Brandom's position has the effect of creating a closer nexus between language and reality, between the social and the natural, and consequently, leaves no need for other than a straightforward discursively grounded knowledge of the world. We can revise concepts but this revision properly so called, heads in only one possible direction because discursive practices are not distinct from the natural world.

Brandom's theory of language does not need aesthetic autonomy in the sense adopted by Habermas. In contrast, it is through the open ended contingent nature of language evolution that our emancipatory interests are served according to Habermas. This requires a basis independent of discursiveness for new concepts to emerge and this basis is aesthetic form; an indeterminate yet rule governed ground for giving a non-discursive communicative form to otherwise unacknowledged aspects of experience. As such, there is still a substantive sense of freedom that can be maintained in Habermas' worldview, but in Brandom's the concept of freedom would be merely conventional, at most a useful concept for organising certain social practices. Brandom's philosophy of language might win on economy but not on the resources needed for humanism or a strong sense of second nature. Habermas is triumphant in this respect. In Habermas's pragmatic theory of language, we find a moderate sense of aesthetic autonomy which is recommended on a variety of grounds not least of which is the conception of the human being to which it points.

## **Conclusion**

By adopting a moderate aesthetic autonomy grounded in Habermas' philosophy of language, we address the ahistorical aspect of aesthetic autonomy by construing aesthetic autonomy as a species specific process or capacity. The historical aspect is that this process or capacity can manifest in various culturally specific ways such that art works, other human artefacts and perception can be understood as having a history. The potency of this notion of aesthetic autonomy is that it brings art into the realm of society, as a critique of society in virtue of this very autonomy. As such, arguments which employ a strong notion of aesthetic 'autonomy' in order to position art beyond cultural critique (as either the source or the object of such a critique) are unfounded. Eliasson's view that art is ideally embedded in the discourses of its day is given a foundation in Habermas' notion of (a moderate) aesthetic autonomy.

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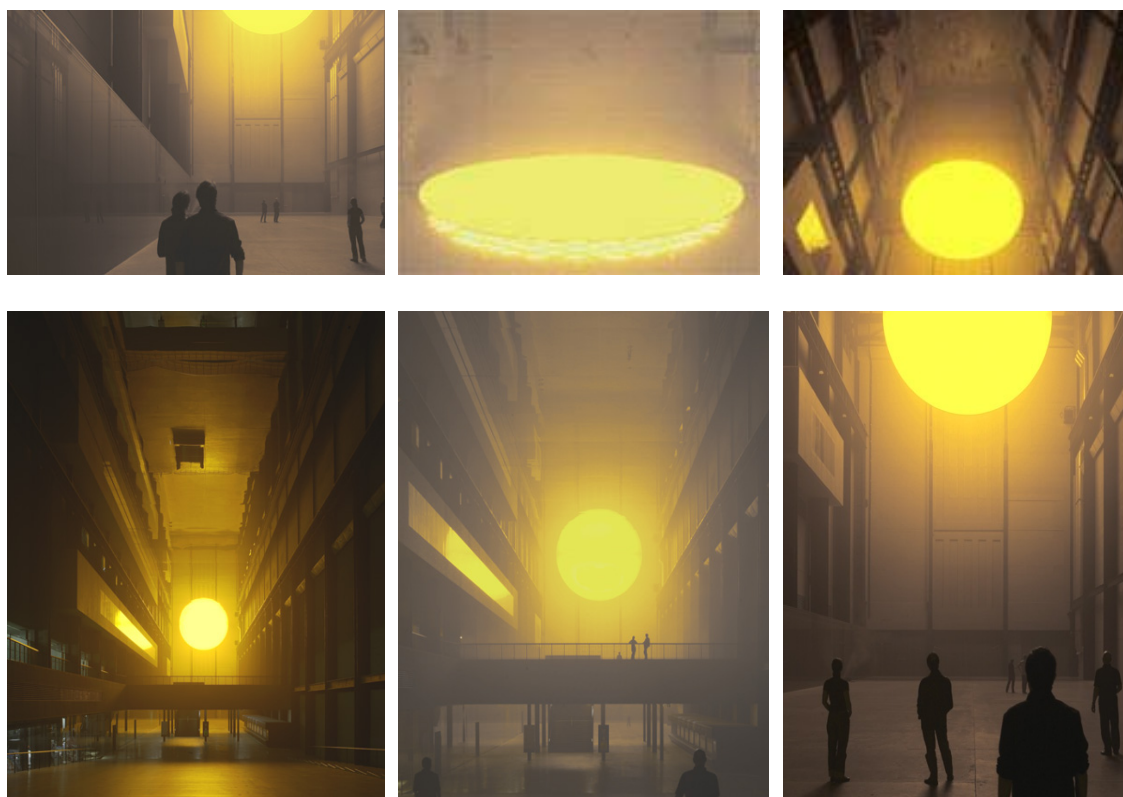


Figure 1: Olafur Eliasson, The weather project, 2003.  
Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London, UK, 2003.  
Photographs courtesy of Studio Olafur Eliasson.



Figure 2: Olafur Eliasson, Your mobile expectations: BMW H<sub>2</sub>R project, 2007. Photographs courtesy of Studio Olafur Eliasson.

### Notes

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- 1 Earlier versions of this paper were presented to the Philosophy Department and the Aesthetics Research Group at the University of Kent, Canterbury UK in 2009; to the Critical Theory Conference (Images of a Demystified World), John Cabot University, Rome 2009; and to the Australasian Association of Philosophy Conference 2009. I would like to thank the respective audiences for their many comments and suggestions. I am also very grateful to Olafur Eliasson for allowing me access to his studio and archives; and providing me with the opportunity to interview him about his work. Many thanks also to Camilla Kragelund and Anna Engberg-Pedersen of Studio Olafur Eliasson for their helpful comments.
  - 2 For a discussion on various notions of aesthetic autonomy and their shortcomings, see Goran Hermeren, 'The Autonomy of Art', in John Fisher (ed.) *Essays on Aesthetics: Perspectives on the Work of Monroe C. Beardsley*, (Temple University Press, 1983), pp. 35-49; Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory. The Redemption of Illusion*. (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press 1991); and Lambert Zuidervaart, 'The Social Significance of Autonomous Art: Adorno and Bürger', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 48 (1) (1990), pp. 61-77. According to Zuidervaart, some uses of 'aesthetic autonomy' pertain to the history and characteristics of art as an institution, others

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- concern the character, functions, and reception of works of art. Some theses are descriptive, others are prescriptive. Zuidervaart also asks that we ‘distinguish clearly between the autonomy of art and our ideas about the autonomy of art.’ (Zuidervaart, 1990, p.68).
- 3 Olafur Eliasson, *Your Mobile Expectations: BMW H<sub>2</sub>R Project* (Baden, Switzerland: Lars Muller Publishers, 2008), p.20.
  - 4 The idea is that once one develops the appropriate ethical *feeling* regarding the relevant ethical maxim, this is sufficient to motivate the corresponding action. This is a reconstruction of Kantian morality but defended by a careful study of his ‘The analytic of practical reason’ (second critique) in the light of his third critique. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason.*, Mary Gregor (trans. & ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997), particularly pp. 50-89; and *Critique of Judgment*, 1790. W. S. Pluhar (trans.) (Indianapolis: Hackett 1987).
  - 5 Eliasson, Olafur. In conversation with Jennifer A. McMahon, Berlin, May 2009. A recording of the interview can be found at: <http://www.raumexperimente.net/programme.html>
  - 6 Ibid.
  - 7 Kant (1987) particularly § 39-42.
  - 8 Eliasson (2008) p. 133.
  - 9 For a summary of changes to the worldview that occurred with the scientific revolution and the way in which Kant aimed to keep ‘intention’ in the world, see Michael Friedman, ‘Exorcising the Philosophical Tradition’ in Nicholas H. Smith (ed.) *Reading McDowell: on Mind and World* (London & New York: Routledge 2002), pp. 25-57.
  - 10 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1970, Robert Hullot-Kentor (trans. & ed.) (London: The Athlone Press, paperback, 1999), p.132.
  - 11 *Ibid.*, p.133.
  - 12 *Ibid.*, p. 96.
  - 13 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
  - 14 *Ibid.*, p.6.
  - 15 *Ibid.*, p.58.
  - 16 Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer, ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception’ in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (John Cumming, trans.) (London: Allen Lane, 1973), p. 123.

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- 17 Archival material at *Studio Olafur Eliasson*. Thanks to Camilla Kragelund of Studio Olafur for pointing this out to me.
- 18 Eliasson (2009).
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Adorno (1999), p. 134.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 For a further discussion see: James M. Harding, 'Historical Dialectics and the Autonomy of Art in Adorno's Ästhetische Theorie', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 50: 3 (1992): pp. 183-95.
- 26 Adorno (1999), p. 353.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 131.
- 29 According to Max Paddison, Adorno employs a notion of correspondence which is built on a determinate concept's relation to its object but adapts it for correspondence between an indeterminate concept with something objective and independent of it, namely the historical artistic materials. See Max Paddison, 'Authenticity and Failure in Adorno's Aesthetics' in Tom Huhn (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004): pp. 198-221.
- 30 Adorno (1999) pp. 17-8.
- 31 Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity versus Postmodernity' 1980, in Clive Cazeaux (ed.) *The Continental Aesthetics Reader* (London & New York: 2000c) pp. 268-77, p. 272.
- 32 Jürgen Habermas, 'Extract from Questions and Counterquestions' 1984, in Clive Cazeaux (ed.) *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, (London & New York: 2000b) pp. 278-81.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 280.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, T. McCarthy (trans.), Vols. 1-2 (Boston: Beacon Press 1984-87), Vol.1, p. 100.

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- 36 Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Jeremy J. Shapiro (trans.) (London: Heinemann 1972) pp. 311-4.
- 37 Eliasson (2009).
- 38 I am not using Heideggerian terminology here. If I were, I would want to include what goes under in his system both ‘present-at-hand’ and ‘ready-to-hand’.
- 39 This is traditional pragmatism: the nature of the doing, of the process, that institutes that relation is where a theory of language and hence meaning begins. The expressive rather than the representational aspect of language is foundational. It is through its expressive aspect that representation is possible. See Robert Brandom, *Between Saying and Doing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008), p. 180. See also Brandom’s ‘Facts, Norms, and Normative Facts: A Reply to Habermas’, *European Journal of Philosophy* 8:3 (2000): pp. 356–74.
- 40 See Jürgen Habermas, ‘From Kant to Hegel: On Robert Brandom’s Pragmatic Philosophy of Language’, *European Journal of Philosophy* 8:3 (2000): 322–55.