

WITHOUT KNOWLEDGE AND CONSCIENCE

Aesthetic judgement cannot be separated from moral judgement. What the debate on Otto Mühl can contribute to the debate on Cancel Culture.

— by Lea Susemichel

On 8 September 1985, the artist Ana Mendieta falls down 34 storeys. Circumstantial evidence suggests that it was her partner Carl Andre who pushed her to her death from the window of their shared New York flat. But the famous minimalist artist is acquitted in the subsequent murder trial.

In her highly recommended podcast “Death of an Artist”, art historian Helen Molesworth revisits this case. It had deeply divided the art world. The dividing line between the camps was not only between those who held Andre responsible for Mendieta’s death and those who were convinced of his innocence. A central point of contention at the time was also whether this question of guilt should play any role at all in the assessment of his art.

It is precisely this conflict that Helen Molesworth is concerned with. She does not treat Mendieta’s death as a true crime story, but uses it to deal with the art-critical crucial question of whether the person of the artist(s) can be separated from their work. Is it really irrelevant from an art historical perspective whether an artist presumably killed his partner — who, by the way, had suffered from a massive fear of heights all her life — in such a cruel way? Or does the verticality of the 34 storeys also influence the horizontality of Andre’s floor sculptures for which he was so celebrated? Celebrated also because the horizontal of his work, often made of simple building materials, has been interpreted as an anti-hierarchical, egalitarian gesture. And is it completely irrelevant to his art that his partner, who died at the age of 36 in a window fall, had repeatedly made violence against women a theme in her artistic works? Who had poured blood, like her own, on pavements in order to scandalise male violence with this performance, for which so often no one is held accountable?

Who had denounced the rape and murder of a female student with her work *Untitled (Rape Scene)*?

Carl Andre, on the other hand, as the author of the “Art Workers’ Coalition Manifesto”, was outraged by the discrimination of, among others, women in the art business and saw himself as a feminist. This political activism and Andre’s clear demand for a moral responsibility of art (e.g., against the Vietnam War) were always regarded as part of his artistic identity, and this outspoken attitude naturally flowed into the evaluation of his works. Why, then, should the suspicion of a brutal betrayal of these moral ideals not do so as well?

Those who seek answers to this question will not only have to think about the value of the presumption of innocence, which is understandably insisted upon in cases without a legal conviction. Moreover, anyone thinking about the connection between moral and aesthetic judgement will immediately find themselves in the midst of heated debates about the autonomy of the work, artistic freedom, and the separation of work and person. A polarised discussion that has been renewed in recent years with every relevant #MeToo case. Are we still allowed (or do we want) to watch films by Roman Polanski or with Florian Teichtmeister? Laugh at Louis C. K. or even Cliff Huxtable on *The Bill Cosby Show*? Can we still dance light-heartedly to Michael Jackson after having seen the documentary *Leaving Neverland* and the allegations of abuse made against him in it? But the removal of the Gomringer poem [from the wall of Alice Salomon College in Berlin] — that really went too far! — Did it?

And what about the works of Otto Mühl? His “Aschebilder” (ash pictures) would probably no longer be exhibited today; the last time they were shown without critical comment was in 2004 at the MAK in Vienna. The ashes come from the diaries and records of his victims that he burned to destroy evidence of sexual violence against children, for which he was later convicted. But what about his other works? In what form can which works still be shown? Is it really censorship to banish some of them to the archive — not only for the sake of protecting victims?

In the course of the debate on “Cancel Culture”, the autonomy of the work of art is being upheld more forcefully than in a long time. The freedom of art must be defended at all costs against the “woke dictatorship of ideas”, on the basis of which iconoclasm and book burning are no longer far away.

Therefore, let us first make it unmistakably clear: Of course, certain aspects of the autonomy of art are important achievements, which are intended not least to protect against arbitrary state power and to enable fundamental artistic criticism. The freedom of artistic criticism is thus not least an important corrective to democratic politics that must be defended at all costs. This leads to the supposed paradox that at present it is often the left, of all people, who demand a restriction of artistic freedom, while traditionally it was they who advocated the liberalisation of the arts (Rauterberg 2018). This can be explained by the fact that in current discussions, very different things are being talked about when the autonomy of art is invoked. According to art historian Wolfgang Ullrich, the concept of autonomy is often reduced to an under-complex concept of freedom: "One may even surmise that the concept of autonomy is damaged more by those who ceaselessly invoke it than by those who take the side of post-autonomous artworks." (Ullrich 2022: 26) So what exactly is the autonomy of art? And just how absolute is it supposed to be?

COMPETING RIGHTS OF FREEDOM

This autonomy, as we will see, has many facets. But it always means either the freedom of art to do something (to cross borders, etc.) or the freedom from something (political influences, etc.). However, this freedom is already curtailed by existing law, for example, by copyright law. Moreover, in Germany the freedom of art is unreservedly anchored in the constitution following the experiences of National Socialism. However, it can be restricted by conflicting constitutional law, such as personal rights. Different rights of freedom can thus compete with each other or even be in direct conflict. In principle, the freedom of the artist ends where the freedom of those who were made artistic objects begins (as a character in an autofictional novel, as a figure of fun in cabaret, as a subject in an oil painting, etc.). Defamation and humiliation can therefore be countered, even if they happen on stage, in pictures or books. However, determining the borderline between opposing constitutional rights and weighing them against each other is a tightrope walk. For the case is seldom as simple as that of André Breton, for whom the simplest surrealist act consisted in this, "to take to the streets with revolvers in your fists and shoot blindly at the crowd as long as you can". Donald

Trump famously had a very similar idea: “I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn’t lose any voters.”) Even though it can unfortunately by no means be said with certainty that after such an action the art (or even the politics) of the perpetrator could no longer be sold — murder and manslaughter are of course not permitted, even as an art action.

AUTONOMY OF THE WORK

That the freedom of art is not absolute also applies to another dimension of artistic autonomy, namely the separation between work and artist. When the gallery representing Otto Mühl pleads for his work to be judged independently of his “violations of the law,” it insists on this distinction and thus on the autonomy of the work. It also wants to legitimise the decision to publish a catalogue (Klocker 2019), the cover of which shows the buttocks of a child that Mühl dipped in paint and pressed onto paper against their will.

The case of Otto Mühl, who resolutely opposed the separation of “art and life,” paradigmatically demonstrates how crude the logic of autonomy of the work is, especially in the case of artists whose declared goal it is to abolish the separation of work and person. Insisting on this autonomy not only contradicts their self-image, but also ignores the fact that it forms the basis of their recognition in art history: Avant-garde artists were celebrated precisely for wanting to abolish this distinction (Bürger 1974). To want to separate Mühl’s action art from his fascist-authoritarian communist regime seems particularly absurd, not only because of the obvious violation of personal rights, but also in view of the goal he formulated of a “total art” that fuses art and life. In the case of Mühl, it becomes very clear how the defence of the “freedom of art” easily becomes an ideological bulwark with which all claims to artistic creation are to be shot down that do not have to do directly and exclusively with the end product of the art process, even if the artists themselves decidedly do not want to see their artistic creation restricted to this product.

"I COME FROM HOMER..."

But what about the separation of work and artist persona when the coquetry with the blurring of the boundaries between art and life is not part of the artistic gesture? When, on the contrary, this distinction is vehemently insisted upon? "I come from Tolstoy, I come from Homer, I come from Cervantes." Peter Handke's smiling reaction to the criticism of his political stance in the Yugoslavian war, which was voiced on the occasion of the Nobel Prize award, is an eloquent example of such a rejection. Even if his political position forms the core of his text *Die Fahrt im Einbaum oder Das Stück zum Film vom Krieg* (The Trip in the Dugout or The Play on the Film of War), it should paradoxically not be allowed to influence the judgement of the quality of his artistic work.

This should apply all the more to moral transgressions that have in no way found their way into the work. In Hannah Gadsby's celebrated Netflix show *Nanette*, there is a passage about Picasso in which the comedian has a wonderful rant about how, as an art historian, she passionately hates the misogynistic "Picasshole" because of his brutal treatment of girls and women (two of Picasso's partners committed suicide). But criticism of the grand master would always be brusquely rejected with reference to the historical achievement of Cubism. Even if Picasso was a misogynous monster "as a human being" (an identity that the genius "as an artist" apparently discards) — this should not be allowed to play a role when viewing *Guernica*. However, Picasso's series *Weeping Woman* was also created under the impression of the bombardment of Guernica. Anyone who recognises Dora Maar, whom Picasso is known to have driven to madness, must therefore exclude this from their aesthetic judgement?

DEATH OF THE AUTHOR

According to art historian Isabelle Graw, who argues for a "metonymic interrelationship" between person and work, there are two opposing methods in art studies. On the one hand, there is the so-called biography, which takes the life and person of the artist into account when interpreting their work and, in the tradition of the "first art historian" Giorgio Vasari, considers the biography of a person to be the decisive key to interpreting a work. In addition, there is the formalist art history,

which is an “art history without female artists” (Graw 2022: 57–71) and insists that the artist person should play no role in reception.

But this is simply not possible, even if we pursue this “art history without female artists” in its most radical form and follow the post-modern postulate of the “death of the author”. This postulate states that the creator brings a work into the world, but that the work emancipates itself completely from the creator and unfolds its effect completely independently. Decontextualisation and *différance* (Derrida) ensure that the significance of the work can never be fixed due to ever new contexts of meaning. But it is precisely this erasure of the author that goes hand in hand with a tremendous strengthening of the reception side. It is no longer the origin and artistic intention that determines the effect of the work, but only its reception. This so-called reception aesthetic, however, is never independent of what is known about the context of origin and authorship. Inevitably, the knowledge that an artist tortured and abused children, probably pushed his partner out of the window or drove his muse mad, influences the way his works are perceived and interpreted. Aesthetic judgement cannot be neatly separated from moral judgement.

"HIGH ART MY ARSE"

Nevertheless, they continue to insist on a form of distinguished enjoyment of art that is obliged to distinguish neatly between the spheres, that knows how to enjoy *Tannhäuser* despite Wagner's anti-Semitism, and sees no contradiction to lived authoritarianism in the supposedly anti-authoritarian actionism of the egomaniac Otto Mühl. This claim also finds expression in the arrogant dismissal of the supposedly simple-minded moral indignation of the art philistines. Accordingly, Mühl was courted by the left-liberal cultural elite even after his trial, and the “child abuser” accusation was ridiculed merely as a reactionary reflex of the hypermoral plebs.

This idea that aesthetic judgement is formed on the basis of purely art-immanent criteria, and essentially consists of enjoying the aesthetic composition with “disinterested pleasure” (Kant) has always been a distinction-driven elite project. Or, to put it in Hannah Gadsby's words: “High art, my arse”.

The arrogance of this attitude originally goes back to a bourgeois striving for distinction, which also and above all took place through aesthetic judgement. Experience, as specifically aesthetic, was made the general imperative of viewing art. The work of art is only considered from a purely aesthetic point of view and not according to whether it is useful in any other way, i.e., whether it can satisfy, warm, or be used as a trivet. But it must also not be of practical use in a pedagogical sense, for example, by serving religious edification or moral education. Bourdieu traces this process in detail as the “genesis of pure aesthetics” (Bourdieu 2011: 289–307).

ETHICS & AESTHETICS

Before that, however, aesthetics and ethics had been closely related in the history of ideas. Since Plato, art has been called into service to fulfil an educational function in conveying ethical ideals such as the sense of justice. And Kant, too, although he defines aesthetic judgement as “judgement of taste without any interest” and “conceptless pleasure”; at the same time speaks of “beauty as a symbol of morality”. Schiller ties in with this and believes in aesthetic education as the cornerstone of human freedom and morally sensible action.

But even with this understanding of autonomy as “pure aesthetics”, which emerged with modernity and went hand in hand with the emancipation of artistic creation from the nobility and the church as the most important patrons of the arts, art production remained beholden to social conditions. The former direct dependence was replaced by “structural dependence” (Bourdieu). Artistic production is still not really “free”, but has since been exposed to complex processes of recognition and legitimisation, something Bourdieu called the “autonomisation of the artistic field”. For what counts as art is not decided by an unbiased, purely aesthetic judgement, but is always the result of hegemonic struggles in which the most diverse social forces are involved. Thus, there are no criteria for the objective quality of a work that are set in stone and undisputed. Instead, the judgement of its art-historical relevance is always dependent on time and context and, of course, always has something to do with moral value judgements, even if only to the extent that art rebels against them and becomes relevant precisely because of this.

SELF-PURPOSE & SELF-REFERENTIALITY

But this is not reflected in the concept of autonomy of pure aesthetics. Instead, it was implicitly demanded that moral conviction, subjective experience and even bodily existence be transcended with and in art. This expectation is also reflected in the fact that aesthetic judgement was designed as the result of a very peculiar quality of experience: “Typical for the aesthetic attitude towards reality is first of all a disentanglement of the subject from its immediate involvement in the world of everyday life with subjective needs and interests and external expectations, in favour of total abandonment to aesthetic practice for its own sake, free from external purposes like cognition of the world or proper action.”

The aesthetic judgement, which thus inevitably goes hand in hand with an almost auratic understanding of work autonomy, must therefore be self-referential. It reflects one’s own reaction to a work, which in turn is purely an end in itself.

This specific requirement, which demands passivity to the point of “self-negation” (Adorno) from the viewer, programmatically excludes any form of everyday experience. The cultural theorist bell hooks has described (hooks 1995) how, and to what extent, this systematically delegitimised the experiences of women and especially of black women. They were thus denied the prerequisites for the production as well as for the reception of art.

“Critique of the exclusion of certain experiences is not only critique of the blanking out of social realities in art. It is also [...] critique of the constitution of the aesthetic area or field itself. For not only are specific experiences (of marginalised people) excluded in the art field, but all kinds of experiences (except the aesthetic one) declared irrelevant.” (Kastner 2020: 162), writes Jens Kastner in his study *Die Linke und die Kunst*.

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This claim to exclude concrete, particular experience was (and still is) accompanied by a devaluation of feminist art and art by black and indigenous people. Since feminist art or political art by women in general often focuses on their own experience or even their own body, their radical subjectivity was readily devalued as mere “condition art”. This is

a judgement that drags along the whole burden of a masculine concept of culture, which also includes the distinction between trivial and high culture as well as applied and fine art, a distinction that was only challenged by cultural studies.

Works such as Martha Rosler's "Semiotics of the Kitchen" or Mary Kelly's "Post Partum Document" challenge these androcentric categories and criteria of quality, and bring female realities of life into the museum in the form of cooking spoons and pooped nappies. They apply the feminist slogan "the private is political" to the rules of art as well, thus insisting that the private is not only of political but also of artistic relevance.

The feminist art historians Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock have worked out how, and to what extent the idea of the autonomous work of art is based precisely on the patriarchal separation of the public and private spheres, of professional and reproductive work, and that the "sexual division in art hierarchies" (Parker/Pollock 1981: 70) is also based on this foundation.

The conceptual artist Adrian Piper also compares the division between work and artist with the gender division of labour, and even goes one step further: the division between the production of the work of art and its contextualisation and monetarisation by art critics, art institutions, and the art market ultimately aims at the complete incapacitation (and thus also moral pardon) of the artist. "The artist 'just makes the stuff' and therefore is not to be held accountable for its aesthetic, social, or political consequences beyond its bare production." (Piper 2011: 256)

But it is not only the artists whose person and intention no longer play a role ("just makes the stuff") who are dehumanised and incapacitated. It is also the recipients who are being asked to do something almost inhuman. Namely, to listen to music, to read a book, and to stand in front of a painting completely uninfluenced by knowledge and conscience, by everything we consider right or wrong, good or bad. Or in front of Otto Mühl's "Materialaktion 12, Leda mit dem Schwan" (Material Action 12, Leda with the Swan) and simply ignore what deeply repels us about this patriarchal penetration performance. Instead, we are urged to ennoble this repulsion through aesthetic judgement as an effect of avant-garde art, instead of denouncing what is actually obvious: Mühl's "Materialaktion 12" may have exploded the boundaries of good taste, but the narrow

limits of the well-known perspective of a male artist subject, complete with violent fantasies of omnipotence, were never abandoned. So these actions are by no means the great cultural break that many still celebrate them as. Instead, on a decisive level, it was the re-staging and reproduction of those core components of this culture that were most worthy of criticism. Conversely, this naïve understanding of the avant-garde also leads to the fact that, paradoxically, feminist art of the 1970s was never classified as avant-garde, although it ideally exhibits its characteristics, as Gabriele Schor criticises in “Feminist Avant-Garde” (Schor 2010).

DIVINO ARTISTA

The postulate of artistic freedom is often accompanied (secretly or explicitly) by a rejection of moral integrity and responsibility. Which in turn can be traced back to the (male, Western, white) idea of an artistic genius accountable solely to art-scientific judgement. For the occidental tradition of the god-blessed genius, the “divino artista”, actually placed the “artist-god” above the law. The “genius” corresponded with male procreative power, which in turn was equated with creativity, creative power, originality, and artistic potency. Breaking the law, defying social conventions, was almost considered a guarantee of pioneering genius. Artistic creativity and originality virtually demanded breaking the rules and transgressing boundaries. The contexts — artistic or “private” — easily get confused, even for art critics: whether it is simply a moral mess or an actual avant-garde breach of convention no longer makes any difference. To this day, the art market reliably rewards the enfant terrible — whose person then suddenly has a lot to do with their works! — with increased market value. It is particularly significant how uncritically even absurd self-genialisations à la Otto Mühl as the self-proclaimed “greatest artist of all time” are sometimes adopted. The art field must therefore not only deal with the question of why works such as “Materialaktion 12” are still exhibited in the same way today as they were fifty years ago, but also with the question of why it has always made men with precisely this habitus so great.

NO WHITE CUBE

In conclusion, it should be emphasised once again: There are convincing reasons to stand up for the freedom of art and not to blame a work of art for every moral transgression or even every breach of the law by the artist. There are equally good reasons not to let the artist and the work simply fall into one. Insisting on the fact that aesthetic judgement is nevertheless inseparable from moral judgement does not in any way mean practising cancel culture in the form of a new iconoclasm and simply wanting to tear the paintings of Gauguin, Balthus and Mühl off the museum walls.

Instead, it means facing the equally pressing and admittedly difficult questions of what art criticism is supposed to do with social criticism, and how this should be reflected in museum representation and art education. And it brings with it the effort of having to discuss the specifics of each slightly different individual case in a differentiated way. In order to be able to decide, for example, how the historical context, self-image, and guilt of the murderer Caravaggio differ from those of the alleged murderer Carl Andres, and how this should be reflected in the treatment of their work. In short: it gets rather complicated. But the fact that such processes of negotiation also become more multi-perspective and democratic as a result of the new complexity, signifying an opening up and turning away from purely expert judgement, is definitely to be welcomed. After all, art critical discourses always define the art canon, and thus decide what will hang in museums in the future.

If exhibition houses decide against heroising artists and sacralising their art, and instead devote themselves to them with the necessary contemporary historical and critical distance, they also have a lot to gain — not least, a broadening of the art historian's view. For those who, for example, only see in Otto Mühl's art the breaking of taboos with which the post-fascist unconscious was exposed, but do not want to recognise in his works the inhuman sect leader and sexual offender, can also only perceive the artistic breaking of conventions — and not the fascist continuities.

Unfortunately, it seems that many art institutions adhere to the "white cube" as a general principle. It is not only the exhibition architecture that is supposed to pretend to give the work maximum freedom

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