

Political Art Criticism and the Need for Theory

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Abstract: Day-to-day art criticism and art theory are qualitatively distinct. Whereas the best art criticism entails a closeness to its objects which is attuned to particularity, art theory inherently makes generalized claims, whether these claims are extrapolated from the process of art criticism or not. However, this article argues that these dynamics are effectively reversed if we consider the disparity between the criticism of so-called political art and attempts over the last century to elaborate theory which accounts for the political in art qua art. Art theory has located the political force of art precisely in the way that its particularity opposes or resists the status quo. Art criticism, on the other hand, tends to treat artwork as a text to be interpreted whose particularity may as well dissolve when translated into discourse. Drawing from the work of Theodor W. Adorno, this article argues that political art theory calls for art criticism more attuned to experience if it is to elucidate art's critical valence.

Keywords: Theodor Adorno; Forensic Architecture; Doris Salcedo; Mika Rottenberg

1. Introduction

Day-to-day art criticism of specific exhibitions and artworks—that is to say, the “ephemeral” discourse which is primarily found in “newspapers, magazines, some journals” (Elkins and Newman 2008, p. 5)—and art theory, which seeks a macrocosmic account of the praxis of art, are qualitatively distinct. Whereas the best art criticism entails a closeness to its objects which is attuned to particularity (and the particularity of its and its objects' contexts), art theory inherently makes generalized claims, whether these claims are extrapolated from the process of art criticism or not. However, in this essay, I want to argue that these dynamics are effectively reversed if we consider the disjunction between the way in which art criticism and art theory address the question of how art might provide opposition to the status quo. When faced with paraphraseably political art—that is to say, art which levels a critique of dominant powers which is readily translated into discourse—art criticism tends to treat it on its own terms as a text to be interpreted, the logical conclusion of which approach is that the artwork's particularity may as well dissolve. On the other hand, art theory, whether that of Gilles Deleuze, Paolo Virno, Julia Kristeva, or even Leon Trotsky, has often located the politically oppositional force of art precisely in the way that its particularity invites a kind of nonsubsumptive cognition inimical to dominant rationality. As paradigmatic of such art theory, I will take the work of Theodor W. Adorno.

First, I will take as a case study the research collective Forensic Architecture, whose significance in the art world is evident in the fact that it received a nomination for the Turner Prize in 2018. Forensic Architecture's work is wholly concerned with conveying empirical information concerning human rights abuses so as to challenge or dispel the official narratives of state bodies. I will show that art criticism broadly concerned itself with synoptic accounts of Forensic Architecture's investigations. I will argue that, rather than an exceptional approach suited to the work of Forensic Architecture, the descriptive register of such criticism is in fact symptomatic of the way in which art criticism tends to treat paraphraseably political art, addressing it on its own terms and elucidating the meanings implanted by artists.



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As is the case with Forensic Architecture, I will show that these meanings often concern the suffering wreaked by the domination of capital. However, I will then take recourse to Adorno's work, specifically his 1962 essay "Commitment", for an art theoretical account of how art does justice to this suffering precisely through its resistance to such interpretation without remainder. In the essay, Adorno identifies three modes of political art—"tendential", "committed" and "autonomous". The former two modes, he claims, attempt to work on political attitudes through exhortation and messages. Thus, the artist subjects artistic materials to the sovereignty of concepts. The challenge to capitalism of autonomous art, on the other hand, is rooted in an inverse praxis, as the artist puts their domination of artistic materials in the service of the materials themselves, resulting in works which resist the prevailing logic of exchange.

In the final section, I will argue that Adorno's distinction between committed and autonomous art still holds for much art praxis, and that, if it is indeed exhausted by synoptic art criticism, paraphraseably political art certainly falls foul of the critique leveled by Adorno. I will also contend that objections that the autonomous artwork has been neutralized by commodification miss the fact that Adorno's argument hinges on commodification releasing the artwork from instrumentality, allowing it to prefigure a relationship with otherness which is currently blocked. Central to this relationship, for Adorno, is how in the experience of the artwork, cognition is inextricable from corporeality. When criticism sees its task simply as exegesis of authorial intent, it evades precisely this experience. Thus, I will conclude that, rather than the subsumptive efforts of such criticism, it is art criticism attuned to particularity, understood via the mediation of theory, which might elucidate the qualitatively distinct protest against the domination of capital of which art is capable qua art.

2. A Surfeit of Description

Forensic Architecture was nominated for the 2018 Turner Prize following an exhibition that year at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in London, and presentations at Documenta in Athens and Kassel in 2017. The collective undertakes meticulous empirical reconstruction of neo-imperial injustice meted out in the Middle East and elsewhere, using architectural methods such as the construction of digital and physical models, three dimensional animations, virtual reality environments, cartographic platforms, along with interviews and eyewitness statements.

In Forensic Architecture's exhibitions, this reconstruction is presented through diagrams and videos. For example, featured in the ICA show was a large-scale piece entitled *The Forking Paths of Ayotzinapa*. The piece is the result of an investigation into a 2014 attack in Mexico on a group of students and activists from the Rural Normal School of Ayotzinapa by local police in collusion with criminal organizations and other branches of the Mexican security apparatus, including state and federal police and the military. The students had commandeered buses in order to travel to a political protest in Mexico City. They were attacked in the town of Iguala, resulting in six people murdered, forty wounded and forty-three forcibly made to disappear. In the course of their investigation, Forensic Architecture data-mined thousands of reported incidents, videos and phone-logs from reports composed by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. The piece is referred to as a mural by Forensic Architecture. However, it does not invite aesthetic contemplation of any kind and was not positioned with any apparent regard for the architectural elements of the space of the ICA. It is simply a very large and easily legible line graph plotting the timelines of the various actors in the atrocity, exposing the divergence between the narrative presented by the Mexican Federal Attorney General and the narratives derived from the testimonies of the surviving students and the IACHR reports.

Another investigation, into the 2014 Gaza war, was presented as a video, entitled *The Bombing of Rafah*. The investigation focuses on Friday 1 August, when Israel enacted the Hannibal Directive, a classified military order which permitted Israeli soldiers to target captured fellow soldiers so as to foreclose the possibility of a prisoner exchange. This

enabled them to destroy the tunnels under Rafah into which an Israeli soldier had been taken hostage by Hamas fighters. Since Forensic Architecture was denied access to the Gaza strip, its investigation consisted of analyzing thousands of images and videos taken by the people of Rafah and journalists, which were posted online or sent directly to the group. From these images, a 3D model was generated, which the video navigates in order to reconstruct a unified account of what happened. The heteroglossia of its source material is thus smoothed, serving as evidence for the facts delivered in the video through impassive voiceover. And certainly, these facts are damning. For instance, at one point, two still frames capturing bombs mid-fall are analyzed, allowing Forensic Architecture to identify the bombs as US-manufactured MK-84/GBU-31 JDAMS, carrying one ton of explosives.

The reception of Forensic Architecture's exhibitions in art criticism is symptomatic of something which in a 2004 pamphlet, reproduced in the 2008 survey of the discipline *The State of Art Criticism*, James Elkins identified as a malaise in art criticism: the absence of judgement, or rather the absence of judgement qua art. He describes a tendency of contemporary critics "not to think outside the box of the exhibition or particular work at hand, or rather they write as if they weren't thinking outside the box" (Elkins and Newman 2008, p. 78):

[C]ritics have become less ambitious—if by ambition is meant the desire to try to see the landscape of some art practice and not just the one thing in apparent isolation. There are few living art critics who have gone on the record with what they think of the twentieth century's major movements. Local judgments are preferred to wider ones, and recently judgments themselves have even come to seem inappropriate. In their place critics proffer informal opinions or transitory thoughts, and they shy from strong commitments. In the last three or four decades, critics have begun to avoid judgments altogether, preferring to describe or evoke the art rather than say what they think of it. In 2002, a survey conducted by the Columbia University National Arts Journalism Program found that judging art is the least popular goal among American art critics, and simply describing art is the most popular: it is an amazing reversal, as astonishing as if physicists had declared they would no longer try to understand the universe, but just appreciate it. (Elkins and Newman 2008, pp. 78–79)

I do not necessarily share Elkins's opprobrium here. As will become more important below, immediate subjective responses to artworks deserve sustained attention and should not simply be factored out of cognition in favor of theoretically informed judgements.¹ And a more generous reading of the lack of judgement and prevalence of description in ephemeral art criticism would understand it as due to the fact that the discipline "intentionally confines itself to less philosophical speculations in order to provide more-or-less strategic and useful readings of artworks to a general readership", as Michael Schreyach writes in his introduction to *The State of Art Criticism* (Elkins and Newman 2008, p. 5). Moreover, in the years since Elkins made his assessment, I would contend that there has emerged a tendency in ephemeral art criticism to provide judgement according to extra-aesthetic criteria of representation. Nevertheless, it certainly remains that art criticism is primarily synoptic, and in the case of reviews of Forensic Architecture's exhibitions, this accordingly resulted in accounts of their works much like the ones I have provided above.

A good example of this is a review of a 2017 Forensic Architecture exhibition at Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona and Mexico City's Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo in *ArtForum* by David Huber, in which he describes Forensic Architecture's investigations of a March 2012 drone strike that killed four people in Miranshah, Pakistan and a 2016 investigation of the Saydnaya military prison in Syria. The closest he gets to judgement is an approving citation of Eyal Weizman, the de facto head of Forensic Architecture, to the effect that the group's work "slows down time and intensifies sensibility

¹ Indeed, subsequently in his essay, Elkins praises the critic David Sylvester for his visceral reactions, which are supposedly "justified because phenomenology frames his critical approach", begging the question of why this justification has to be conscious on the part of the critic (Elkins and Newman 2008, p. 95).

to space, matter, and image" (Huber 2017, p. 77). Other critics provide more appraisal of Forensic Architecture's work in reviews, but this is generally in terms of the work's efficacy in communicating the empirical information of its content, or the adequacy of that information for the ends of social justice. For instance, in *Art Review*, JJ Charlesworth accused the ICA exhibition of preaching to the converted, contending that the collective shies away from "deliberating bigger political 'truths'" such as "[h]ow we respond to the catastrophe of the migrant crisis, for example, or to conflict in the Middle East" (Charlesworth 2018). And Maria Walsh's main concern in her *Art Monthly* review was whether Forensic Architecture's position as "invincible [disseminator] of knowledge and truth" problematized this dissemination (Walsh 2018, p. 27)

Indeed, for some critics, the supposed exigency of this dissemination meant that raising theoretical questions as to whether the work of Forensic Architecture is art, or whether its political interventions are not qualitatively distinct from the political interventions of which art is capable, amounted to political reaction. Take, for instance, Zarina Muhammad and Gabrielle de la Puente, the influential bloggers at *The White Pube*. In her review, Muhammad lauded Forensic Architecture precisely on the basis that the collective's work articulates the suffering of the oppressed "with the backbone of receipts so suffering is irrefutable, qualified, quantified and evidenced" (De la Puente and Muhammad 2018). Accordingly, upon Forensic Architecture's nomination for the Turner Prize, de la Puente ruefully predicted that "everyone" would be "excited to shout about them nOt BEinG an ArTisT [capitalization in original]", while she was simply excited about the exposure which the collective's work would thus receive (De la Puente and Muhammad 2018).

Now, it is certainly the case that the investigative work done by Forensic Architecture is vital and invaluable in its advocacy of the interests of the oppressed and has had a demonstrable impact, with the collective having been hired by international prosecution teams, NGOs and political organizations. In terms of the Ayotzinapa investigation, the parents of the victims have drawn upon Forensic Architecture's efforts to challenge the state's version of events in the Mexican Supreme Court. And the discoveries of the Rafah investigation allowed Amnesty International to identify a war crime in the use of one ton of explosives in a civilian area and inadvertently led to Israel's abandonment of the Hannibal Directive.

However, it is not only in reference to work so emphatically lacking engagement with (even the rejection of) aesthetics that theoretical questions are disbarred. Paraphraseably political art of all hues often receives similar expository treatment in ephemeral criticism. For example, a 2019 review by Gökcan Demirkazik of a Michael Rakowitz exhibition *The Ballad of Special Ops Cody and other stories* elaborates how the artist's large reliefs are replicas of panels which once lined the walls of a Palace in Nimrud, Iraq, reconstructed from Arabic-language periodicals published in the US and Europe and the packaging for various Middle Eastern foodstuffs. As we would apparently be informed by a "museum-style label" if we were to attend the exhibition, Demirkazik explains that the bottom part of one of the reconstructed reliefs was destroyed by ISIS, while another section has long been in a private New York collection, and concludes that the work shows us that "[n]o matter how different the motivations of ISIS and a crafty nineteenth-century antiquities dealer may have been, the destruction of cultural heritage is an unfortunate constant across time and space" (Demirkazik 2019, p. 205).

Or take a 2016 review by Isabell Dahlberg in *Flash Art* of Doris Salcedo's *Plegaria Muda*, an installation informed by the Columbian army's massacre of young men who had been recruited from remote areas and then murdered and dressed in the uniforms of guerrillas, incentivized by the fact that the government was offering financial rewards for killing rebels. The installation consists of pairs of stacked tables the size of coffins, through the middle of which small blades of grass sprout. As with much art of its ilk, the work is neither voluptuous nor ascetic. Rather, the tables appear artefactual, as if requiring explication, and in the review, Dahlberg provides this explication, confidently affirming that "[e]ach pair is a stand-in for a human being; for a death; for every single death that

has occurred in massacres in the past, and for those that will occur in massacres to come” (Dahlberg 2016).

The “strategic and useful readings of artworks” for which both these critics opt, then, are basically exegetic, serving to explain meanings implanted by artists, which are essentially independent of the subjective experience of the spectator. We saw that Elkins implies that the problem with art criticism’s emphasis on description is a surfeit of contingent evocation divorced from overarching theoretical context. However, in the case of the art criticism of paraphraseably political art, description, as Schreyach notes as a pitfall, dovetails with “the same positivist outlook that surreptitiously converts the richness of perception [. . .] into quantities that can be isolated and measured” (Elkins and Newman 2008, p. 5). In this situation, the commitment to description without theory results in capitulation to unexamined theoretical assumptions as to the dynamics of art’s political force. While in the case of the reviews of Rakowitz and Salcedo, these dynamics are mediated by aesthetics, they are homologous with those governing the reviews of Forensic Architecture. And if in the case of the latter’s work, interrogation of such assumptions can be foreclosed with an appeal to the victims to which its “irrefutable, qualified, quantified and evidenced” receipts of suffering do justice, in what follows, I want to argue that such a framework of critical assessment misses how art can do justice to these victims *as art*. To understand this, we need political art theory, and specifically the political art theory of Adorno, which is wholly preoccupied with the way in which art concerns the suffering perpetuated and ignored by capitalism.

3. Adorno’s Art Theory

Adorno’s definitive work on art theory is his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*. However, in 1962, Adorno gave a radio broadcast entitled *Engagement oder künstlerische Autonomie*, subsequently published as “Commitment”, in which, in the form of a commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre’s *What is Literature?* (1948), he interrogates the question of how artworks might be properly understood as political. While I take recourse to Adorno’s aesthetic theory more broadly, in what follows, I mainly orient my discussion of Adorno’s art theory around “Commitment”.

In “Commitment”, Adorno identifies three types of artistic practice: tendential, committed and autonomous. The first variety receives the least attention and refers to works which are “intended to generate ameliorative measures, legislative acts or practical institutions” (Adorno 2007, p. 180). Committed and autonomous art, on the other hand, both strive for the “supreme effect” of resisting the fate of being “displayed side by side in a pantheon of optional edification, decaying into cultural commodities”, subsumed by what he refers to elsewhere as their exhibition value (Adorno 2007, p. 177). It is in this sense for Adorno that “hermetic and committed art converge in the refusal of the status quo” (Adorno 2013, p. 336). Nonetheless, the form the “supreme effect” of resistance takes in the two styles differs radically. Committed art’s refusal of the status quo entails an effort (in vain, so long as it remains “necessarily detached as art from reality”) to cancel its distance from a reality which would render art nothing but “an idle pastime for those who would like to sleep through the deluge that threatens them, in an apoliticism that is in fact deeply political” (Adorno 2007, p. 177). For autonomous art, on the other hand, it is precisely this distance from reality—the “duty and liberty of its own pure objectification” (Adorno 2007, p. 177)—which must be affirmed in resistance, in spite of the fact that an “ineradicable connection with reality [. . .] is the polemical *a priori*” of this affirmation (Adorno 2007, p. 178).

First addressing committed art, Adorno distinguishes its intended effect from that of tendential art, insofar as, rather than the epiphenomenal issues of tendential art, committed art seeks to work on “fundamental attitudes” (Adorno 2007, p. 180). Paraphrasing Sartre’s account of his own plays and novels, Adorno details the task of committed art as awakening “the free choice of the agent which makes authentic existence possible at all, as opposed to the neutrality of the spectator” (Adorno 2007, p. 180). He criticizes

Sartre's variant of committed art on the basis of the latter's subjectivist voluntarism which "little registers the particular other for which the subject must first divest itself to become a subject" (Adorno 2007, p. 180). For a start, in forwarding artworks as vehicles for an exhortation to free choice, Adorno argues that Sartre presupposes that it is possible for an artist to dominate artistic materials to the ends of paraphraseable meaning by sovereign rule, while in fact "every work of art [...] confronts the writer [...] with objective demands of composition", among which the artist's "intention becomes simply one element" (Adorno 2007, p. 181). Moreover, the exhortation itself is "merely the abstract authority of a choice enjoined, with no regard for the fact that the very possibility of choosing depends on what can be chosen" (Adorno 2007, p. 181). Adorno argues that Sartre accordingly converges with the dominant ideology he opposes, insofar as dominant ideology "confuses the actions and sufferings of paper leaders with the objective movement of history" (Adorno 2007, p. 182). This misses the fact that the latter is determined by the exigencies of "anonymous machinery", which for the inveterate Marxist Adorno are always in the last instance reducible to the appropriation of surplus value (Adorno 2007, p. 182). As James Hellings has recently argued, this criticism also holds for more recent art theorists, such as Claire Bishop and Jacques Ranciere, for whom, similarly, "it is ultimately all a question of subjective choice and agency" (Hellings 2014, p. 91).

For an example of committed art which *does* take aim at the macrostructural determinants of everyday life in its working on spectators' fundamental attitudes, Adorno turns to Bertolt Brecht, whose *Verfremdungseffekt* similarly seeks to shatter the comfortable neutrality of the spectator but aims to do so in order that "the people on his stage shrink before our eyes into the agents of social processes and functions, which indirectly and unknowingly they are in empirical reality" (Adorno 2007, p. 183). However, Adorno contends that the aesthetic stratagems that Brecht deploys for these ends ultimately obscure political truth. He accuses the parables through which Brecht supposedly presents the essence of capitalism of missing this essence in much the way Sartre did, limited as they are to the particularity of the sphere of circulation.

Moreover, Adorno argues that parables per se run the risk of trivialising or falsifying the political reality which they stand in for. He cites Brecht's play *Mother Courage and her Children*, in which the Thirty Years' War substitutes for World War II, affirming that such an analogy is inadequate because "the society of the Thirty Years' War was not the functional capitalist society of modern times [in which] we cannot even poetically stipulate a closed functional system in which the lives and deaths of private individuals directly reveal economic laws" (Adorno 2007, p. 187). Adorno concedes that Brecht made this choice precisely *because* "he saw clearly that the society of his own age could no longer be directly comprehended in terms of people and things" (Adorno 2007, p. 187). However, this leads to Adorno's defense of autonomous art, as he affirms that works which, conversely, do not force themselves "to proclaim what they cannot believe" become "more telling in their own right" and do not "need a surplus meaning beyond what they are" (Adorno 2007, p. 187). For Adorno, it is only in such art, which firmly negates empirical reality, "that suffering can find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it" (Adorno 2007, p. 188).

It should be clear that this ostensibly counter-intuitive claim is informed by Adorno's argument that representing this suffering under late capitalism often requires falsification. However, it is more fundamentally rooted in his conviction that "the notion of a 'message' in art, even when politically radical, already contains an accommodation to the world" (Adorno 2007, p. 193). For Adorno, the reason for this is twofold. Firstly, the representation of suffering runs the risk of assimilation by the very culture which gives rise to this suffering. Taking the example of work about the holocaust, Adorno asserts that it "makes an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning", implying that "even in so-called extreme situations, indeed in them most of all, humanity flourishes" (Adorno 2007, p. 189). With genocide accordingly circumscribed as a thematic concern, "it becomes easier to continue to play along with the culture which gave birth to murder" (Adorno 2007, p. 189).

Moreover, Adorno contends that art with a message is always already neutralized because of a formal homology, irrespective of content, between its dynamics of conceptual subsumption and those which are integral to the way in which capitalist culture gave birth to murder. Adorno elsewhere refers to the mode of cognition befitting the status quo as “identity thinking”. He details it as the unequal exchange of objects for concepts in the service of the unequal exchange of labor-power for wages at the heart of capitalism. The latter, of course, is rooted in the way in which commodities are identified with their exchange value as if it were a natural property, rather than the quantitative expression of the socially necessary labor time it takes to produce a given commodity comparative to other commodities. Thus, capitalists pay workers the price of their labor-power, rather than the price of the commodities produced by that labor-power, and the difference between the two is pocketed as surplus value. For Adorno, under late capitalism, the total inner and outer life of society is tendentially mediated so as exchange values dominate use values. In this mediation, objects are exchanged for concepts, and all particularities of the former which are not calculable in terms of the latter fall to the wayside:

[I]n the process only this exchange relation of knowledge, that is, the effort, the exchange between the labour of thinking and the object which thought then appropriates, and the products of this process, namely the fact that the ideas *work out*—only this becomes the thing that endures, the lasting product. (Adorno 2001, p. 27)

Subjects become interchangeable, categorized as bearers of labor-power or in terms of other identifications which ultimately serve the extraction of surplus value. As Adorno writes with Horkheimer, “the negation of each individual” is integral to “the unity of the manipulated collective” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p. 9). Accordingly, the ferocity of pogroms is fueled by anger at those who persist in “inflexible adherence to their own order of life” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p. 138). And their undifferentiated extermination is an effort to demonstrate that they, too, are nothing but fungible specimens.

For identity thinking, then, objects (and subjects-as-objects) are rendered intelligible only in terms of the status quo—as what a given object “comes under, what it exemplifies or represents and what, accordingly, it is not itself” (Adorno 1973, p. 149). Committed art may oppose the status quo. However, for Adorno, the stratagems by which it does so entail subsumption of material by the artist’s sovereign mind in a manner which does no less injustice to particularity. Autonomous artworks, on the other hand, are avowedly the result of a process of mimetic reciprocity with artistic materials. While their formal hermeticism may be derided by committed artists, Adorno argues that it is precisely the fetishistic being-in-itself and obstinate asceticism vis-à-vis dominant communicability of these artworks which allows them to contrast with the total heteronomy of exchange society and serve to demonstrate or indicate what surpasses exchange.

As Adorno puts it in “Commitment”, “[a]utonomous works of art [. . .] firmly negate reality, destroy the destroyer, that which merely exists and, by merely existing, endlessly reiterates guilt” (Adorno 2007, p. 190). In affirming this, Adorno is not aligning himself with *art pour l’art* dilettanti for whom the artist creates ex nihilo. Contrarily, for Adorno, while it might be “mysteriously transmitted and itself unaware of the process” (Adorno 2007, p. 190), the mimesis of autonomous artistic praxis is effectively determinate negation of the extra-aesthetic negation of particularity. As J.M. Bernstein writes, on Adorno’s account, the power of autonomous art lies in its “distance from or ability to resist the claims of determinate judgement and the social practices which forward those claims” (Bernstein 1992, p. 63).

Adorno acknowledges that resistance to such determinate judgement “can easily slide into a different sort of vacuity, positivistic arrangement, empty juggling with elements” (Adorno 2007, p. 191). It is accordingly only those works of art which borrow the “organising, unifying principle of [. . .] that very rationality whose claim to totality [they seek] to defy” which “by their existence take the side of the victims of [that] rationality” (Adorno 2007, p. 192). However, this organizing principle is put in the service of that

which it organizes, rather than imposing an organization from without. Thus, for Adorno, “[a]s eminently constructed and produced objects, [autonomous] works of art [. . .] point to a practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life” (Adorno 2007, p. 194). It is on this basis that Adorno concludes “Commitment” with the polemical assertion that “politics has migrated into autonomous art, and nowhere more so than where it seems to be politically dead” (Adorno 2007, p. 194).

4. The Need for Theory

A ready objection to both Adorno’s tripartite taxonomy of political art, and the task he sets for art theory—that is, to glean in the autonomous artwork “what exchange has not maimed or [. . .] what is concealed by the exchange process” (Adorno 1998, p. 253)—is that they are archaic, and indeed that they were already being superseded by art praxis itself in the 1960s as “Commitment” was published. For such an argument, this is the case insofar as the commodification of the particular artwork extinguished its emancipatory valence and led artists to the fraying of disciplinary boundaries, the proliferation of happenings, performance and conceptual art and the production of “texts”.

However, in spite of the motley which contemporary art has become since 1962, an eclipse of delineable mediums by dematerialization and intertextuality has not rendered the majority of artworks unamenable to Adorno’s categories. As Julianne Rebentisch has recently pointed out, the “dynamic in artistic production in which the internal logic of ‘the thing itself’ surpasses the artist’s intention”, which to Adorno is the most decisive for the definition of autonomous art, is still “corroborated by the self-description of artists who organize their own material” (Rebentisch 2012, p. 112). And, conversely, it is the case that the paraphraseably political artworks which receive mostly synoptic description from art criticism conform to the dynamics of committed art set out by Adorno.

A good example of this is the work of Doris Salcedo, which I cited above as typical of such art. The art historian Chin-tao Wu has asked whether it is problematic that Salcedo’s “artistic expression of anguish” is “given a price within capitalism and traded for profit by the world’s most powerful gallery owners” (Wu 2013, p. 459). While Wu acknowledges that this paradox is fraught, she is cautiously optimistic about the way in which Salcedo’s deep involvement and implication in “the very power structures she is criticising” has enabled the voice of artist who has “so relentlessly devoted [herself] to the problematics of human violence” to be “heard loud and clear” (Wu 2013, p. 476). However, Wu also notes that it is precisely the messages in Salcedo’s work which have led to her being “welcomed by the powers-that-be in the Western art establishment” (Wu 2013, p. 47). This begs the question of whether the critical content of Salcedo’s work is not always-already co-opted. In the same way that, as Adorno writes, “solid extractable [ideas] won Sartre great success and made him [. . .] acceptable to the culture industry” (Adorno 2007, p. 182), Salcedo’s “expressions of anguish” are circumscribed as epiphenomenal instances of injustice, and it is easy to overlook how this injustice is imbricated with the institutions exhibiting her work and the collectors who buy it, allowing for a level of performative absolution or evasion on the part of these institutions and collectors. Here, a personal anecdote is instructive: In the summer of 2012, I was working as an invigilator in a commercial gallery exhibiting *Plegaria Muda*. Standing in the space for hours daily, I heard countless salespeople extol “the power” of Salcedo’s work to wealthy clients on the premise of its critique of the particular injustice of the Columbia massacre, without ever mentioning the wider context of such injustice, which might indict the system which sustains those clients’ lives.

As for the objection that the commodification of the autonomous artwork has neutered its oppositional potential, this misses the fact that for Adorno, it is precisely as commodities, free from the demands of ecclesiastical or courtly patronage, that artworks might “insist fetishistically on their coherence” and thus resist capitalism’s abstract medium of exchange-value (Adorno 2013, p. 310). Furthermore, while their structural imbrication in capitalism renders autonomous artworks incapable of political instrumentality, the insistent fetishism of their coherence allows them to enact a categorial promise, insofar as, as Bernstein puts it,

“they open a possibility of responding and relating to objects (including other subjects) that is not presently available” (Bernstein 1997, p. 198).

Central to this is the somatic element of aesthetic experience, whose absence from Forensic Architecture’s work was in fact registered in art criticism which otherwise more-or-less accepted the collective’s work on its own terms. In her review of Forensic Architecture’s ICA exhibition in *Art Agenda*, for instance, Naomi Pearce notes that, despite the fact that “galleries allow for experimentation with sound, scent, and touch”, the group’s “installations fail to harness the exhibition as a sensory experience” (Pearce 2018). Similarly, Maria Walsh’s aforementioned concerns as to Forensic Architecture’s position as “invincible [disseminator] of knowledge and truth” are rooted in the way in which this renders “the bodies of gallery-goers [. . .] little more than receivers of information” (Walsh 2018, p. 27).

For Walsh, what is at stake in this mode of address is “the consolation of empathy”, presumably insofar as a level of viscerality focuses attention on the suffering of victims in a more immediate way than the quantification of graphs and diagrams (Walsh 2018, p. 27). As we saw above, Adorno ostensibly takes a different tack in his opposition to the conceptual subsumption of committed art, insofar as he affirms that autonomous art does justice to the suffering of victims by resisting identity-thinking not in addressing “itself to human beings [and giving] something to them”, but rather “by not thinking of them [and] being purely and consistently formed within itself” (Adorno 2002, pp. 118–19). This is the case for Adorno because such autotelism means works affirm their particularity and cannot be translated into concepts without remainder. Accordingly, reception of autonomous art ostensibly entails an abdication of subjectivity, as the imposition of concepts is abandoned, and viewers adapt themselves to the immanent logic of the work itself.

However, Adorno also claims that an autonomous artwork’s “irruption of objectivity into subjective consciousness”, whereby the subject must submit to the work’s discipline mimetically, occurs “precisely at the point where the subjective reaction is most intense” (Adorno 2013, p. 332). Adorno writes that when an object is “an object of cognition”, as we might argue artworks are for descriptive art criticism, “its physical side is spiritualized from the outset by translation into epistemology” (Adorno 1973, p. 192). When, on the other hand, the object takes precedence, as it does in the experience of autonomous art, it is clear that there is no sensation—“the crux of all epistemology”—without “a somatic moment” (Adorno 1973, pp. 192–93). As Lambert Zuidervaart puts it, Adorno argues that “[t]he object’s precedence” in art “means that conscious cognition cannot do without sensation, a preconscious and corporeal feeling”, and thus, “the corporeal emerges as the ontic core of subjective cognition” (Zuidervaart 1991, p. 108). Accordingly, autonomous artworks not only promise an experience which does justice to objects, but also to subjects who extra-aesthetically “must mold themselves to the technical apparatus body and soul” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p. 23).

As I noted in the introduction, Adorno is only one of many theorists for whom art’s political power lies in the fact that it invites a mode of cognition which evades conceptual subsumption. However, his insistence on this mode of cognition’s inextricability from corporeality marks his account out from many of his successors. Jean-Francois Lyotard, for instance, similarly describes the experience of autonomous art as a confrontation with an event which eludes rules and categories, but as Espen Hammer writes, whereas for Adorno, such aesthetic experience reverberates with “primordial experience that, during the process of rationalisation, is supposed to have been repressed and virtually forgotten”, Lyotard is “agnostic” about what this experience involves, “remaining mainly at a formal level” (Hammer 2015, p. 69). As Phillip Shaw notes, Slavoj Žižek has since attempted to provide content to what Lyotard describes as the “presence as upresentable to the mind” which constitutes this experience (Shaw 2006, p. 130). Žižek, however, tends toward a mode of reading whereby artworks can be shown to *illustrate* the notion of something lying beyond hegemonic concepts, to be intuited by way of conceptual subsumption, rather than *instantiate* it in a manner which must be apprehended somatically.

To return to Schreyach, he counterposes criticism which “mediates between the critic (a professional who produces specialized knowledge about artists and artworks) and a public that seeks to be educated or enlightened about a market of artistic or intellectual products” to criticism “characterized by its ability to create for readers an experience that possesses qualities of the critic’s original confrontation with the object, text, or process that serves as the occasion for writing” (Elkins and Newman 2008, p. 17). Such criticism, Schreyach writes, seeks to “preserve in writing the force of a physical or emotional encounter with an object (or process, or event)” so as to “register the resistance of that object to immediate assimilation, to habitual understanding” (Elkins and Newman 2008, p. 17). As we have seen, art criticism addressing paraphraseably political art tends to conform to the former conventions. On the other hand, it is of course the latter mode of criticism which is the necessary counterpart to Adorno’s political art theory.

As work which elicits “from art critical writing such a motivated connection to its object”, Schreyach points to Abstract Expressionism (Elkins and Newman 2008, p. 18). And indeed, for Bernstein, Abstract Expressionist painting is exemplary of work which opposes societal abstraction in an Adornian sense. He writes the following about the tactility of Pollock’s *Lavender Mist* (1950):

[It] has the effect of embodying the eye of the viewer, of making the experience of seeing the painting an experience of being embodied as a condition of viewing without the painting at any point or moment denying its condition of being a surface. That a sensuous, fragmented *surface*, a surface that robs the viewer of perspective and orientation with respect to it, like [de Kooning’s *Excavation* (1950)], can nonetheless hold the (embodied) eye gives back to sensuous immediacy a potential for statement as such. (Bernstein 2006, p. 155)

In this way, Bernstein writes, Abstract Expressionism “engages us on the ground of our bodily mortality, which the reigning universals eclipse as a condition for meaning” by calling back and voicing “sensuous reality in its mortal coils” and thus “inventing an experience of depth or transcendence that hangs on nothing more than our bodily habitation of a material world in which all things pass away” (Bernstein 2006, p. 163).

However, and perhaps in spite of Adorno’s assumptions, artworks which *prima facie* appear “committed” might also be understood to contain dereifying aspects. In her book *A Political Economy of the Senses* (2015), Anita Chari has made a sophisticated attempt to construct a “perceptually, somatically, and affectively engaged kind of critique” in order to address how paraphraseably political works by contemporary artists such as Oliver Ressler, Zanny Begg, Claire Fontaine, Jason Lazarus and Mika Rottenberg are not only critical in content but also serve as “defetishising fetishes” in Adorno’s terms (Chari 2015, pp. 165–99). But this insight can also be gleaned by ephemeral art criticism which goes beyond description and attempts to account for experience. Take the example of an *Artforum* review of Mike Rottenberg’s 2010 film *Squeeze* by David Frankel. In the film, women across time and space perform often surreal tasks in a production line which ultimately creates an ugly cube. It is an uncompromisingly palpable work, in which, *inter alia*, the crushing of cabbage leaves, the collection of sap, the maneuvers of wooden contraptions, the dribbling of water and the massaging of arms are all accompanied by meticulously realized squelches, creaks and whirrs on a soundtrack attuned to the most infinitesimal of noises. In his review, Frankel not only elaborates the film’s critical content concerning the exploitation of feminine bodies in the supply chains of useless commodities but also stresses how it “reminds us of our actual solidity, of the material stubbornness of the body and so of the systems it depends on for nurture” (Frankel 2011, p. 216)

Frankel’s use of the plural determiner here is telling. It gestures towards a thoroughgoing concern of *The State of Art Criticism*, that is, the question of who, precisely, comprises contemporary art criticism’s definitive public. Elkins is the most saturnine about the issue, bemoaning that “[c]ritics seldom know who reads their work [. . .] and often that reading public is ghostly precisely because it does not exist” (Elkins and Newman 2008, p. 77). But Michael Newman articulates the dilemma in a less hyperbolic register as follows:

[I]t no longer makes sense to speak of a single public or a single public sphere—rather, there are now multiple publics and potential publics, distributed in various ways, sometimes geographically, sometimes within the same national or urban space; and an individual might participate in more than one public. (Elkins and Newman 2008, p. 77)

For Newman, the fact that “the public” has inescapably become a conflictual multiplicity should not lead to despair but rather provide the impetus to deliver art criticism back to its inherent possibility of calling forth a public. This was evidently the ambition of criticism at its inception in the 1700s Paris Salons. The critic introduced a hitherto non-existent discourse on art from the perspective of a member of the public, rather than by or for artists themselves. However, in doing so, critics at the same time served to constitute this public, acting as a model or exemplar for a community of art aficionados by dramatizing their visit to exhibitions, “describing works that struck them, and encounters with other visitors” (Elkins and Newman 2008, p. 52). Thus, art criticism was not so much pedagogical mediation as a performative gesture providing “a bridge between the intimate, subjective response of the individual critic and the ‘general’ public that such criticism interpolates and supposedly represents” (Elkins and Newman 2008, p. 54). While Newman acknowledges that the contemporary variety of publics and art praxes makes such a task difficult to conceive, he maintains hope by concluding with the rhetorical question “have not reflective aesthetic judgments always had to discover their criteria, which are never given in advance?” (Elkins and Newman 2008, p. 56).

Nonetheless, I would argue that art criticism need not aim to produce an actually existing public, in order to glean how the experience of art makes legible a latent concrete universality which is yet to be realized. In its elucidation of the “intimate, subjective response of the individual critic”, art criticism might articulate how artworks invite a relationship to otherness which does not truncate or dominate but rather is premised on somatic and affective assimilation. On its own, such a response to artworks runs the risk of neutralization as culinary. However, with the mediation of theory, we can understand this as a categorial promise that the world could be determined in the interests of corporeal subjects and their Other by whom and which the world is currently reproduced, as opposed to in accordance with the laws of capitalism by which subjects are currently forced to reproduce the world.

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