

Aesthetic Autonomy: Tracing the Kantian Legacy to Olafur Eliasson*

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ABSTRACT. Aesthetic autonomy is sometimes equated with an art for art's sake approach to art. On the contrary, the philosophers whose work is often cited as backup to this concept of aesthetic autonomy held a very different conception of it. I will trace an alternative notion of aesthetic autonomy in the work of Adorno and Habermas, the origins of which can be found in Immanuel Kant's aesthetic theory, the popular notion of his formalism, notwithstanding.

I draw upon the art practice of the contemporary Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson in order to demonstrate this alternative notion of aesthetic autonomy.

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 is

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not constrained by survival related interests and physical needs that typically characterise our 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.¹

The first 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, the empirical world seems to take precedence over the higher reaches of the mind. However, according to Kant, aesthetic judgment names the process whereby the mind redeploys the processes 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 (ideas connected with our sense of ourselves as free 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. I will argue

¹ For a discussion on various notions of aesthetic autonomy and their shortcomings, see Hermeren 1983, pp. 35-49; Zuidervaart, 1991; and Zuidervaart 1990, pp. 61-77. According to Zuidervaart, some uses of 'aesthetic autonomy' pertain to the history and characteristics of art as an institution, others concern the character, functions, and reception of works of art. Some theses are descriptive, others are prescriptive.

that Adorno's attempt to unite both notions resulted in a strong aesthetic autonomy which in some respects undermined the purpose he set for it. However, I identify a notion of moderate aesthetic autonomy in the work of Jürgen Habermas and the artist Olafur Eliasson which arguably unites both conceptions of aesthetic autonomy in a way which extends its relevance beyond the concerns of the Artworld (in a way more amenable to Adorno's purpose).

2. Aesthetics, Ethics and the Arts Practice of Olafur Eliasson

The Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson's conception of art incorporates a dialogical aspect. For Eliasson, art is a public act which brings the values of a community into view for evaluation and discussion. Through art, we play out an essential aspect of human nature and this is that the individual is defined in relation to her community. In the order of explanation, the community is the primary unit. According to Eliasson, '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" (Nancy 2000)' (Eliasson 2008, p.20). To see Eliasson's studio is to see this notion in practice. While all artists depend on the conceptual and technological discoveries of their respective cultures, Eliasson makes this explicit. 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 considers his interactions with others essential to his art.

In order to understand the structure of value judgment, it is useful to compare ethical and aesthetic judgments. Our unexamined intuitions might be that they are quite dissimilar. Ethical judgments are grounded in community constraints while our judgments about art typically involve the kind of responses that privilege our feelings above those of other people. 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. On the face of it, the kinds of judgments

involved in each case would seem to have little in common.

However, an ethical judgment consisting of inference from explicit principles may allow us to identify the right thing to do but would not necessarily motivate us to do it. Motivation to act requires endorsement. 'Endorsement' is the feeling associated with the moral law according to Kant. 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 can be defended by Kant's equivocation on 'feeling' in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. (Kant 1997, 5:73-5:89)² in the light of his reference to pleasure and feeling where respect for the moral law is concerned in the *Critique of Judgment*. (Kant 1987, '271, '292, '299, '353)³. There is a parallel case in the aesthetic realm. An argument for an artwork's expressiveness would not necessarily evoke one's endorsement of it even if one could see the point to the argument. An appropriate *feeling* response is required. 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 ethical dimensions of a situation on the one hand, or the artwork's expressiveness on the other. The point is that when we endorse some aspect of an ethical judgment or artwork, 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

² In Gregor, pp. 50-89.

³ In Pluhar, pps. 131, 158, 165, 228. Also see First Introduction '206, Pluhar p.395.

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 (Eliasson 2009).

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 (Eliasson 2009).

The meaning of *The weather project* is constructed by social interactions. While we fall into entrenched ways of seeing where more conventional art forms are concerned, installation works like *The weather project* draw to our attention the way meaning and value is constructed between members of a community. This case of the two people discussing Eliasson's work provides a direct example of the dialogical nature of value judgment. Arguably the concepts we bring to bear on any work are socially constructed and as such dialogical.

Any suggestion that artistic and ethical 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 idiosyncratic. However, Kant provides the basis in the 'Deduction of Pure Aesthetic Judgments' in the *Critique of Judgment* (Kant 1987, particularly § 39-42) for a concept of *Sensus Communis* in relation to the nature of judgment, according to which the values involved in judgment are constrained by the pressures exerted by individuals upon members of a group. 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 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 (2008, p.133).

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 ethical and aesthetic judgments.

So far we have found that both aesthetic and ethical judgments require rational deliberation and endorsement, and both exercise our capacity for sociability. However, there are significant differences between both kinds of judgment. 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 explicit objectives. The point is however, as Kant argues, both aesthetic and ethical judgments have similar preconditions: our capacity for cultivating a feeling response based in the public rather than the private realm.⁴ Furthermore, Kant's ahistoricity can easily be reconstructed in terms of its

⁴ For a summary of changes to the worldview that occurred with the scientific revo-

application to particular historical periods and cultures. The structures of the judgments occupied Kant but we can understand them in terms of particular cultural manifestations. The general point however is not an Hegelian one regarding the progression from art as individual expression to art as public construction. Rather the point is that the meaning of individual art works and their very possibility has always been a public construction, even the trope of 'art as individual expression' is one such construction.

3. Aesthetic Autonomy as a Condition of Social Critique

Theodor W. Adorno's notion of aesthetic autonomy was analogous to Kant's notion of moral autonomy. Aesthetic autonomy referred to the individual's authority where aesthetic judgment was concerned but due to the inter-subjective nature of the basis of an aesthetic judgment, such a judgment made a claim on everyone's assent. This raised for Adorno the problem of how new ideas can come from old, given that he did not allow himself recourse to Kant's metaphysical supersensible substrate to explain spontaneity or mental causation. That is, if aesthetic judgment drew upon the individual's feeling response, one might expect any individual's creative endeavours to be mired within their own individual histories and caused by those histories rather than freely constructed. Against this conception, Adorno conceived of art in terms that would explain the possibility of genuinely new and innovative ideas. Adorno writes: 'the fact that artworks exist signals the possibility of the nonexisting. The reality of artworks testifies to the possibility of the possible' (1970, p.132).

It is obvious that Adorno's conception of aesthetic autonomy is not the common one when he argues that art's capacity as a critique of society is in virtue of its autonomy. 'Autonomy' construed along the lines of the art-for-art's-sake notion is clearly not the conception held by Adorno. 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

lution and the way in which Kant aimed to keep 'intention' in the world, see Friedman 2002: 25-57.

against which it remonstrates' (1970, p.133). 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' (1970, p.96).

Aesthetic form according to Adorno, provides the vehicle for critique because it communicates beyond the confines of entrenched conceptual frameworks which constitute our literal forms of communication. In explaining how this works, he resists the kind of proto-cognitive science in which Kant engages and focuses instead on the properties of the art work. Specifically, Adorno argues that aesthetic form is communicative in virtue of its inner consistency. The inner consistency of the artwork refers to the relation between the materials and technologies (historically determined) and the content. However, he does not draw out how the communicative capacity in virtue of this inner consistency acts as critique. He suggests that by its very existence, it constitutes a critique of entrenched institutionally grounded conceptual frameworks.

Adorno's concept of aesthetic autonomy was peculiar to art and he believed in virtue of its autonomy, art could generate revolutionary ideas. This is a strong sense of aesthetic autonomy. A moderate notion of aesthetic autonomy might be one according to which there is some sense of genuine invention and creativity but it involves the generation of new concepts over the top of existing ones; that is, combining aspects of various combinations of pre-existing concepts. An implication of this moderate aesthetic autonomy is that creativity and invention is always culturally relative. This is the notion of aesthetic autonomy endorsed by Adorno's student Jürgen Habermas. In contrast to Adorno's conception however, according to Habermas, aesthetic autonomy was not confined or unique to art. This approach anticipates the artist Eliasson. For both Habermas and Eliasson, art simply takes its place along with other cultural artefacts that engender and occasion the development and communication of values and norms.

4. Aesthetic Autonomy and the Plasticity of Language

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. 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 (1984-87, Vol.1, p. 100). 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.

Habermas' interest in aesthetic autonomy was relatively fleeting and was not drawn upon (in the way one might have expected) to answer his critics regarding the conditions of (normatively valid) communication. He posited citizens all fully equipped with argumentative capacities in his theory of communication and ethics, overlooking the kind of inequalities which lend the veneer of consensus to what is actually coercion.⁵ Instead, Habermas' references to aesthetic autonomy concerned the process of conceptual innovation. It answered the problem of conceptual revision in his theory of language and meaning rather than the problem of inequality in his discourse ethics.

Habermas attributes to art the capacity to express aspects of experience

⁵ See Nae 2010 for a discussion of this shortcoming of Habermas' theory of communication and his contrasting of it with the notion of dialogical aesthetics of Grant Kester's.

that are unbounded by objective concepts (2000, p. 280). 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' (2000, p.280). This is the sense in which aesthetic form can take its place across the boundaries and at the edges of conventionally entrenched and endorsed concepts, norms and values.

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 of the artist served as a sign of the kind of associations that one purchases when one purchases a BMW. Here the notion of art as critique is completely quashed. The 'art' produced by the BMW project might have been dismissed by Adorno as entertainment rather than art, that is, before Eliasson's contribution.

Eliasson's response to this project was to consider the car in the context of his own arts practice. He treated the car project as he would any project, as an opportunity to experiment with conceptions of the car. In an approach typical of his past work, he creates an opportunity for an immersive experience in both the sensory and intellectual sense. In stark contrast to the previous artists involved in the BMW art project, Eliasson

created an occasion for reflection on matters related to the car industry.

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.⁶

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:

⁶ Archival material at *Studio Olafur Eliasson*. Thanks to Camilla Kragelund of *Studio Olafur Eliasson* for pointing this out to me.

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 (Eliasson 2009).

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 (entertainment) and art as critique. Eliasson uses the form of his art to heighten our perceptions and ultimately prompt new conceptions of the automobile. In effect, he provides a critique of prevailing values and an opportunity for his community of perceivers to realign their values. The other artists were drawn into a context foreign to their artistic purposes and were unable to make any impact on this context. Their known styles were turned into symbols of the BMW. Eliasson on the other hand, never simply manufactures 'style'.

While in some respects Eliasson's approach to art demonstrates Adorno's high hopes for aesthetic form, the notion of aesthetic autonomy demonstrated in Eliasson's work differs from Adorno's concept 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' (2009) as though it simply plays its part along with other communicative media.

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, but art can provide an opportunity to extend the metaphors, examples and analogies that eventually extend the concepts with which languages operate. 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 (Eliasson, 2009).

For Habermas also, aesthetic autonomy is conceived to accommodate the possibility of conceptual invention. This is the notion that art can tran-

scend 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 as the sensuous embodiment of ideas (expressive of human freedom or spirit as opposed to being determined by physical needs) of a particular historical period is Hegelian in origin but the possibility of art's communicability grounded in aesthetic or imaginative (indeterminate) form is Kantian in origin.

5. Conclusion

A moderate aesthetic autonomy involves conceiving of art as critique but not limiting the kind of critique involved to art. Other human artefacts and endeavours can involve critique in virtue of aesthetic aspects of communication. The explanatory power of moderate aesthetic autonomy is greater than a strong aesthetic autonomy because it does not sever the connection between art and other social debates and conversations about the issues of the day. Art is not sequestered off into its own world. In addition, by adopting a moderate aesthetic autonomy grounded in Habermas' philosophy of language, we address the ahistorical aspect of aesthetic autonomy by construing it as a species specific process or capacity. The historical aspect is also accommodated. Our capacity for interpreting and communicating through aesthetic form 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. A far reaching implication of this view is that art criticism by its very nature engages a moral perspective but I will leave an exploration of this for another time.

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