Autonomy
New Forms of Freedom and Independence in Art and Culture

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In many Western states, not lastly in the former subsidy paradise of the Netherlands, huge cutbacks are taking place in governmental budgets for the arts and culture, in addition to equally drastic financial measures in the public sector and social services, in health care, education, the environment and developmental aid. Not only is there a question of national economic, social and political crises, which here and there are coupled with a rise of populism, but there is also a euro crisis and a global free market crisis. What's more, a wave of revolution is going on in the Arab world which is bringing about new local and global relationships. All of this compels a drastic revision of national and international positions and the interests of nations, parties, institutions and citizens in relation to one another, to authority and also to the communal and the shared.

That a concept like autonomy comes into this, and that it would be put forward in an issue of *Open* as a topic of thought and investigation, would seem both obvious and surprising, or even dubious: it seems inevitable that this notion would be reconsidered and probablematized at a time when people and things are being thrown more upon their own resources; but at the same time, a number of its connotations evidently run directly counter to the urgent call for new forms of involvement and participation that is resounding everywhere – witness the rise of the Occupy movement. In the arts, certainly, the term is often directly related to Clement Greenberg's sterile notion of autonomy, in which the art object must in the first place refer to itself and its own formal characteristics. According to Greenberg, a work of art must try to avoid dependence on every order of experience that is not inherent to the most essentially construed nature of its medium.

This modernist art theory is miles apart from the political thinking of the Italian Autonomia movement in the 1970s, which was about the autonomy of the working class, of immaterial labour, biopolitics, precarity, the 'multitude' and the 'commons'; topics that tellingly enough are currently in the spotlight again. Where does the call for engagement and performativity, which in the arts in particular has been frequently made over the last few years, converge with the desire for autonomy, broadly seen as the urge to take the helm oneself and have a significance that is separate from old structures? Doesn't engagement actually spring from a desire for autonomy?

Open 23 was made in collaboration with art historian and publicist Sven Lütticken, author of *Secret Publicity* (NAi Publishers, 2006) and *Idols of the Market* (Sternberg Press, 2009). This issue picks up the thread of The Autonomy Project, which Lütticken participates in and which is a collaboration between the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven and a number of art history and art study programmes in the Netherlands and abroad (see theautonomyproject.org). From 7 to 9 October 2011, a several-day symposium took place in the Van Abbemuseum within the framework of The Autonomy Project, where the ideas of Jacques Rancière on politics and aesthetics and the intertwining of autonomy and heteronomy played an important role. During the symposium, the Occupy movement

manifested itself at various places in the world; this became an important topic of debate in the Van Abbemuseum, and is also reflected in this issue.

The symposium was organized by an editorial team comprised of Jeroen Boomgaard, John Byrne, Clare Butcher, Charles Esche, Annie Fletcher, Thomas Lange, Sven Lütticken, Nikos Papastergiadis, Gabriëlle Schleijpen and Steven ten Thije, with assistance from Laurie Cluitmans and Arnisa Zeqo. Furthermore, in Eindhoven there were contributions by, among others, Peter Osborne, Gerald Raunig, Franco Berardi, Hito Steyerl, Thomas Hirschhorn and Joost de Bloois, each of whom also has a voice in *Open 23* with either a new contribution or an adapted or extended version of their lecture. Willem van Weelden interviewed Franco Berardi on Autonomia, the Occupy movement and the educational system for *Open*. Steven ten Thije investigates the underlying motivation for The Autonomy Project. The issue includes an e-mail exchange between Rancière and Hirschhorn on presence and production and new, in-depth articles by John Byrne, Andrea Fraser and Johan Hartle as well as a column on autonomy and Anonymous by the undersigned and an essay titled 'Autonomy After the Fact', on 'autonomy as praxis' in the intervals between disciplines and structures, by Sven Lütticken.

In *Open* 23, autonomy is regarded from the viewpoints of art, art history, philosophy, political theory and cultural criticism, a variety of artillery that is necessary in order to break open the concept and give it new meaning. The friction between these different discourses and disciplines and between theory and practice is precisely what allows perspectives to emerge for an 'engaged autonomy', a compound term that Charles Esche, director of the Van Abbemuseum, coined in order to escape the limitations of thinking in terms of engagement on the one hand and autonomy on the other.

Jorinde Seijdel is an independent writer, editor and lecturer on subjects concerning art and media in our changing society and the public sphere. She is editor-in-chief of *Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain* (formerly known as *Open. Cahier on Art & the Public Domain*). In 2010 she published *De waarde van de amateur* [The Value of the Amateur] (Fonds BKVB, Amsterdam), about the rise of the amateur in digital culture and the notion of amateurism in contemporary art and culture. Currently, she is theory tutor at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie and Head of the Studium Generale Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. With Open!, she is a partner of the Dutch Art Institute MA Art Praxis in Arnhem.

Tags

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