

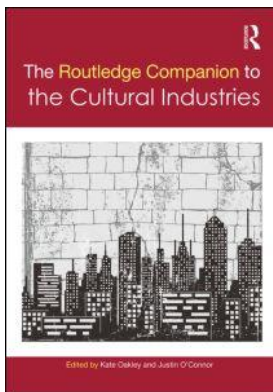
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ART AND CULTURAL INDUSTRIES

Autonomy and community

Laikwan Pang

The discourse of art and that of cultural industries does not overlap much in current scholarship, largely due to the latter's interest in articulating its methodology and concerns, as opposed to art history's entanglement with auteur studies and aesthetic transcendence. The cultural industries are supposedly made up of contractual relationships instead of individual talents, and cultural commodities are often based on fashions or quick utilities instead of timeless artistic ideals with constructed naïveté. Emphasizing late-capitalist production and an environment of consumption, cultural industries scholars, however, have perhaps underestimated the persisting relations between arts and cultural industries, and the extent to which traditional aesthetic concepts still directly inform the operation of cultural industries. Apple sells simplicity, Nike sells perseverance and solitude, and many tourist commodities claim to embody transcendence. The architecture of Zaha Hadid and that of Rem Koolhaas are as extravagant as they are shocking; so are their Lacoste and Prada products. The products of cultural industries are variously marked by the existing aesthetic vocabulary of the West. While it is true that certain cultural industries, such as tourism and culinary consumptions, do not so obviously manufacture cultural representations with aesthetic value, they all deploy aesthetic means to package their commodities so as to promote consumption.

Most importantly, concepts inherited from the European art tradition continue to define the identification and aspirations of many creative laborers around the world. Cultural industries are specifically defined by “new” modes of production and an environment of consumption in which products are still invested with “old” aesthetic values, particularly on the level of creative input. The sociology of art has richly demonstrated the ways that economic transactions relate to the production and consumption of art, and Pierre Bourdieu purposefully adopts the notion of capital to address the relation between art and people (Bourdieu 1993). But sociology does not deal with aesthetic value in itself, and it tends to see art in terms of personal capital that artists use to advance their careers or realize themselves, and that

consumers use to showcase their class status. As such, it does not address the ways that art is fundamentally different from other social capital in the psychology and aspirations of many cultural workers. This chapter aims to reconnect the two discourses of art and of cultural industries in order to explore the tensions between autonomy and community that underlie many current debates concerning creative labor, including to what extent workers in the cultural industries should be protected from market coercions, and the ways that networks and creative communities can be built to facilitate their endeavors.

Simply put, the idea of the Romantic genius who creates art out of her own unique talent and private, interior journey continues to influence our conception of cultural workers. However, this fundamental faith in the artist-designer is also challenged, first, by industrial modes of production, which cannot afford the resources required for the cultivation of precious artistic moments, and, second, by a consumer society ruled by consumer demand. Many creative-labor scholars and critics, therefore, are concerned about the ability of workers to maintain their limited autonomy in the face of complete marketization. This tension between high valuation and the ultimate debasement of the artist remains a paradox of the cultural industries. By reintroducing the connection between art and cultural industries, this chapter not only deconstructs the fetishization of authorship and creativity, but also emphasizes the importance of intersubjectivity in all cultural activities, and maintains that cultural production and consumption are meant to connect people rather than isolate them.

The value of autonomy in the arts

Since the eighteenth century, European artists and philosophers have conceptualized the value of art in terms of artists' independence from social interference; art demonstrates truth not only because artists can choose their own subject matters and styles, but also because viewers and critics can judge arts independently from any other structures of meanings. Around this time we also observe the birth of aesthetics and its close link to the philosophical problematic of individuality. Elucidating Kant's idea of aesthetic judgment as independent from any doctrine in the *Critique of Judgment*, Jean-Marie Schaeffer observes that "The aesthetic sphere would thus be that of concrete, autonomous subjectivity: in artistic creation and in judgments of taste, the individual acts freely, without being subject to any heteronomy, whether theological, conceptual, or ethical" (Schaeffer 2000: 18). The notion of artistic autonomy in the modern age must be understood along with the unique and subjective perspective of the artist and that of the viewer in relation to the rapidly changing and alienating modern world. The self in modernist arts—the depicting, the depicted, and the watching self—is often the one who faces critically and helplessly the nameless masses, increasing tempo, and expanding space. The world is changing too fast, introducing too many sensory excitements and consumption desires, and one of the main duties of the aesthetic experience is to offer shelter from these alienating experiences. The helpless individual getting lost in the modern world is translated into the world of art to become the lone but genius artist capable of producing the most transcendental artwork by connecting with her inner, private self. Artistic production can be

understood as the autonomous action of an individual who combats the passivity cultivated by the modern world.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this romanticist celebration of individual genius encountered new interests in artistic form in the West. The demand for formalistic innovation and the increasing abstraction of art from reality are prominent in many modernist art movements, and the avant-garde's urge to overthrow traditions and the status quo further accentuates the modernist indulgence in individual art forms. This interest in pure creativity effectively strengthens the discourse of the autonomy of arts, which refers both to artistic form and to artistic expression, as the highest principle in artistic creation. The slogan of "art for art's sake" first emerged in early nineteenth-century France, and the idea that the intrinsic value of art resides in itself, radically separated from any other ideological or utilitarian functions, gained wide currency not only among artists but also the general public well into the twenty-first century.

This European-based concept of art is heavily coded, assuming that art is the highest form of all cultural productions. Because of the privileges artists supposedly enjoyed, art works became class indicators as well as embodiments of national identities that had to be respected and protected. The discourse of artistic autonomy is part of this narrowly defined but globally circulating concept of art, which, of course, has also attracted much criticism. Feminist art critics, for example, argue that arts are not transcendental works but representations situated squarely in their own social conditions and projecting dominant ideologies, particularly that of the patriarchy. We find in all arts a systematic hierarchy of meanings and knowledge, whose ideological origins and impacts are both inside and beyond the artwork itself. In her study of the beautiful-woman faces so profuse in European art, Griselda Pollock reminds us that these faces are produced and secured by "the erasure of indices of real time and actual space, by an abstracted representation of faces as dissociated uninhabited spaces" (Pollock 2003: 170). The discourse of the autonomy of art is a fiction, in other words, one heavily invested with the patriarchy's attempt to appropriate women. Postcolonial scholars and cultural anthropologists also remind us that arts are communally based in many places in the world, and that the "autonomous" European arts were indeed invested with many racialized ways of looking at people (Mudimbe 1998).

The strongest critics of "art for art's sake" also include Marxist theorists, who condemn modernist art as naïve in claiming independence from society, and who accuse artists of failing to respect and uphold the organic relationship between life and art. Georg Lukács, for example, turned into a fierce critic of modernism when he became a Marxist, accusing modernist artists of dwelling in subjectivism and denying an explicable objective world (Lukács 1995: 187–209). For Lukács, the objective world is explicable to the extent that life is determined by ideological forces. And if the world is ideological, art, which faithfully reflects the world, should also be ideological and therefore political. Obviously, Lukács did not read arts and literature in a completely mechanical way:

For the inter-relationships between the psychology of people and the economic and moral circumstances of their lives have grown so complex that it requires

a very broad portrayal of these circumstances and interactions if people are to appear clearly as the concrete children of their age.

(Lukács 1983: 40)

But any idea that art could be independent from its social material reality had to be condemned. It is primarily in opposition to “art for art’s sake” that a Marxist theory of art began to develop in the twentieth century, followed up by such prominent artists and critics as Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin, who describes art as an epistemological tool for both the writer/artist and the reader/viewer to understand the pervasiveness of capitalism and its influence on all social relationships (Benjamin 1978).

These criticisms should not be read simply as a blow to creative freedom. At the same time, not all modernist artists are apolitical, and an indulgence in form can also be socially engaging. It is well known that many modernist artists were highly responsive to the world and critical of the increasing alienation resulting from modernity and capitalism. Not only were they concerned about the conditions of their own artistic production, but they also explored the ways that art can comment on and reflect the general social conditions of disciplined labor and exploitation, and many were critical of capitalism in general (Gagnier 2000). Richard Brettell (1991) convincingly demonstrates that modernist concerns with alienation and dislocation amount to critiques of capitalism. Matei Calinescu also reminds us of the fundamental appeal of Marxism to many avant-garde artists, however much they were suspicious of ideologies in general (Calinescu 1987: 128–29). Unless we want to be entirely conceptual, there is no need to equate the autonomy of the art form with the artist’s freedom of expression. A modernist artist could believe in the autonomy of art to assert a pronounced political position, and a contemporary filmmaker or designer could denounce the modernist pursuit of pure form while still striving for independence from market and political coercions in his or her work. The latter is indeed a major dilemma facing many creative workers in the current cultural industries. To properly respond to actual social conditions, what we need are not slogans but a more sophisticated understanding of the dialectics between autonomy and connectivity.

Creative labor and the discourse of protection

While most cultural industries are preoccupied with the production of aesthetic values, these values are too abstract and unstable to be easily planned and manufactured. These industries are therefore very much concerned with talent, and the successful creation of “stars” continues to be a guarantee for profit. The aesthetic value invested in cultural products is generally understood as the output of certain creative agents, whose unique talents and sensitivities are in turn carved into the products. Many people are attracted to work in the cultural and creative industries precisely because of the self-actualization and self-expression that such industries promise (McRobbie 1998: 147–48). Some critics also argue that a degree of creative freedom is protected by such industries because their products require creative input (Banks 2010). We can say that the operation of the cultural and creative industries is still significantly

and intimately linked to the myth of the talented and quasi-independent artist who expresses his or her true self in a creation.

The notion of artistic freedom is, however, quickly absorbed by a certain industrial mode of cultural operation in order to support a pervasive neo-liberal logic. As many scholars have pointed out, the value of autonomy is often employed to isolate creative laborers from wider social and political networks, and myths of artistic freedom clandestinely legitimize the exploitation to which creative laborers are increasingly subjected—with the irony that modernist aestheticism emerged in the nineteenth century partly to combat the control of the rapidly developing market. Some kinds of freedom might be structured within cultural and creative industries, but this freedom is also highly ambivalent because workers are often not provided with financial safety nets and medical benefits, and creative workers are victimized by harsh and aggressive treatment related to working conditions and job security (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011). Neo-liberalism promotes the ideal of self-reliance, and the self is increasingly conceptualized as an isolated individual capable of solving all problems and taking all risks alone; in this way neo-liberalism empties out the meaning and importance of the social. Angela McRobbie further demonstrates that with this promotion of the isolated self, the concept of talent is aggressively deployed to dramatic effect, mediated by a new rhetoric of mobility and success. Those individuals who can be pushed to become inexhaustibly resourceful and entrepreneurial are idealized as the talent and ultimately as the winners (McRobbie 2002: 101–2). Under this set of social conditions, the autonomy of arts is doubly alienated: not only is it not practiced, but it is also resurrected only as a myth in order to create a fake private relationship between the consumer and the producer, both of whom are imagined in singular form.

In response to this capitalist appropriation of artistic autonomy, critics appeal to the ideal of autonomy all over again in an attempt to develop a protectionist discourse that would fend off the highly intrusive logic of capitalism. Along with the rise of the creative industries discourse scholars have realized the increasing domination of economic logic in the production of art and culture is highly problematic (Boorsma, van Hemel, and van der Wielen 1998). The revaluation of the modernist value of autonomy, which emphasized the artist's internal probing and the power of art, is thus not nostalgic but rather is symptomatic of the recognition that arts and culture are becoming resources for all kinds of interested parties to use. Cultural industries advocates urge their governments to formulate more protective cultural policies in the belief that arts are losing their autonomy and failing to survive under the hegemony of the market. This criticism of neo-liberalism also leads leftist critics to realign themselves in support of artistic autonomy, and to argue that art should not be controlled by the market.

But adopting the slogan of “autonomy” could never be an effective politics for combating the labor alienation increasingly found in cultural and creative industries, because pure autonomy is never possible, and it can easily become an empty signifier awaiting appropriation. I propose that only when the notion of autonomy is understood together with its dialectical other, connectivity, can the more complex face and propensity of art be discovered. Recourse to the notion of connection also enables us to revisit in more specific terms the freedom promised both by art as form and art as creative production.

Transcendence and embeddedness

Let me return to art as form. A prominent critic of the increasing inability of art to relate to the world is Jürgen Habermas, who demonstrates the modern tendency of aesthetics to separate from the discursive realms of the epistemological and the moral-political (Habermas 1984). Habermas develops Weber's idea of pre-modern society as characterized by a more coherent worldview according to which knowledge, justice, and taste were more unified and interconnected. Habermas argues that in modernity, knowledge, justice, and taste are increasingly differentiated into autonomous fields of reasoning, to the extent that they become mutually incompatible. Moral and aesthetic ideals are excluded from the political decision-making process, and policies are formulated based on scientific research only. Observing the marginalization of the arts, Habermas calls for intercommunication between the realms, which he believes would prevent the irreparable splitting of society into competitive value spheres, as posited by Weber. By inviting the arts to speak once more to the political and the epistemological, we can also fulfill the modern promise of critical self-reflexivity (Habermas 1997: 45). But this theory of intercommunication, which presupposes the possibility of equal and effective communication, does not respond to the fierce appropriation of arts and culture by powerful economic and political forces as observed today (Yúdice 2003). Thus it is widely contended that Habermas's idealization could only be a utopia.

From a completely different purview, Jacques Rancière also demonstrates the importance of making art relevant to politics, but instead of a model of communication, which probably never works in any actual power-structure situations, he advocates a model of dialectics, which brings us back to the nature of art. Rancière reminds us that art must retain a certain autonomy in order to relate to the world, and it is this dialectic of autonomy and connectivity that makes art politically powerful.

On the one hand, Rancière insists that there is a part of art that is by nature autonomous from politics—according to the broadest definition of the latter term. Rancière is highly critical of the traditional Marxist theory of fetishism for turning art into some positivist sociological evidence for people to investigate underlying political forces (Rancière 2004: 32–34). For Rancière, the political value of art can be located only if art is respected first and foremost as art, autonomous from the realm of the political; only through the dissensus between art and politics can each interrogate the other (Rancière 2010: 115–17). Being politically engaged, Rancière still maintains a certain Kantian understanding of the arts, and he endorses Kant's aesthetic judgment as a judgment without concepts—without the submission of the intuitive to conceptual determination. On the other hand, Rancière maintains that art is by nature political because it can redistribute time and space by the way that it orders its visibility. To him, art might be a Greek statue, manifesting its idleness and indifference but, due to its actual occupation of time and space, it also necessarily calls attention to its own distribution of the sensible; it thus questions its own separate reality, indirectly suggesting the possibility of constructing something different (Rancière 2009: 19–44).

Accordingly, Rancière points out two attributes of art: its autonomy, or independence from social reality, and its heteronomy, or dependence on social reality. He explains that while the two forces of autonomy and heteronomy bind each other

together, they also call each other into crisis: all art is tied to a certain form of politics, and this attribution threatens the aesthetic regime (Rancière 2009: 44). But at the same time, the autonomy of the aesthetic regime accounts for the resistance to politics that inheres in the work of art. All artworks are bound to the dialectic between aesthetics and politics, between independence and dependence on other socio-political forces. “To say that art resists thus means that it is a perpetual game of hide-and-seek between the power of sensible manifestation of works and their power of signification” (Rancière 2010: 174). In other words, it is the simultaneous embodiment of and resistance to signification that defines art’s political potential. For Rancière, art’s most important function is to disrupt politics, but this ability is conferred by its own autonomy and plurality in contrast to the control and singularity of politics. While he is highly critical of the linear classic Western aesthetic regime, according to which art passively retains and transmits the artist’s intention, the most distinguished dimension of Rancière’s aesthetics is his belief in the active power of the artwork itself.

This dialectical theory of art might end up being entirely interpretive, implying that it is the critic’s job to establish whether a certain artwork is effectively political, since all art has the potential to be both active and passive. But Rancière’s insistence that art’s value must not be detached from its “relationship” with social reality is helpful for reconceptualizing a politics of creative labor in the cultural industries that would be based on art’s propensity to make connections. This innate ability of art and culture to order the world, to connect and reconnect things and humans, demonstrates not only their political nature but also their economic nature: interrelations between culture, politics, and economy result not from people’s good will, but from these realms always already being part and parcel of each other. This realization leads us back to the freedom necessarily implied in creative labor.

Community and connectivity in cultural industries

The notion of the network is extremely important in cultural industries discourse, which addresses products that are no longer artworks as such and whose production and distribution demand inputs from different agents and institutional supports. Basically, all products of cultural industry are meant to be commodities for sale, to be advertisements of other commodities, or to create added values to yet other economic activities. As such, no cultural commodity is a lone product. Most importantly, present-day creative labor operates in a network society, where workers cannot be isolated from their peers. Even freelance workers face an accumulation of resources online, where agents and platforms are available to help self-employed or amateur artists produce and present their products.

Networks and connections are generally assumed to affect workers’ career development. In this context we can identify two main types of networks. First, networking is essential for workers to survive within and gain access to existing institutions. Just like the old boys’ clubs, networking facilitates the worker’s climb of the career ladder. These networks represent the status quo, and they endorse built-in inequality—entrance presupposes exclusion. But there are also networks that are meant to facilitate mutual support and to offer alternative routes for creative laborers to produce and

distribute their works. The two types of network seem to refer to completely different politics and values, but some cultural industry and creative labor studies tend to conflate them. A problematic result is the assumption that the networks are set up only for players to play along, instead of transcending the existing dominant structures to offer new possibilities for navigating them.

An example of this assumption is the “creative cluster,” an emerging term in cultural industry and cultural policy studies. The geographical concept of the cluster is meant to encourage the agglomeration of specialized talents and institutions so as to enhance communication, competition, and innovation. In the last decade, governments and public policy organizations around the world have demonstrated clear interest in and commitment to the concept of creative clusters, which are considered capable of promoting local and regional growth in a post-industrial environment (Kong and O’Connor 2009). Proximity of related firms and workers is assumed to encourage a supportive network and collaboration in solving problems, accumulating knowledge, and developing further specialization. In China, many city governments pursue creative clusters. Old factories are re-occupied, communities are extricated, and significant real estate interests are mobilized to conjure up such clusters (Keane 2011: 37–56). The problem with many creative clusters, however, resides specifically in their inability to offer alternatives to the existing institutional restraints, and they fail to present new tensions and opportunities in the cultural industries in question. New networks do not necessarily lead to new conditions within the cultural industries; instead, many creative clusters are established by existing power structures for their own benefits.

Many network analyses also tend to see network size as a determinant variable of a successful cultural career: the wider the network, the more information and career opportunities a worker has, which would lead to more professional success. Helen Blair demonstrates, however, that size and density of networks does not necessarily lead to greater employment opportunity, partly because there are usually many redundant contacts providing the same information, and partly because the effort expended in maintaining a huge network often goes unrewarded by proportional information benefits. But most importantly, social institutions often precede the existence of any given individual or network of individuals, and networking often reinforces these pre-existing institutions instead of challenging them (Blair 2009). The basic structure of inclusion and exclusion is not always challenged by acts of networking or community building, so that someone from an ethnic minority, an underrepresented gender, or a certain class background who puts effort into establishing networks might only thereby be led back to those ghettoized jobs already prescribed for him or her.

It might be too much of a cliché to reiterate that both autonomy and connectivity are needed in creative labor, yet we must also realize that they are both quickly appropriated by the market and the industry to facilitate capitalist logic, making the two concepts vulnerable and their meanings unsteady. We can assume that the discourse of cultural industries, which emphasizes multiple sources of influence on cultural production, has the potential to offer new ideas for reconceptualizing the tensions and dynamics between autonomy and connectivity. Many cultural industries and their related discourse end up endorsing the existing structure and logic of capital, when arts and culture could be called upon to broaden the understanding of community

that has been narrowed by the dominating logic of administration and possessive individualism. We are caught in an environment when even relationships are commodified, and a major business model of Web 2.0 is precisely to organize the rubric of relationships built up online to make them salable (Van Dijck 2013: 14–18). I maintain that there is a connective nature in art that can never be reduced by any simple claim to “autonomy,” and that its inherent relationship with the material world always resists, however subtly, the prevalent attempts at privatizing works of creative labor (Adorno 2001: 107–17). The most important question for us is how to rediscover the active dimension of art that would make connections with and in the world possible again.

To link this discussion to creative labor, we should ask whether, and how, the communities built by creative workers actually facilitate and realize the connective potential of art. On the level of production, can cultural workers be encouraged to relate to the world beyond the utilitarian purposes of work itself? On the level of consumption, would the consumption of cultural pieces lead the viewer to transcend the work and be reminded of the social conditions in which he or she is embedded? In both cases, a true sense of autonomy could be achieved. If networks are constructed only to help workers fix the immediate purposes and restrictions of the work itself, then these networks betray and cancel out the rich potentiality of autonomy and heteronomy endowed in the art form. If the network is understood and employed in a merely utilitarian way that aims to match the flexible and adaptable nature of culture to comparable market mechanisms, then the creative and transformative potential of cultural works would only be repressed in order to strengthen and enrich existing institutions. Such communities would not offer new viewpoints and mechanisms to create new power structures.

Similarly, when we try to articulate the importance of autonomy and independence in creative labor, we need to make sure such arguments are not based on a fundamental fear of lending oneself and one’s works to the foreignness of others, who might embrace and distort the integrity of the work into a different form. Most assertions of artistic autonomy are advanced under the presence of a controlling force against which art is trying to escape. If the autonomy of art that was promoted in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe was based on the individual’s fear of a rapidly changing world, this individual was also highly problematic, in that its insecurity was caused by a desire for knowledge and control of the world (Pang 2012: 224–26). Instead of simply maintaining the importance of artistic autonomy, cultural industries critics should campaign for creative workers not in order to isolate them in a discourse of rights, but in order to establish respect for such workers’ unique embedding in and transcendence of the world, an embedding and transcendence that might be able to regenerate the energy of culture.

A discussion of community is urgent in current critical theory because Western modernity has overemphasized the value and the will of isolated individuals. But resurrecting community in the traditional egalitarian sense is not an option. Discussions of community, or relationality, as Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, should be geared toward the denial of any metaphysics of the absolute (Nancy 1991: 1–42), which also amounts to the denial of any political, economic, or social project that aims for a community of essence or immanence, such as Nazism (Nancy 1991: 12). Community, therefore, is

not composed of individuals of shared identities pursuing a common goal, but it is characterized by the impossibility of such consensus and stable relationships. A community is not meant to be stable, and a community is always at risk, as are the individuals composing it. A true sense of community would refute any unifying principle that defines a community, because the matters making up a community are always relational, and finite. Connectivity is neither a rendition of a designed order, nor a development toward some final goal. If we use Nancy's concept of community to understand the potentiality of cultural industries, we can avoid questions of definition and modeling, and we can instead envision constantly mutating institutions that produce cultural products for the sake of building symbolic relationships.

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