



Medienimpulse
ISSN 2307-3187
Jg. 63, Nr. 2, 2025
doi: 10.21243/mi-02-25-08
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Rezension: The Autonomy of Art is Ordinary: Notes in Defense of an Idea of Emancipation von Kim West

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In The Autonomy of Art Is Ordinary, critic and researcher Kim West pushes back against post-critical arguments that label artistic autonomy as elitist or politically irrelevant. Rather than seeing autonomy as a withdrawal from the world, West reimagines it as a form of “self-determined dependency” – a way for art to stay critically engaged while still being connected to society.

In The Autonomy of Art is Ordinary setzt sich der Kritiker und Forscher Kim West überzeugend gegen postkritische Positionen zur Wehr, die künstlerische Autonomie als elitär oder politisch belanglos abtun. Statt Autonomie als Abgrenzung von der Welt zu begreifen, versteht West sie als Form „selbstbestimmter Abhängigkeit“ – als eine Möglichkeit, wie Kunst gesellschaftlich ein-

gebunden bleiben und zugleich eine kritische Distanz wahren kann.

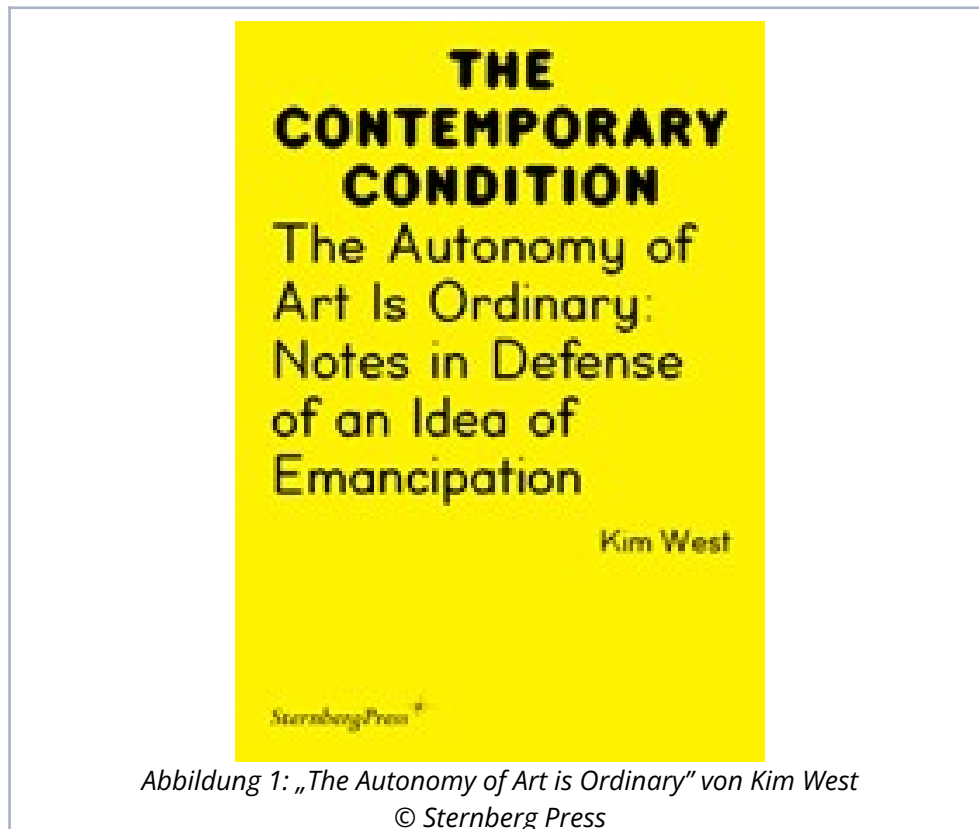


Abbildung 1: „The Autonomy of Art is Ordinary“ von Kim West
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Verlag: Sternberg Press

Erscheinungsort: London

Erscheinungsjahr: 2024

ISBN: 978-1-915609-61-8

Written by critic and researcher Kim West, *The Autonomy of Art Is Ordinary* is a timely intervention in ongoing debates about the role and independence of art in society. West makes a compelling argument for art's autonomy and against positions in post-critical

discourse that denounce it as an undemocratic and elitist notion that relegates art to the artistic sphere. Instead, he proposes a nuanced understanding of autonomy, in which art can be within the world without being the same as all other social forms.

West starts by drawing attention to the broader political implications of abandoning autonomy in order to *reattach* art to the world. As he argues, if independence is what allows art to resist being reduced to the logic of existing (capitalist) social relations –and to remain a spectre of alterity/otherness to the status quo–then art’s autonomy is the power of a “critically informed theoretical position to influence material conditions”. In the absence of artistic independence, politics would become the only vehicle for change, ushering us into a post-political world–a new “end of history”–as the status quo engulfs everything that once was alterity.

In response to critics suggesting that autonomy ties art to “patriarchal traditions of elitist formalism and [is] linked to essentialising, euro- and anthropocentric figures of an inherently free and rational subject”, West insists on the need and possibility to think autonomy beyond those associations. He sets out to reject common (mis)understandings of autonomy and outlines three principles of art’s autonomy. Against reductionist positions that dissolve art into other social forms and diminish its otherness (opposition) in relation to the (political) status quo, West suggests we transcend the boundaries that separate aesthetics and politics.

As a first step, the author debunks the myth of independence, according to which autonomy is synonymous with an “objective

independence” that situates art outside of any material context, turning it into a refuge from the everyday and its social determinations. This myth proclaims that art’s political function comes precisely from its severance from the social and political. Drawing on Schiller’s notion of art as a container of contradiction, West proposes that art’s autonomy be understood as “self-determined dependency”, which allows for dependence on social conditions and freedom in form to coexist within an artwork. Rather than detaching from the world, by asserting autonomy, artworks trade habitual modes of engagement for critical modes of engagement with the world. For West, autonomy does not describe or prescribe art, but must remain that which can be asserted in and by each instantiation and is dependent on a mutually constitutive social relation with an open public.

The second argument against autonomy is the equation between autonomy and formalism. Opponents of art’s autonomy seek to free themselves from “old regimes of privilege” that preclude the possibility of democratising art. Against this, West suggests that understanding art’s autonomy as *self-determined dependency* means letting go of the idea that there is a set of predefined requirements without which art cannot be autonomous. This causes the categorical divide between high and low art forms to collapse, for autonomous art is simply the site of a continuous battle between two tendencies—towards autonomy and heteronomy—a battle given in both high art and popular cultural forms.

West also points out that what has been perceived by some as the liberation of art from the shackles of old elitist regimes and a shift towards democratisation has come at a cost, and has often resulted in art being re-attached to a logic of heteronomy with its own set of dependencies (see the “Californian Ideology”, the creative industries). As the old distinctions between high and low culture, autonomy and heteronomy become blurred, and “aesthetic culture” expands beyond “high culture”, autonomy too becomes *ordinary*.

Finally, West discusses the mirror theory, which states that any form of autonomy reinforces the myth of the equally free and rational subject. According to this, art’s detachment from the realm of the social and political—the messiness of the everyday—demands a similarly autonomous, rational, ideal subject. However, if autonomy of art is ordinary, what kind of subject does the autonomous work of art interpellate?

Following the logic of mirror theory, if art asserts its autonomy by participating *within* networks of mediation and becomes a site of contradiction between self-dependence at the level of form, while still dependent on heteronomous determinations, then the subject of autonomous art carries the same tension between self-determination and dependence. Thus, the exhibition can be a spatial representation of this split, a site of doubling, distancing or denaturalisation where both subject and object enter a set of ambiguous relationships to other objects, other subjects, and to

each other and where alternative social relations and modes of collective subjectivity can arise.

West's essay is an attempt to rescue the political role of art, for which autonomy is a precondition. At the end, perhaps in search for a way to bring the theory nearer to practice, West admits art and culture can only enjoy a relative autonomy where autonomy as equality (i.e. the absence of external determinations and thus, of relations of dependency) remains a regulative idea without which art could not operate but which can never be fulfilled. It is, in other words, that which determines each instantiation, without ever being fully present in it.

West's essay is a good reminder that critique must be accompanied by alternative practical models, lest it backfire. One does have to question if, much like the post-critical thinkers he criticises, West's theoretical formulations would also fold under the pressures of political and social realities. While acknowledging the scope of the essay is limited, one is still left wondering how the outlined model of artistic autonomy might look when translated into cultural and institutional frameworks and policies. Without this translation, we risk art's autonomy becoming an individualistic endeavour that does not acknowledge its political role in society, even when that role might be asserted by a few instantiations here and there.