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Aesthetic Autonomy after Adorno

1 Introduction

I wish I had encountered Ann Rigney's essay on the agency of the aesthetic (Rigney 2021b) while revising my recent book on memory art from the global South (Huyssen 2022). I am struck by how much our conceptual approaches overlap. We both believe that "the creative arts can be seen as catalysts in creating new memories" (Rigney 2021b, 13) and can bring unrecognized dimensions of traumatic histories into local, national, and transnational memory narratives. Our work shares a multiscalar approach, as she calls it, which shows how disabled or ignored histories can be reactivated to circulate within and across national borders. Focusing on colonial and postcolonial memories, we both argue that aesthetic mediations of traumatic histories permit us to build toward a twenty-first century transnational memory culture of solidarities providing "conditions for a cognitive and affective opening to the memory of strangers" (Rigney 2021b, 10). Our resonances are not coincidental, but reflect a vibrant cross-national field of memory studies that has created a dense web of shared ways of reading, conceptual framings, and interlocking perspectives.

So I welcome the chance to respond to Ann's Latourian take on the agency of the aesthetic via the aesthetic tradition of Frankfurt School Critical Theory. Memory studies benefited a great deal from Benjamin's imaginative work on remembrance and historiography, but here I want to draw on the legacy of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. It can help us rethink the aporetic situation of the arts under conditions today that extend far beyond Adorno's geographic and temporal reach. When he first theorized in the 1960s what he presciently called "the fraying of the arts" [Verfransung der Künste] in his essay "Art and the Arts" (Adorno 2003), he analyzed the fraying and erosion of borders between the verbal, visual, and auditory arts the more they moved toward intermedial practices of performance and installation. I will focus on four concepts all related to the agency of the aesthetic: autonomy, art activism, transnational reciprocities, and the intersectionality of sedimented timelines.

2 Autonomy

At a time when the Western art markets and capital have captured the aesthetic and subjected it increasingly to investment strategies and commodification, vacuous spectacle and empty eclecticism, we must rethink the notion of aesthetic auton-

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111439273-048

omy in a new key. Shunned in the post-1960s as hopelessly retrograde and tied to bourgeois ideology, the autonomy of art and the specificity of aesthetic experience must be reclaimed today from a neoliberal discourse that promotes everything as aesthetic from oatmeal to TikTok accounts. If in the eighteenth century the arts had to be freed from the fetters of church and state, reflected in Kant's claim to autonomy, the aesthetic today demands freedom from capital and spectacle.

Reading autonomy with and against Adorno, my *point de depart* is Adorno's pithy formulation: "Art's double character as both autonomous and *fait social* is incessantly reproduced on the level of its autonomy" (Adorno 1997, 5). This statement belies any attempt to read Adorno simply as an advocate of the post-Kantian ideological understanding of the aesthetic as completely separate from the social. Social and political reality, Adorno argued, are always and inevitably linked to aesthetic form through the mediation of the dialectic: "The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in art works as immanent problems of form" (Adorno 1997, 6). Such formulations, shaped by high modernism, fascism and Holocaust memory are anything but obsolete. But today they must be read against the grain of Adorno's own aesthetic negations that privileged European modernism from Kafka to Schönberg and Beckett. Artistic developments since Adorno, especially the evolution of installation as form, are characterized by what philosopher and art critic Juliane Rebentisch has described as an *Entgrenzung der Künste*, a boundary-crossing of the arts that operates both geographically and temporally (Rebentisch 2013). Rather than dissolving the arts into life, contemporary *Grenzgänge* [border walks] of the arts insist on the difference between art and non-art in visual culture, challenge any nationalist *Eingrenzung* [enclosure] of art, language, and culture, and acknowledge colonial histories and multiple peripheral modernisms beyond the confines of the Northern Transatlantic. In the realm of transnational memory art, they also draw on images and tropes of the Holocaust and relate it to various other traumatic histories of state violence, conjured to guard against the repetition of genocidal violence and "ethnic cleansing" (Huyssen 2022, ch. 5). *Entgrenzung*, in this account, implies an activating understanding of aesthetic experience beyond mere contemplation. As spectators become active participants in the spaces of installations, their aesthetic experience is triggered both by the work as open-ended process and by its resonance in the spectators' historically specific situation. The notion of *fait social* thus acknowledges not only the art work's social genesis, as it does in Adorno, but also its multiple historical and institutional after-lives neglected by the straitjacket of Adorno's theory of capitalist culture and the artwork as monad. Distinct from a recently popular "relational aesthetic" of total experiential immersion, this expanded notion of a socially mediated autonomy of art insists on the dialectic of cognitive and affective dimensions of aesthetic experience that are always subject to the spectator's shifting

horizons of expectation. It is indispensable today as it resists demands to adhere to hegemonic national traditions, identitarian politics demanding censorship, and the rules of facile consumption. It thus guarantees agency both at the level of genesis and that of reception.

3 Art activism

In tune with much of the art world's shunning of political art after Hitler and Stalin's ideological *Gleichschaltung* of the arts, Adorno constructed a border wall between legitimate art and politically committed art, whether Soviet agitprop, Brecht's didactic learning plays or Sartrean existentialism. He saw the dangers of political art as subservient to an ideology that instrumentalized both the artistic and the political character of works, thus betraying art's resistant and enigmatic *Rätselcharakter* [riddle character]. While the risk of ideological abuse remains, the once impenetrable border between high art and agitprop has become porous in contemporary memory art. Today memories of political violence are mobilized by both types of artistic intervention. The title of Gregory Sholette's recent book *The Art of Activism and the Activism of Art* (2022) draws attention to fundamental affinities of two modes of activism: one quick, fugitive, visually compelling, and geared to immediate political effect in a specific, often nationally defined public sphere; the other slow, engendering long-term, lingering engagement and enlightenment created through complex aesthetic means and reaching beyond national borders. If the art of activism is represented in an urban protest like the 1983 *Siluetazo* in Buenos Aires (El Siluetazo), the activism of art manifests itself in works exhibited in Biennials, galleries, and museums. Both are needed, both can work in tandem, especially at a time when the threats of right-wing memory revisionism are globally on the rise. Indeed, it has been in the realm of memory politics that such art-inspired activism and the activism of art have joined forces. Doris Salcedo's memory space *Fragmentos* in Bogotá represents this kind of merger (Huyssen 2021). There are remarkable affinities in strategies of making state terror and violence visible in both modes of artistic intervention, even as they remain clearly differentiated by the ways they address their audiences either in the museum or in public space, and sometimes in both, as is the case of Doris Salcedo who calls all of her works "acts of memory" or "acts of mourning." Contemporary memory art allows for many more ways to engage an aesthetic of mourning than Adorno did and thus it points to the fraying of Adorno's dialectic itself.

4 Transnational reciprocities

Rigney argues that the agency of the aesthetic can provide "conditions for a cognitive and affective opening to the memory of strangers" (2021b, 10). Contemporary memory art from the global South achieves this goal on several distinct axes. It is in creative dialogue along a South to North axis with the legacies of Northern modernisms and postmodernisms. It translates aesthetic strategies developed in different social contexts in the West into a postcolonial language that brings expressionist, modernist, or minimalist formal experiments to new life, rekindling their political charge and nurturing contemporary memory politics. I call this appropriation in reverse. It is a transformative appropriation of hegemonic Western aesthetic forms and strategies that are re-inscribed and creatively altered to yield postcolonial perspectives. Rather than merely imitating successful artistic practices or having the artists serve as local informants, such appropriations have several felicitous effects. Western audiences will recognize the genealogy of such practices, allowing them reciprocally to enter into the worlds of postcolonial memory politics. But beyond such reciprocities between North and South there also is a South to South axis as well. Installations based on local histories of violence in the global South enter into dialogue across borders as they are first exhibited and encounter each other in Third World biennials. An example is the use of shadow play and stop motion animation in the work of William Kentridge and Nalini Malani, both of whom deal with their respective histories of colonial and postcolonial violence in South Africa and India. Similarly, Indian artist Vivan Sundaram and Colombian Doris Salcedo cite the tradition of a deliberately affectless minimalist sculpture, but load it up with affect and empathy to articulate their mourning about victims of state violence in India and Colombia.[1] They create a space of aesthetic entry for Western spectators, just as their subtle references to the Holocaust creates a thematic horizon to suggest a kind of universal and inclusive memoryscape of always singular cases of political violence. Their works thus evoke a semblance of global solidarities grounded in the recognition and memory of, as Adorno writes in his *Aesthetic Theory*, "accumulated suffering" (Adorno 1997, 261). Mindful, however, that history cannot do without its repetitions, memory art's politics turns to the future: it aims to activate us and guard against continuing cycles of violent eruptions.

1 I discuss these artists and their works in greater detail in my book *Memory Art in the Contemporary World*, as well as in my keynote lecture at the 2023 Memory Studies Association conference, available here: https://youtu.be/cQ1a-WYXaQw.

5 The intersectionality of sedimented timelines

The agency of the aesthetic involves examining currently shifting structures of perceiving and experiencing temporality at a time when the modern model of progressive linear time and the mythic counter-model of circular time have imploded. Historians of time have spoken of an extended all-encompassing present gobbling up all available pasts as a digital archive, reducing the multiplicity of pasts to searchable invisibility and leaving us locked into a present with a futureless future. It is the agency of the aesthetic that offers alternative experiences with time and space transcending the everyday extended present of neo-liberal capitalism. It trains the imagination in how to negotiate shifting modes of experiencing time, history and memory, both in their fluidity and their historical sedimentations.

The philosopher Ernst Bloch described the synchronicity of the non-synchronous in Weimar culture, a result of what historian Reinhart Koselleck later described as the temporalization of space and experience in modernity emerging from the eighteenth-century revolutions. Two World Wars and the Holocaust have ruptured the resulting grand narrative of the linear trajectory of progress towards a future better than the past. What David Harvey described broadly as modernity's compression of time and space, Reinhart Koselleck captured in miniature through a close-up on the sedimented layers of historical experiences of time [*Zeitschichten*]. He investigated processes of acceleration, a shrinking space of experience [*Erfahrungsraum*] and ever narrower horizons of future expectation [*Erwartungshorizont*] (Koselleck 2018). The implied loss of confidence in the future led filmmaker and storyteller Alexander Kluge, already before the invention of the internet, to speak of the attack of the present on the rest of time.

Against this dystopia of an extended present, the humanities hold that any present combines a multiplicity of sedimented historical experiences and shifting, even fluid memories, which make both historical memory and historiography sites of perpetual reinterpretation and conflict. It is especially, perhaps even exclusively the arts that can account for such simultaneity by exploring crisscrossing timelines based on the polyvocality and pluralization of interweaving or clashing histories. Art creates palimpsests of times and spaces in their combination of old and new media and materials, narrative structures not bound by stable timelines, works that articulate specific layers of sedimented time while simultaneously attending to processes of memory's erosion and transformation over time. Memory art is uniquely positioned, not just to counter socially produced forgetting or traumatic repetitions, but also to articulate the complex mediations between future, past, and present and their respective affective charges in our times.

I have no illusions about art being able to move things substantively in the world. As Robert Musil argued in his speech to the 1935 Congrès pour la defense de la culture in Paris, organized to counter the rising tide of fascism in Europe: "I doubt that one can improve the world by influencing its spirit; the engines that drive events are of a cruder nature" (Musil 1978, 1265. My transl.). For spirit read culture – and this warning should ring in our ears, especially given challenges by neo-fascist movements across the world to everything for which memory studies stands: its diversity of discipline and geographic context, its transnational ethos, its critique of grand narratives of progress, its illumination of repressed or ignored histories, and its refusal to forget or evade.

And yet, like Rigney I do have some trust in the agency of art and aesthetic experience to provide spaces of reflection and empathy, to question and challenge reified forms of sanctioned memory, to create shared meaning in deeply divided societies, to strengthen demands for accountability, to sabotage organized forgetting. I am with Alexander Kluge, who countered the extended present of neoliberal hegemony when he wrote: "In this age, we writers of texts are the guardians of the last residues of grammar, the grammar of time, i.e., the difference between present, future, and past, guardians of difference" (Kluge 1987, 89). As art mediates historical realities in aesthetic form, it recognizes such differences of time, creates a space for strangers to meet, and preserves an indispensable horizon of expectation. "All art works," Adorno wrote, "bear witness that the world should be other than it is" (Adorno 1997, 177).