# What happens when autonomy is collectivized?

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## mapping autonomy & self-organization

In November 2023, the Argentinean duo Iconoclasistas, consisting of the social scientist Julia Risler and the graphic artist Pablo Ares, led a group of about forty teachers and students of the Willem de Kooning Academy Rotterdam and visitors of Roodkapje to produce, over the course of an entire working day, a communal “counter-mapping” of autonomous and self-organized practices. Based on the combined experience of the participants - which included various forms of work in self-organized collectives - the resulting map identifies types of autonomy (“biopolitical”, “technological”, “political and social”, “individual and life choice”, “economic”), certainties and uncertainties, obstacles (such as “precarity,” “pressure to make money,” “inclusivity versus security,” “freerider problem,” “personal conflicts,” “who does the dishes”), and questions (autonomy “where,” “for whom,” “with whom,” “why,” and “when”).

The map ended up as a condensed, yet still experimental and open-ended body of knowledge of today’s self-organizers, consisting of questions and issues that future self-organizers are also likely to face. Its questions and issues are as applicable to an artist or designer collective as they are to a neighborhood committee, a research group, an activist initiative, or any other self-organizing project, collective or community.

The fact that the workshop participants had no difficulty agreeing on such a broad mapping and concept of autonomy suggests that something has shifted in how autonomy is understood and lived in today’s art practices. While in recent years, the work of non-Western multidisciplinary artist collectives (organized in networks such as Arts Collaboratory and prominently involved in events such as the Jakarta Biennale 2015 and documenta fifteen 2022) has received more public attention, it seems that autonomy and self-organization are understood and practiced in quite similar ways among younger generations of Western art practitioners. On a broader scale, this means that the notions of autonomy and self-organization that have long existed in various subcultures and in political activism have trickled down to - at least some - artist communities and replaced traditional Western concepts of autonomy in relation to the arts.

## what we broke with

But what are these traditional concepts? In the post-18th-century Western art system, “autonomy” conflates aesthetic autonomy (the fact that an object or piece of nature can be perceived as beautiful, sublime, or otherwise, without viewing it from a utilitarian perspective; first defined by Kant as “disinterested pleasure”), art for its own sake (as opposed to politically or socially engaged art), “free” art versus “applied” art (or fine art versus design), freedom of art and expression in general (versus censorship), art as free individualistic expression (versus conventionality caused by conformity pressures),[[1]](#footnote-2) also as open-ended experimentation in a systems theory view. It could be argued that “autonomy” in Western art thus stands for a politics ex negativo.[[2]](#footnote-3)

This is at odds with the meaning of “autonomy” in politics, where it stands for active struggles for self-determination: of populations, as in decolonial and separatist activism; in struggles for statehood for stateless populations such as Kurds, Palestinians, and Taiwanese; or in struggles for self-determination over specific areas of life, as in squatter housing activism and feminist struggles for abortion rights. Art that would actively promote and participate in such struggles would traditionally be considered non- or even anti-autonomous, unless one considers the romanticist concept of autonomy in art as part of an emancipation struggle of artists.[[3]](#footnote-4)

## what next?

What remains outside the picture of negative-political autonomy in the arts is a core question of political struggles for autonomy: autonomy for whom, and from what? Especially when this “who” is not the artist(s) themselves, but a larger group of people. How does art change when it creates autonomy for others, not just for itself? Why is “art” still needed as a specific concept and practice?

Ironically, “autonomy” - in its traditional Western, romanticist-modernist, negative-political meaning - is still the criterion that secures the status of Western art and prevents its disappearance into other forms of social and economic work (including that of the creative industries or, in the case of much social art and design, social work, the hospitality industry, etc.). Or, to put it differently and in a more contemporary language, “art” today is a privileged position that gives a higher value to activities carried out under its name than to those labeled otherwise, even if they are (superficially or not) identical. “Autonomy” is the distinguishing feature of this privilege.

To illustrate this with an example, a social art project is usually considered art and not just run-of-the-mill social work, or a food art project is different from ordinary catering if it has at least some of the previously listed types of autonomy, such as being non-utilitarian, based on free expression, and done as an open-ended experiment - or, realistically, just by taking place in an art scene. All this applies to Roodkapje’s community workshop program documented in this book. But that’s privilege on a shoestring. It manifests itself mostly in the (low-budget) public art funding of the space and the program. One day, this remaining privilege may disappear completely, thanks to the simultaneous effects of the democratization of art practice and the political questioning of the (ontological) status of art, by artists themselves, but also by populist governments. In the larger, non-Western parts of the world, the arts are not a privileged practice or space to begin with.

To date, non-white cube, self-organized, collective, multidisciplinary practice - which often takes place as community events and can take forms as diverse as cooking and self-organized libraries - has mostly been seen as a development within the arts, raising questions about how art should be understood, taught, and presented in the future. But perhaps the larger question (and one that was already virulent in the self-organized artist movements of the 20th century, including Dada, Russian productivism, Fluxus, and the Situationist International) is whether “art” as a category and system should be sustained at all.

1. For all these definitions, see also (Osborne, Peter. *The Postconceptual Condition: Critical Essays*. Verso Books, 2018, pp. 64-67). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. This is even the case in Adorno’s aesthetic theory, which - within a larger Marxist discourse - tried to dialectically rescue or extend the lifeline of the concept of autonomous art against classical Marxists who insisted that art serves a social and political function and can therefore not be autonomous (aside from aesthetic autonomy being a bourgeois illusion from a materialist perspective). In other words, Adorno dialectically transubstantiated late-romanticist l’art pour l’art - suited to his own aesthetic preferences for dodecaphonic classical music and symbolist poetry - into political art by declaring its anti-politics an act of resistance against capitalist mass culture and commodification. This argument amounts to political conservatism dressed up in Marxist terminology. It also become a recipe for post-conceptual white cube contemporary art existing in close vicinity to critical theory. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. “What is supposed to be the ‘autonomy’ of art, its purposeless self-legislation, has therefore only existed seemingly; the ‘autonomy’ of art has always been more of an invocation than a fact - especially where its freedom from heteronomous constraints has been emphatically emphasized” - my translation of Bredekamp, Horst. “Autonomie und Askese.” *Autonomie der Kunst: Zur Genese und Kritik einer bürgerlichen Kategorie*, edited by Michael Müller, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972, p. 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)