

Written for the Rotterdam [Autonomous Fabric](#) Initiative by Geert Lovink

In today's neo-liberal 'creative industries' landscape, autonomy needs to be redefined. The term has multiple meanings, which, potentially, creates confusion. Let's distinguish between the use of the term autonomy in the contemporary arts context, as opposed to its use in (radical left) politics, social movements and theory circles. In this short essay I propose to look at contemporary network culture as an expression of a living yet temporary, actual existing autonomy, and see how this can be applied in the Rotterdam context.

In the arts, autonomy once referred to the independent position of the artists in regards to both patronage and the museum and gallery world. Paradoxically, at the height of the popularity of this concept during the 1970s, the Western welfare state was also at its height. Forty years into the neo-liberal regime, autonomy still means to be independent of the market (and in many countries also from the state) but mysteriously leaves open the (political) question how artists are going to make a living.

The term autonomy also implies a liberation of the professional class that supervises and guides the life and works of artists, such as the teacher, curator, critic and cultural policy civil servant. The emancipation of the arts is thus the story of the struggle of the artists to liberate the creative process from outside forces in order to start a journey deep into the work itself and include a reflection of the making of art works into the works themselves. Autonomy thus stands for radical self-reflection of the aesthetics, to understand and then deconstruct the rules, and society impact. The element of reflection has resulted into a multitude of academic studies and fields of research that studies new forms of autonomy as a practice. One of the confusing bits here is the explicit rejection of 'autonomous practices' of the 'l'art pour l'art' attitude. Often, autonomous art was—and still is—deeply engaged in society and socio-political movements. In short, abstract-conceptual work and political engagements are not opposites. What it requires is *Bildung*, an informed public that is able to 'read' the works in order to discuss them. Social sculptures (Beuys) have created a dependency of the 'interpretation industries' in which curators, critics, journalists, guides and teachers all play a crucial role. Can contemporary arts ever become self-explanatory and emancipate itself from its intermediates or will it become more and more dependent on its surrounding infrastructure and become unsustainable and too expensive to produce.

To break ties with authorities often results in a move towards society (even though it can also be expressed as the freedom to withdraw and precisely not engage). What counts here is autonomy as enabler: it facilitates and embodies actual existing freedom, in whatever direction. Autonomy as self-rule or self-determination also has a strong political tradition that needs to be discussed here, beyond the individual neo-liberal characteristics such as self-awareness, self-motivated skills to act independently and execute a plan, outside of the interference of (state) institutions or other authorities such as family or tribe members or similar social factors.

Autonomy in the arts discourse sometimes also refers to the rebel mentality of the 1960s-80s movements. One of the many roots of the term is autonomy of workers in Italian factories, autonomy from, funny enough, Communist trade unions and parties, but also Christian-democratic and social-democratic (Labour) influences. In this context autonomous movements were those that refused to negotiate and compromise with both capital and the state and instead of building up systems of representations, focused on cooperatives and collectives that practiced forms of sabotage and resistance, combined with a strong belief in autonomous infrastructure such as squats, bars, book stores, cinemas, theaters, bike repair shops and printing facilities. With the demise of the classic social movements, we can also see a shift away from the sustainable autonomous forms of organization (that unfold in time), towards a temporary expression that materializes for short amount of time, in space (such as the occupations of square, Occupy, Arab Spring, university occupations etc.).

Self-organization today is radically different from the world before the arrival of 'social media'. Facebook is the default local networking tool, also for designers, activists, artists and academics. How is the informal creative sector organizing itself these days, and how could this be done in a better way? In the recent past, this was mainly done through email, paper (flyers) and telephone. Which tools work best? Let's investigate this and widely publicize the results. Would it be a LinkedIn group or a Facebook group? Or should we rather communicate through WhatsApp, Mastodon or Telegram? There are two elements that need to be balanced here: the network needs to be (relatively) open, while simultaneously get their act together in order to make their voice heard, trying to get things done. The overall aim should be to create sustainable time-axis between the players. Is there enough time to organize the grassroots in the age of Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook live? Social relations are becoming real-time: they are relevant now-or

never. How can the temporary politics of social media be broken down in order to create slow spaces, areas to chill-out, meet-up and conspire (if this all sounds too hipster find and replace terms as the problematic remains the same). How can we go beyond the identity question and create new cultures of solidarity and exchange? How can artist-run space remain economically viable? What do we expect from a shared office these days anyway, if not that can be turned into political cells, subversive gatherings where we 'radicalize whiteness' (and other agendas).

The aim of the Rotterdam-based Autonomous Fabrics initiative could be to foster stronger ties within the localities, starting from the educational structures in the arts (such as Piet Zwart) and their links with cultural spaces and related singular individuals that are vital to the scene. This goal is in direct conflict with the 'weak ties' model of the dominant social media platforms. The promotion of strong ties is the core ideas of the 'organized networks' concept (which I have been developing over the past decade with my Sydney media theorist friend Ned Rossiter). Why should artists and designers network? Not just to get to know each other, to keep updated about events nearby and far away, but to organize the field. One could call it cultural self-defense. For many that would be too negative but these days even informal structures need to be defended. Culture only unfolds in time, within a space. It's not there instantaneously. The next question is then if the act of organizing should also result in a proper organization. Here opinions might differ. Maybe it is not cool to start an NGO, a trade union or a policy think tank. Foundations are boring so how about a coop? However, we cannot walk away from making choices here. There are real problems such as the 'tyranny' of informal networks and the lack of directions networks often experience. The organized network proposal is trying to overcome the problems on both sides. One of them is the real existing dependency on 'weak ties' social media. On the positive side there is a real desire to come together, make decisions, collaborate and getting things done.

One of the explicit goals of Autonomous Fabric should be to fight gentrification, protect low rents of office spaces and exchange information how to establish 'commons' in the arts in terms of sharing infrastructures and exchange knowledge. Some speak of 'commoning' as a verb and see 'networking' as precondition of the commons. Traditionally, the aim of local networks active in arts and culture was to lobby the city council and change cultural policy. This might still be important but we are all aware that there are multiple players and forces at work here. The housing situation is at the

very centre of our concern. It is up to us, as a collective entity, to occupy, build-up and defend those spaces. As Sebastian Olma writes: “An aesthetic of performative defiance is not something that can simply be demanded of artists. If we want them to contribute to the evolution of our collective sensorium, so the future will remain within reach of our aesthetic imagination, we must collectively persevere in our efforts to create a social space where this possible.” (p. 67) The current patchwork of small and medium size non-profits, start-ups and freelancers can be destroyed overnight. Our existence is called precarious for a reason. This uncertainty is the main reason why informal networks, as mapped by the Rotterdam Autonomous Fabric initiative, should organize themselves along the lines of their own ‘strong ties’ (and overcome the ‘weak ties’ of social media). Mapping can only be a very first step in a process to raise self-awareness—autonomy, if you like. The big question remains how to move beyond mapping. Organize all networks!

Literature:

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