

Three Accounts of Autonomy in London Galleries

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Adorno's thesis, almost 50 years ago, that "art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art",¹ arguably captures the complexity of the relationship between producer of art, the art object and its social context. The artistic materials available to the artist are imbued with social and historical resonances, whilst the structures of previous works allude to the ways in which different societies solve their problems. Yet the moment the artwork independently admits (or emits) its secretive codes, it diminishes its ability to critique society and tell us anything meaningful about existence.

Does this sound terribly anachronistic? The notion of aesthetic autonomy today is liable to invoke the idea of an isolated, socially awkward and artistically uninformed artist, ostentatiously and selfishly 'suffering' for their art. In an era whose archetype is the network, in an environment where artists group together and collectively provide services and spaces where their needs are unfulfilled – such as galleries, curatorial projects and advocacy organisations² – and at a time when artists are increasingly invited to produce work that deals with urgent social issues on local and global scales, the necessity for interconnected thinking about cultural production appears paramount. Remnants of autonomy's legacy still emerge in discussions about the financing of art, therefore, I spoke to the directors of three young London galleries about the freedom offered by their different financial models of exhibiting spaces. What follows is a weaving together of their thoughts:

Donald Smith, Director of Exhibitions at Chelsea Space, which is financially supported by, and located within the grounds of the Chelsea College of Art in London's Millbank. Chelsea Space was established in 2005.

Ed Greenacre, co-director of Rokeby, an independent commercial gallery in Bloomsbury launched in 2005 and was listed in Art Review's 'Power 100' in the same year.

Colm Lally, Director of E:vent, an artist-run gallery in Bethnal Green that started off as a media arts centre and is partially financially supported by Arts Council England. Colm started E:vent in 2003.

Donald Smith: Being next to the Tate Britain is interesting. People think it must be marvellous to be next to this amazing museum as there's a belief that it gives people a fast-track to an art hierarchy but that's not how the dynamic works. I think Chelsea Space tries to bear in mind the dynamic of art-in-perpetuity as symbolised by the Tate and work-in-progress symbolised by the College, and that's what I see as the most interesting dynamic. My insistence in the proposal of the art space was that it wouldn't just be a showcase for the staff and students of the school. For me, the most prominent and important model of an art gallery attached to an art school in the UK is Linda Morris and the Norwich Gallery, who is recognised at the highest level worldwide. But I also see Chelsea Space in relation to say, MOT, Matt's Gallery or the Showroom. And on the commercial front, in relation to Green Grassi, or Vilma Gold.

Chelsea College of Art owns the venue, pays for me, the invitation cards, the publication, the private view, the advertising on the outside of the building and a small amount of materials costs but Chelsea Space is really reliant on the generosity of the people we work with. People work with us because they believe in it and want to participate. If they think they're going to come here and everything's going to be paid for and signed off, it isn't going to happen. The programme and everything surrounding it has been generated by me – the ambience, the brand identity, the welcoming attitude of the people who work here and how we're intent on being an informal network hub for a wide group of disparate characters to come together and meet.

Cecilia Wee: I think that diversity and juxtaposition through the presentation of different visceral realities are key to Chelsea Space. I often think the gallery has a winding, serendipitous, constantly evolving story behind it.

DS: Yes, it's a self-reflexive approach. For Mark Titchner and Marcel Duchamp's 'Vertigo' show (21 March-28 April), I invited Lisa Le Feuvre to interview Mark Titchner. That refers back to Lisa doing the 'Avalanche' show (11 June-23 July 2005) which dealt with a certain kind of autonomy. Avalanche magazine featured artists' projects and interviews, there were no art critics in that magazine, no reviews – so in the 'Avalanche' show I wanted to allude to the specific presentation of the artist's voice, unmediated. This is why I wanted Mark Titchner to explain the trajectory for him through Duchamp, Vertigo Records and Brian Gysin.

CW: Chelsea Space cleverly galvanises a continually growing roster of international artists and designers to contribute their time and work, attracted by the diverse and vibrant nature of its programme. No doubt the numerous high-profile artists who have shown there and the growing profile of the space help persuade the college to continue supporting the project. Other participants in the art world are, however, faced with the reality of ever smaller funding budgets and increasingly instrumentalised cultural policies, that will likely squeeze out projects deemed politically or socially critical, difficult or subversive: "for the prognosis of developments for cultural policies and cultural funding in Europe over the next ten years, this juncture is the most important point of reference, suggesting that negative effects are to be anticipated at every level".³ As a result, we notice that some savvy galleries operate in the blurry terrain between 'artist-run' and 'commercial', consolidating the statement that the content of artist-run galleries increasingly parallels that of commercial spaces.⁴

Ed Greenacre: We are an independent commercial gallery, which is positive as it means that we have no backer(s) to report to, and thus are free to make our own decisions. This also means that we have no fall back, which may seem like a negative as we have to ensure the business is run successfully. The art world we operate within is a market, and we are a commercial gallery, therefore as long as we are open we are to some extent successful. Rokeby has artistic freedom; this means we are free to work with the artists we choose, who are then free to work and develop their practice as they choose. Neither party is economically autonomous, both parties are pretty tied up together in that respect. To ask for more artistic freedom would be greedy, and mean little because it could only be achieved by two methods. The first by a massive dose of cash, which would stop the gallery's need to perform in relation to the rest of the art market, in turn making the gallery irrelevant, I would get fat and the artists would also suffer, if only in reputation. The other method would be by removing the economic aspect completely, which would be dull because the social/political aspect of government funding would become necessary, bringing with it new rules (and more of them).

Our approach from the outset helped us to stand out. We got the most space we could, in an area that at the time was not associated with young contemporary galleries. We made a decision not to open up in the East End of London, instead trying to make the gallery accessible (we are ground floor with a shop front and open door). The majority of shows are solo exhibitions and we have always planned our programme at least a year in advance. We are responsible to our artists, and we also have a certain responsibility (not obligation) to our clients, which is tied in with our obligation to our artists. By working well with our artists and running the gallery (promoting artists and the gallery to an international audience of curators and collectors etc) well, we fulfil our responsibility to our clients, and it does not affect our artistic programme.

CW: The indefatigable work ethic of Rokeby gallery and the commitment to gallery artists is genuine, but such motivation can easily be reinterpreted and cunningly utilised to justify continued myths about the arts as sacred, authentic and promising future (material, and therefore social) success.⁵ Alas, avant-gardiste aims to bridge the distance between art and praxis⁶ seem to have failed on a practical level and also undergone distortion through generations of instrumentalist state policies.

Colm Lally: Event Gallery works in collaboration with artists to realise projects that would not be possible in a commercial gallery space. We offer artists a structure where they can take risks without the need to create finished work. The ambition is more about making significant developments in practice outside of the dictates of the commercial environment. We commit to working with each artist for the duration of a project but do not make any further commitments. From a creative perspective, these partnerships are very productive but from a business perspective we are not offering artists long-term contracts or any significant financial rewards for their work, aside from whatever Arts Council funding we manage to get.

CW: When you talk about the people who come to work in the gallery [often for free], the concentration of autonomy trickles down. You personally may have autonomy to carry out your artistic goals but by making a commitment to you, the people working for you are not supported financially: clearly almost every institution in the cultural sector is complicit in this behaviour and it is therefore able to continue. Theories about exploitation in the age of immaterial labour are discussed by Maurizio Lazzarato⁷ and in another contentious Hardt and Negri book *Multitude* – we are asked not only to give our bodily efforts and our minds but our personalities, subjectivities; essentially, to work we must give *our selves*. The affirmative articulation of the de rigueur phrase ‘productive cooperation’ suggests that one’s activity and skills are acknowledged, valued and allowed to manifest relatively autonomously whilst situated safely within a larger social sphere. Indeed, working at creative and physical capacity no longer necessitates a managerial figure since the rhetoric accompanying immaterial labour means that one self-dictates, perhaps to the extent that one genuinely conflates institutional vocabulary with that of one’s own. However, the supposedly collaborative spirit underpinning contemporary modes of production is attacked as being a guise for a sophisticated form of exploitation, where at least part of that which was produced ‘as common’ is appropriated or claimed as private.⁸

CL: Collaborative practices are appropriated and misused not only in the cultural industries but also by large corporations. However, the motivations behind these collaborations are different. Event Gallery is a charity and is not motivated to exploit the creative talents of the artists it

works with for private gain. Collaborations are always tricky to navigate – its always hard to figure out who owns what at the end of a collaboration – I try to create a commons or shared space and the rest is about dialogue and exchange... it's a different kind of economy.

However other forms of exploitation are less easy to disentangle. We are located in the East End where an accelerating process of regeneration is taking place. The arts community here, which is predominantly middle-class, is implicated in a process of gentrification. We are situated in one of the poorest boroughs in the UK, which in some areas is little more than a ghetto for marginalised groups, yet it is championed as a fantastic success because there's a thriving creative industry.

CW: Specifically, when walking down Cambridge Heath Road and Vyner Street you feel that you're in a hermetically sealed art bubble, one cynically entertains the idea that art about sustainable issues is unsustainable. In which case, I refer to Fowkes and Fowkes, who cry, "regarding the functioning of art structures, there are very few examples of liberated zones in the contemporary art world...Where is the alternative to more conferences, more merchandising, more branding, more special events, and more VIP lounges in galleries and museums?"⁹

¹ Adorno, TW., *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone, 1997) p.225

² Castlefield Gallery in Manchester, the critical and curatorial group Midwest and the professional development/advocacy organisation New Work Network are examples of successful UK artist-led initiatives

³ Raunig, Gerald., '2015' in *European Cultural Policies 2015*, Maria Lind and Raimund Minichbauer, eds., (Stockholm: Iaspis, 2005) p.18

⁴ Gordon Nesbitt, Rebecca., 'Don't Look Back in Anger' in *European Cultural Policies 2015*, Maria Lind and Raimund Minichbauer, eds., (Stockholm: Iaspis, 2005) p.26

⁵ see Abbing, Hans., *Why Are Artists Poor? The Exceptional Economy of the Arts* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2002) chp.1

⁶ Bürger, Peter., *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984)

⁷ Lazzarato, Maurizio. 'Immaterial Labour', trans. Paul Colilli & Ed Emery, in *Radical Thought in Italy*, Paolo Virno & Michael Hardt, eds., (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) pp. 132-146.

⁸ Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri., *Multitude* (London: Penguin, 2005) p.150

⁹ Fowkes, Maja & Reuben Fowkes., 'The Art of Making Do with Enough' in *The New Art*, Maggie Smith, ed., (London: Rachmaninoff's, 2006) p.105