Theorem 4. Aesthetic Agency and the Practices of Autonomy

Part I: Critique de l’économie politique de l’atelier d’artiste

Part II: Der Prozess / The Trial

“I don’t know this law,” said K.  
“So much the worse for you, then,” said the policeman.  
“It probably exists only in your heads,” said K. […]  
But the policeman just said dismissively,  
“You’ll find out when it affects you.”  
(Franz Kafka) ¹

Art should be changed! As long as we leave art alone and keep on transferring works of art from studios to depots and basements by means of social regulations and mechanisms, storing them, like stillborn children, for the benefit of our cultural offspring, or while we keep on creating, through the private market, our own variant of the nouveau riche or Kleinbürger, art will remain a social appendage, something serving no useful purpose, but something it is not decent or cultured to be without.

THE SELF-MANAGING SYSTEM OF FREE EXCHANGE AND ASSOCIATION OF LABOUR THROUGH SELF-MANAGING COMMUNITIES OF INTEREST REPRESENTS A NEW NON-OWNERSHIP RELATIONSHIP that examines and revises the existing models of artistic work and behavior.  
(Dunja Blaževic) ²

Appropriating Theorem 4 on the autonomy from Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason, which reflects on the will’s self-relational power in a deterministic world, the exhibition/project negotiates the place of Autonomy in the current production conditions in art and beyond. It looks at the function of the power of Aesthetic Reflective Judgment ³ that can


² Dunja Blaževic (then curator of the SKC gallery), statement as part of Oktobar 75 – An Example of Counter-Exhibition (Statements on Artistic Autonomy, Self-management and Self-Critique) <http://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/oktobar-1975/> (accessed 2017-01-08).

³ The power of aesthetic judgment or synthetic operations (geometric, which includes algebraic) is an aesthetic and reflective function, a performative function and mathematical operation of the sublime, with its multiplicity and total joy. The calculus or algorithmic grid produces the manifold of sensible intuition under one consciousness that is critique and dissent. The radicants and their parallel rain, the marvels are synthetic, too.
open a passage to the space of politics through its aesthetic agency, the
practices of free play of Immanent Critique. It is a legislator that generates
the aesthetic and autonomous principles of immanent law.

What do we mean by autonomy? Theorem 4, like the *geometrica
demonstratio* (geometric proof, or geometric method) of Spinoza’s *Ethics,*
which is “a Question of lines, planes, and bodies,” ⁴ relates to alterity and
power, even if it problematizes the concept of a politics of freedom in a
different way. The Power of Judgment or critical reflection is an action
for the sake of moral law, not merely a body movement action, but a
distinctive mix of attitudes of agents, of precarious events and situations.
The cognitive principles of morality and sensitive critique are classes of
attitudes that govern actions. They pre-form the will of the attitudes in
the categories of freedom, by a synthetic critique of moral attitudes in the
struggle, and of attitudes of politics. The project/exhibition looks at the
moral principles of Autonomy to critically reflect on them, as the practical
reflections are attitudes as well. Through its method and attitude of
critical reflection, the project investigates how attitudes become form, or
perform. Ethics, politics and aesthetics share the same synthetic ground
zero of the sensible reflective surface of immanent and positive freedom
that affirms noise, multiplicity and life.

The two parts of the project/exhibition revolve around Theorem 4
and autonomy, questioning how the self-love or love of me has been
transformed to the love of *I-Other,* and the will of freedom to the will
to Power. The idea of self-legislation has mutated into that of positive
freedom, to set up a process of individuation, which can be justified
practically and translated to the multiple notion of Autonomy, to a
myriad of singularities at the limit of knowledge within the conditions of
knowledge. Today there is a growing discrepancy between the aesthetic
domain and knowledge production, between art practices and their
economic and social embeddedness, between their politics and aesthetic
regime. They demand that new attitudes be invented.

At the same time, “We’re no longer in the domain of codified rules of
knowledge (relations between forms), and constraining rules of power (the
relation of force to other forces), but in one of rules that are in some sense
optional (self-relation): the best thing is to exert power over yourself.” ⁵
This is the power of the formless, which is something that is no longer
adequate to knowledge, like a void in all speculations or Kant’s Aesthetic
judgment, which is a kind of talent or creativity that can only be practiced
and cannot be taught. It is the ‘business’ of everyone, unspecialized and
undetermined practices that are non-knowledge. The aesthetic ground
(sur-)face of politics are justice and giving in the play of aesthetic agency,
with its own *modus operandi* or liminal performance of the sensible, or
the sublime monstrosity of synthetics, and non-linguistic productions that
evoke the instantaneity of the animal. It aims to “foreground the question
of politics immanent to capitalist relations.” ⁶

These operations of Moral and Politics, Aesthetics and Immanent Critique,
invite a re-thinking in the sense of the moral fight (Nietzsche), as Gilles
Deleuze puts it in his essay about Foucault: “A man-form, then, appears
only in very special and precarious conditions,” ⁷ as a dissolved man.
All form is a combination of all forces, a mix of human and non-human
in the process of individuation. This precarious man-form is the extra-
human ethical being of politics. Indeed, in Deleuze and Guattari’s words,
“Politics precedes being. Practice does not come after the emplacement

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⁴ Baruch Spinoza, *preface to “Third Part Of The Ethics. On the Origin and Nature of the
⁵ Gilles Deleuze, “A Portrait of Foucault,” *in id., Negotiations,* trans. Martin Joughin (New
⁶ Nicholas Thoburn, *Deleuze, Marx and Politics* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003),
p. 4.
⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *ibid.,* p. 118.
of the terms and their relations, but actively participates in the drawing of the lines; it confronts the same dangers and the same variations as the emplacement does.”

The concepts of Justice, Ethics and Politics remain inevitably attached to aesthetic practices and Autonomy. Contemporary concepts of (In)Justice evoke not only the relationship between politics and law, but also between critique and aesthetics, which are completely interdependent in the construct of freedom and emancipation. One often forgets that freedom is a construction, a play of ephemera with its own temporality on a plane of immanence. Freedom is a multitude of interdependencies. It takes care. Autonomy is a singularization that invents a dangerous line running between different forms of knowledge, between life and death, not a form but a play of forces, a microphysics of power – formless.

Aesthetic judgment is a “judgment of taste” that produces “new styles of life,” of which immanent critique is not so much a method than rather a means of production, a combination of the productive forces and the context. Judgment brings not only critique to the domain of aesthetics, but also practices of legislation and law. Aesthetic judgment, reflective judgment, or immanent critique can be seen as other relations between representation and production. It invents, too. It demands perceptions that can remain unperceived, that (un)ground the subject not in abstraction but in practices and experience, able to engender the new space-time of a sensory world.

The notion of autonomy is investigated and reflected from various perspectives, without a model, as it takes place in the realms of aesthetics and of politics, in the social and the personal, art and practices. Autonomy is distinct from knowledge. As an intensification of power it regroups and redistributes. Despite this, the term of Autonomy has become increasingly derided in art and criticised as egotistical or even attributed to the hegemonic western ideology of the individual, as a result of the connection between the autonomy of art and the autonomy of the artist, and the equalization of both to aesthetic autonomy.

Aesthetic autonomy goes beyond the art context to embrace life as a whole. Aesthetic experience as a practice of philosophy has never been necessarily attached to the field of art and the artwork, and has mutated to the concepts of aesthetics of existence and of life as a work of art (in Foucault’s conceptualization) – “existing not as a subject but as a work of art.” The aesthetics of the ephemeral of the event of political subjectivity and of temporary autonomous zones are dispositions of time or of a brain. They draw “new cerebral pathways, new ways of thinking.” As Deleuze says: “I think subjectification, events, and brains are more or less the same thing.” What can emerge from these practices is the creative struggle that is resistance and invention. Art is resistance, too. These new subjectivities are precarious minor social formations, and to the extent that the artist is part of the precariat in the informal economy, they practice aesthetic autonomy, too. Peter Osborne writes that “aesthetic autonomy is indifferent to the art/non-art distinction,” which is close to Jacques Rancière: “To the extent that the aesthetic formula ties art to non-art from the start, it sets that life up between two vanishing points: art becoming mere life or art becoming mere art.”

Precarity wears a ‘double’ mask. One side of its face is a neoliberal economical force. The other side is the face of the power of creativity in art, in struggle and resistance. The latter are precarious events that give potentiality to the flourishing positive freedom of multitudes of attitudes.

of the will to power. Such precarization can be seen as the principle of individuation (Gilbert Simondon), as the political power of the formless that bends power, or goes beyond it through ‘self-relation,’ as a “force playing on itself.” 13 It is a silent sense of selective power of the event and the practice of refusal in the selection process, the invisible motor of the system of judgment. They are functions that are both questions and aesthetic reflections of ethical life. Another idea(l) of autonomy draws on Spinoza’s multitude and his concept of ‘modes.’ Freedom is a social, economic and political construct that demands participation. Its complex relations produce a diagram which is the sensible skin of autonomy on the axis of freedom and determination, movement and rest, between many that are in no need of unity in order to become autonomous. Autonomy requires the agency of mutuality, collectivity, care and commitment.

Theorem 4. Aesthetic Agency and the Practices of Autonomy addresses the misconceptions and mythocracy around how autonomy has been constructed in art contexts, such as equating the autonomy of art and the autonomy of the artist, which are entirely different concepts. The project aims to unfold some distinctions between the autonomy of art, the autonomy of aesthetics, and political autonomy in class struggles, such as those of autonomia operaia (workers’ autonomy) in 1970s Italy, and “later movements from alterglobalism to Occupy Wall Street [which] have insisted on autonomy not as a property of the subject, but as ‘collective adventure’ produced by transversal connections and groupings,” 14 taking further the concepts of an autonomy of politics and aesthetics.

Aesthetic practices can be seen as a meta-critique that pre-exists the subject-object relations on the plane of immanence, which is a collective sensitive plane produced by all different material points of interaction on the mask of the reflective surface. Its transindividuality is the power to affect and be affected. They are practices that are not only a matter of how one looks at art, but are productive forces and principles in the web of life as well. The inventive power of immanent critique is the passage of an unexpected presence and immediate consciousness that always requires experience and practice. The sensible intuition of aesthetics is the threshold to any knowledge.

Aesthetics exercises a meta-critique of institutionally signified forms of knowledge and ideology in a knowledge-based economy, where the cognitive power of rationalization and epistemology eliminate the aesthetic and political domains and their practical dimensions both from the production of knowledge and from daily life. On this background the relationship between critical thinking and the so-called third critique of aesthetics demands to be reinvented, to allow the practical power of aesthetics to perform and become a critique that is both productive and ludic, and to become immanent to life.

The exhibition/project Theorem 4. Aesthetic Agency and the Practices of Autonomy makes some practical reflections on the value of art/work, the labor of the artist and production processes in art and beyond, and critically investigates the materiality of production processes, how value can function outside the sphere of art as cultural and social power in a broad social context where the freedom of play of its productivity can be appreciated as a force of change. It can bring new aesthetics and politics in the working modes of production and invent new forms of life. The project encompasses all sorts of events, materials, techniques and disjunctions, discussions, practices, aesthetic and social (un-)skills, etc.

Part I: Critique de l’économie politique de l’atelier d’artiste

A group exhibition with Lisa Biedlingmaier, San Keller, and Maria Pomiansky in collaboration with Vadim Levin

Saturday, 21 January – Sunday, 19 February 2017

The focal point is on the relation between the studio, artist labor, artwork, aesthetic practices and their economic conditions. The studio might be a space where a certain degree of autonomy can be detected. The exhibition/project expresses how productivity in art depends on the relation between the artist's liberty and the economic and social conditions of art production. The studio is part of the productive flow of relations, subjectivities, institutions, places, materials, techniques. At the same time it is in the grammar of autonomy, aesthetics and politics. There are many possible places and non-places of the studio, but it can still be put mainly in two orbits, as an independent space of a solitude where the artwork is produced, and a more open idea of the studio, where the artwork is performed by artist-labor. It is often a shared space, a space of collaboration that engages with the performative domain of the aesthetics and politics of art production and its economic and social reality.

Unsettling the studio, the project brings its practice and experience to the exhibition space, taking into considerations the transformation of artwork to art-work, and their legitimization as work-labor in a multitude of art practices. It tackles the dichotomy between the studio/production/artworks and the display/art exhibition space/institution and intensifies the potentiality of a discourse on autonomy which can expand art production in a broad social/economic environment and speculate on a dis-categorical future of art in which there will be no distinction between ‘pure art’ and ‘political art.’

The common rejection of the concept of autonomy in the field of art is expressed even by politically informed discourses that engage with emancipatory practices. There, the political and aesthetic account of autonomy has often been associated with capitalist subjectivity and its neoliberal spirit, too. In the dilemma between l'art pour l'art (art for art's sake) and political art, the latter currently conceived as art for the social's sake. Such a dialectical distinction is connected to the most striking refusal of art for art's sake in the neo avant-garde art movements that strive to go beyond "the autonomy of art" associated with bourgeois fine art, and bring art closer to daily life, deconstructing the logic of authorship. For them, art practices are not in the relation labor-power that predetermines the conditions and conditioning of art-work. Rather, artist energies are radical ends in themselves, and the productivity of the moments of wasted time, or vanishing moments, constitutes the inventive forces that create not only art but new possibilities of life and 'a way of existing.'

In his Aesthetic Theory, Theodor W. Adorno considers the double face of the artwork, one side being autonomous while the other is a fait social. These two streams play on the constitution of the studio as a place of play of free labor or, in a term coined by Adorno, labor of obfuscation, in the sense that the art work is able to hide its labor from systems of measurement, and is more dependent on social than direct economic exchange. Because art-work-labor obscures the production process, a notion close to the meaning of the virtuoso performer of Paolo Virno or Marx before him, a form of labor without commodity (non-object based work). Like services and immaterial labor, it transforms the studio to project oriented art that requires a differently oriented working environment which may at times look more like an office than traditional fine arts studios. Despite this, art-labor remains between the overworked and underworked.

Lacan's statement “I replaced Freud's energetics with political economy” goes one step further and openly engages psychoanalysis with the ‘immanent’ critique of liberal capitalist society. Following psychoanalytic practices, the project Part I: Critique de l’économie politique de l’atelier d’artiste incorporates ‘immanent’ critique in the politico-economic

15 Jacques Lacan, Seminar XVII.
relations in the production of art to reflect and analyze in terms of movements and vectors the current conditions of artist-labor and art-work-life social relations.

It also adopts the critique of the political economy as a method to look at the studio space and the practices there, its social and political impact on art, on the labor and life of the artist. To what extent can the studio support the autonomy of the artist's practices, and what is its emancipatory political potential? Giorgio Agamben attributes to the Situationists an "unavowed awareness that the genuinely political element consists precisely in this incommunicable, almost ridiculous clandestinity of private life." 16 The art labor and art-work are inevitably incorporated in the critique of a broad socio-economic process. At the same time, they will remain 'ridiculously clandestine' attitudes of free labor outside of the labor-power. In this way the project looks at how a return to critique and autonomy practices can perpetuate an emancipatory politics in art. They can be used as a model for an exit from the 'hegemonic' capitalist discourse and capitalist production of value. Autonomy practices, aesthetic immanent critique and politics invent new living forms and socio-economic relations outside of capital, like generic commons, undercommons, etc.

The project reflects on self-organized and self-managed aspects of the artist studio space, the conditions of the artist's labor and the productive process of art-work there. Work is here used not necessarily to designate an art object. The working environment of the studio can be seen from many angles. At the same time, it remains a place where (un)productive forces play disalienated forms of labor in the work and life of the artists. The artist remains a free laborer who betrays the labor-power and slows down, or accelerates a virtuoso productivity.

The project inevitably asks, can the artist make a living from their art? How can they sustain their working environment relying on income from their artistic labor and art-work. Often, they inhabit the studio mostly in the time in-between several other jobs, while the studio is transformed and adapted to multitasked functions driven by project-oriented work, digitalization and internet. The productive process is automated between two applications for grants, in a diversity of institutional commands by e-mail and research work mostly based on Google searches. Being an artist is a day-to-day job of professional occupation, and at the same time a form of life that can scatter into a new sociality.

At the same time there is indeed a reality gap between the image of the autonomous artist and the actual working conditions of living artists, and how their productivity and the conditions of art production are socially evaluated and valued, between the relative 'autonomy' of the studio and today's institutionally driven art, complemented by the erosion of the autonomy of art by different neoliberal dynamics and the restructuring (financialization, digitalization, gentrification) and the ideology of the free market that inevitably machinically signifies the social production and art, too. Although the artist precariat is potentially revolutionary and resistive, Hito Steyerl describes the instrumental precarization in the third stage of institutional critique that leads merely to "integration into precarity" 17 of artist labor and working and living conditions. "What remains hidden in this – a new 'hidden abode,'" the practicing artist remains outside of the employment." At the same time, nowadays the art production process has been connected to digital productive flows, automated and highly professionalized by accelerated competition on a global scale, that disempowers the possibilities for collective, community forms of art, work and life.

The artist often struggles with very difficult and precarious working and social conditions. And yet, the romanticized image of the studio place is used for interior design as a background for the fashion and creative industry. The obscurity of the economic relations and the private


character of the studio space (cf. A Room of One’s Own, or The Ivory Tower), contributes to its instrumentalization by the creative industry as a kind of ideal interior. It is an emancipatory space to the extent that it is predominantly a space of rather private relations in which emancipation is performed individually, not socially and publicly, which predisposes it to be a space for romantic escapism from engaging with politico-economic reality.

One of the large-scale paintings by Gustave Courbet is The Artist’s Studio: A real allegory summing up seven years of my artistic and moral life, 1854-55, oil on canvas, 361 x 598 cm (Musée d’Orsay, Paris). It reveals a view on the inside of the artist’s studio, which can rather be grasped as the construction of a mental space than an actual studio. The artist’s studio is crowded by subjects and bodies, the social milieu and its classes dialectically split into two antagonistic groups. On the left, it represents a group of morally depraved figures who are the politicians and other key figures of the political and economic life in Paris, including the emperor Louis-Napoléon. On the right, a group of his patrons, other intellectuals and colleagues he appreciates, depicted as a class of intellectual nobles. The political in art acts through the artist’s moral judgment. The artist occupies the middle of the composition in the intimate company of innocent figures (a child, an animal, and a woman) paints a landscape, an odd thing to paint in the studio, opening a virtual window towards the life outside for the next generation of artists (like Marcel Duchamp’s The Large Glass, 1915-1923). Courbet also wrote the first manifesto in the history of art, in which he connects art practices to daily life.

The historical development of the studio refused to converge towards the conventional bourgeois salon format and has kept to the workshop, or the Factory, the laboratory, and has even become another alley for drifting in the city or in the world. The studio can be both a social hub and a place of communal activity, a space of solidarity, sociality, events. The model Factory of Andy Warhol and Co brings together private and public and organizes the art productive forces mixing them with the social productive forces. It is a model of an open studio for sharing skills and de-skilling within the economic, social and political side of artistic production, a model for connecting art to daily life and society. In this context, Daniel Buren’s harsh critique of the studio and its practices vs. site specificity and long-term, process-oriented practices has to be mentioned: “Analysis of the art system must inevitably be carried on in terms of the studio as the unique space of production and the museum as the unique space of exposition.”

The analysis and critique of contemporary art production and the relation between art practices, the studio and the art institutions demand political changes, which need other attitudes and an other performance of labor-work, refusing the auratic and spiritual value (no return to abstraction!) of artworks to connect political and economic emancipation to the concept of freedom and the artist’s attitudes to work and life, beyond the art scene in the broad social field. It involves not only other practices, but also other attitudes towards the production of art and a new economic signature into an ideal of art.

If artist's practices are not translatable to labor-power, they require another process of valorization. One can even consider that the “art work as a commodity is harmful towards the art works.” To what extent are they forms of exception and abstract acts of exchange in the neoliberal economy with its scientificized and digitalized working processes that brings the performance of all work close to art. How can the artist, who embodies subversive and resistive subjectivity, which is considered a vanguard aesthetico-political force, can remain ‘exclusive’ in the general transformation of the relation between work and life. In the neoliberal situation, the aesthetic critique seems to have been reduced to mere

18 A theme of becoming, becoming-child, becoming-animal, becoming-woman in the line of Deleuze and Guattari.
20 ...
‘epistemo-politics’ and critique of cognition, which are anyway privileged in a knowledge-driven economy. There is thus an urgency to re-introduce aesthetico-politico-economic critique and the practices of autonomy. A series of discussions and presentations around the role of the studio in the urban fabric and its public support is planned, as well as on the role of the self-organized studio represented by various artist associations active in the city of Zurich, as a mode of cooperative resistance in the forms of work and existence.
Part II: Der Prozess / The Trial

Participating artists, dates and other details to be announced.
February/March 2017

“The machine has to be rediscovered under the sensibility which is no more than a theatrical effect of it.” (Jean-François Lyotard) 21

“Someone must have traduced Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning.” Despite that “K. claims to be innocent and doesn't even know the Law,” he has been convicted.

The novel Der Prozess by Franz Kafka provides the title and the direction of the second part of the exhibition-project Theorem 4. Aesthetic Agency and the Practices of Autonomy. The flashing K-function in the middle is a micro intra-process of reflective actions in a pre-reflexive impersonal consciousness – the reality of virtuality, the power to affect and to be affected, what Deleuze defines to be a theater without a stage. There is no personal inputs by the actors, who do not embody characters, but are only masks behind which there is nothing, just another mask. Their performance of repetitive clothing veils the plane, and is the collective acting of the three avatars Percept, Affect, Concept, constitutes the forces of individuation and the positive estrangement or displacement that clothe the event and transform it. In Hegel's negative dialectics, they are Abstract, Negative, Concrete, or Immediate, Mediated, Concrete. In Deleuze, they are transformed into the positive affirmation of No! The immanence evokes the masks and hiding, crime, and the false (the fancy, or funky). The politics of justice, which is not only in the ethical but also in the aesthetic domain, deals with the distribution of force between the layers of violence and control.

The exhibition-project incorporates video installations, objects and ephemera, and is designed around a series of discussions about the artworks on display, some of which will be publicly selected and picked up from the private storage of one of the participating artists, and exhibited in the middle of the space in a display that will change weekly.

Text: Dimitrina Sevova in collaboration with Alan Roth