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Getting in by the exit-sign

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One of the big mistakes in the evolution of the notion of autonomy is the conviction that the ideal is to protect your autonomy and that not-knowing, thriving on instinct and intuition, is the only way to guard this precious treasure. Looking back in history however, you can see that autonomy came into existence as a refusal to position art as a tool for the expression of ideal produces within other pillars of reigning ideology (Religion, History, Morals, Justice). This freedom of expression, in itself of course also a strong pillar of democratic capitalism, became a reciprocal combination of form and content: the essence of what Rancière calls the 'Aesthetic Regime'. Crucial in its relation to ideology and democracy is that this combination stand for a point that can never be attained. Any given idea or any given form is, seen from the ideal of autonomy, at once regarded with distrust and as something to break away from. At one and the same time self-asserting and self denying, this system does not know a stable situation:

Autonomy is a line of flight never a point of departure.

The implications of autonomy as something that is not a given but rather a promise in the future is that its precondition is not ignorance but knowing exactly the forms of outer and inner encapsulation. To get to the point of understanding that autonomy is always false – because it is not a choice for art but is produced by democratic capitalism as a pivotal point of ideology – and always true – because this ideology in itself always leaves open space for dissent, a possibility for redistribution of the sensible.

For art education this means making students aware of this most schizophrenic demand to obey by disobeying. This awareness cannot be attained by teaching them to “do their own thing”, but by teaching them to “do their thing” in relation to the specific ways in which art is instrumentalised at any given time and the specific ways in which it is supposed to refuse this very instrumentalisation. To find a possible non-position between these two poles can be seen as an indication of autonomy, even if it is only for a short while. This working towards autonomy can be seen as the only way art can explore and exploit the gaps given within the system of democracy, not to undermine this system, but to fulfil its promises.

We have to teach students to find the way out to get in.

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