



## Some thoughts on the role of autonomy in the arts and its role in discourses on the value of the arts

### Introduction

The cutbacks of the previous government in the Netherlands caused a shock in the art sector. Not only because of the scale, but also because of the ease with which these cuts were accepted. The only protests came from the sector itself, the rest of the population thought it was fine. Apparently the public support for art is much smaller than expected. The reaction from a new government, with a social-democrat as a minister for the arts, was therefore to stress more the social value of art. But the social value of art is not that easy to interpret and make explicit.

We are soulsearching on the theme of social value of art . Do all artists now have to deal with social themes? Is this not a breach of artistic autonomy, is not art used instrumentally and does it not inevitably affect artistic quality? Some artists I hear complain that you can not get a subsidy if you do not come up with a social theme.

The theme ' the value of art' has been put on the map, but there are conflicting sides in the discussion.

### Two statements

To get further in this discussion, I want to make two statements.

The first is:

The dichotomy between autonomy and instrumentalism is simplistic and does not do justice to the professional practices of today's artists. Let's look at these practices and investigate how both artistic value and social value come about. An important concept is professionalism and what we mean by it.

The second statement:

There are several ways in which the social value of art is realized. Let us recognize and appreciate that pluralism and stop putting one way above the other. They each have their own value. We need this pluralism to strengthen popular support for the arts sector.



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The first statement about autonomy and instrumentalism

What do I mean by autonomous in this context? It involves making decisions independently about what is made and how.

I start with two examples to illustrate: the National Ballet is going on a diplomatic journey. That is an instrumental use of ballet, because it serves a different purpose than art itself. As a country we show what we are able of and that it is of the highest possible quality. But are the dancers working instrumentally that evening? Or are they, as always, intrinsically motivated to the bone to dance the ballets they show as beautiful as possible? Does the ballet itself become different? Is that no longer autonomous as a work of art? That seems unlikely to me. So this is instrumental and autonomous at the same time.

A completely different example. An actress and theatermaker has been working for years with groups that are not doing very well in this demanding society: illiterates, vulnerable young people, demented people. She uses her professional skills to get them together through workshops and for a longer period of time to let them create their own performance and have them gain more self-confidence and positive experiences. Self-expression, cooperation, learning something and showing the results have all positive effects on people, research has shown. A typical case of an instrumental use of the of art, one would say.

But she also makes theater performances, in which these people are on stage together with professional actors. Authentic performances with lots of expressive quality, entirely made according to her own artistic insight. In short, autonomous works of art, in the sense of being made independent according to her own artistic insight. So what she does is instrumental one moment, and the next moment autonomous. Or stronger: the instrumental commitment is needed to come to an autonomous work of art. It is questionable whether the hard, dichotomous distinction between autonomous and instrumentalism is still meaningful. And whether it does not stand in the way of appreciating the value of art.

### *Autonomy as a necessity*

I do not deny the importance of autonomy in art. On the contrary. Without autonomy in the arts, without independent reflection and artistic imagination, there is no artistic,



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but also no social value.

I do think that the opposition autonomy-instrumental obscures the view on the value of art for our society. Because it seems as if every social commitment of art and culture is deemed instrumental and is thus dismissed as negative and threatening to the arts. And as a result, much social value of art remains invisible and is placed outside the art sector. And besides, there are several stories about the social value of art and culture in which this contradiction plays no role. In other words, it seems that this alleged opposition is primarily a problem within only a part of the art world itself and not outside of it.

### Autonomy

Autonomy is always relative, you are always independent of something or someone else. Autonomy is about degrees of freedom that you acquire to think and act in relation to your environment. Full autonomy may hold true for a person on a deserted island where housing, food and drinks abound, including high-speed Internet. But simply setting these conditions indicates that autonomy depends on the presence of other fulfilled conditions. Autonomy is never absolute, but exists only by the grace of others.

Is not the use of the opposition autonomous-instrumental proof of a lack of confidence in the professional capacities of the artist? As if it would just be put aside in a different context? Can we not speak better of different forms of autonomy, different degrees of autonomy or of different autonomous positions that each have their own value?

The concept of autonomy has helped art enormously, making art independently from clients, sponsors or patrons. It has led to many new trends and developments. That alone has social value. At the same time we consider a lot of 'old' art which was commissioned now as autonomous art of high artistic quality: classical music, old paintings. And forget that it was made on commission. Commissioning and quality can also go well together.

### Multiple discourses about the value of art

There are several discourses about the social value of art, discourses that stand side by side, sometimes overlap, but all have their own value. And it is about time the art



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world stops fighting each other with the only correct story about the value of art. But recognize that there are multiple discourses which each has its own value. And that as an art world we stand much stronger if we embrace and acknowledge those discourses. Because until now, the art world is not able to produce one inclusive story about the value of art. There is a lack of connection between the amateur art and the official art world, between community art and so-called autonomous art, and there is no support for art subsidies in large parts of the population.

### *Five times art value*

Let us take another track on the social value of art before we return to autonomy and instrumentalism.

There are five discourses about the value of art:

#### *Only artistic autonomy counts*

In this discourse artistic quality is the only criterion that counts. Everything else does not belong to the artistic domain and should therefore not be included in the assessment of art. It is precisely here that the concepts autonomy and instrumentalism play a major role as a boundary. The autonomy of the artist is an almost absolute quality. And that means that the artist decides for himself what he/she makes and that only equals can determine whether this is good art. All other ways of making (and assessing) art - f.e. commissioned - fall outside the autonomy of the artist and are therefore instrumental. That is an abuse of art, because instrumental art does not meet the criteria of autonomy and is therefore not good art. This discourse plays the strongest in the visual arts. In its distorted version, autonomy is a pretext for a lifestyle in which an artist thinks that he/she does not have to account to anyone and yet has to be paid for his/her work, especially by the government. That last connotation with 'autonomous' art is strongly present among the general public: it is great that it is made, but why do we have to pay for it?

#### *Critical value*

One of the possibilities that the development towards autonomy in art has yielded in the last 100 years is the critical position towards society. In the strict form of this reasoning, art is only good art if it is critical of our society; art must grate, cause resentment, and especially show the failings of capitalist society. In a somewhat more



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positively oriented form, critical art also devise alternatives for society, for example in coming up with small-scale, bottom-up initiatives. This discourse is also very afraid of instrumentalism. Working in commission or in organizations and companies are forms of art in which the autonomous – read: critical attitude – of art is under pressure or disappears, and is therefore no longer a good art. Autonomous art is critical art. Art as critical commentator of politics and society (Pascal Gielen).

### *Activist value*

In the previous discourse, art is about politics and society, but art should not become politics, because then you will go beyond the boundaries of art. Then it loses its autonomy and becomes instrumental. Many artists, however, use their art to change society in one way or another. This can be done by imagining utopias and experimenting with them and by doing so challenge and actually present alternatives to existing practices. Another common form is to take to the streets, stand up for underlying groups, protest for their interests and actually try to improve their own environment. It is no coincidence that you will find many artists among them who shelter refugees, who strengthen the self-confidence of children with disadvantages with art activities and who improve the circular economy with innovative ecological discoveries. In researching, designing, executing and making known, they use their experience with artistic processes and research. Many still consider themselves artists, although the artistic process is often more important than the artistic quality of the result. And in their experience the established art world does not accept them as 'real' artists. Others leave even the label artist apart because they feel that the associations of the public with the artist ("oh, they're just artists") limits their social effectiveness.

### *Applicable value*

Art is often used as a means for a different purpose than art itself. Think of the ballet performance as a diplomatic tool. In both artistic and critical discourse, this is immediately referred to as an instrumental use of art, and thus as a mistake. The question is whether this Pavlov reaction is correct. And whether the artists who are active in this way are not 'good' artists either. To name a few areas where art is applied:

*Economy:* the presence of art strengthens the attractiveness of the city or village and



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thus has an impact on spending, such as via tourism. The art sector itself is an economic sector that matters (and as a part of the creative industry, including ICT and media).

*Area development* : the presence of breeding spaces and creative hubs leads to the influx of new residents and trendy coffee shops and thus making the neighborhood attractive, which leads to higher house prices. In its worst form, pure gentrification ( leading to the expulsion of original inhabitants and artists), in a social form an improvement of social cohesion and strengthening the self-confidence of local residents.

*Companies and social organizations* : an increasing number of companies and organizations are using artists to undo stalled processes, for innovation and product development and for strengthening communication with customers or citizens. One calls these artistic interventions, the other crossovers. For artists, this work is regularly inspiration for their own (autonomous) work, but also monetary appreciation for their qualities that are often lacking in the art world itself.

*Doing it yourself*: many people practice art, painting, playing theater, making music, photographing, writing, you name it. It makes people feel good, they discover new qualities of themselves, they practice, work together and get better at something. That too is an important value that art offers.

### *Entertainment value*

Art is also just a pastime . Listening to music makes it easier to get through the day; going to a musical or a cabaret show is a night out. Go to the museum can also simply be a social activity. And yes, art may well be about moral dilemmas, social themes, or you can recognize yourself very well in the persons who are displayed. And you can talk about that afterwards. A lot of art is entertainment. For the people who hold the autonomous and the critical value, this is a value category that they do not appreciate: it is flat, one finds it commercial, and yes, it also attracts many visitors. Often of the kind they want to distinguish themselves from. They find their cultural capital of higher value than that of the people who go to this kind of art.

### Social value of art and autonomy

The social value of art seems to depend on the position you take about what good art



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is. As far as I am concerned, not one discourse can claim to represent the only right social value of art. They all exist, next to and through each other. And are all important. And: multiple values find their place within one artistic practice.

But we now also see that the fear of loss of autonomy is predominant only in two of the five discourse about the social value of art, namely in the first reasoning about artistic autonomy, and in the second about art as a critical value . And that most of the art being made is condemned to be instrumental or flat. I do not think that this makes sense if we want to see and appreciate the social value of art.

Should not we therefore re-evaluate the concept of autonomy? Should we not part with the dichotomy of autonomy-instrumentalism, but talk about professional autonomy? Do not think that I attach no importance to artistic autonomy, on the contrary, that autonomy lies at the basis of all other discourse about the value of art. Without autonomy, without independence and without an artist making his/her own choices in the process of making and showing art, there is no practical use of art, no entertainment, no activism, no critical attitude. No alternative view of reality without imagination.

It is up to the professional himself, the artist, to determine how, where and when he/she uses artistic autonomy. For the benefit of his/her own art, for the benefit of young people with a disadvantage, for the benefit of a company that does not understand its customers, to use all professional knowledge and artistic imagination to protest against the appropriation of public space by companies.

For what does the opposition autonomy-instrumentalism mean if the same artist in the morning will give a workshop with vulnerable young people (so professionally instrumental), in the afternoon gives a socially critical reading about vulnerable youth and in the evening is the director of an autonomous theater performance in which these vulnerable young people take part? Is that artist making bad art in the morning, good art the afternoon and bad art in the evening?

You see more and more artists who combine different forms of value and are inspired by them. Who, independently, autonomously, decide to work in this way . Who devise their own rules and choose their own context to make art. And who will cooperate with actors from outside the arts and on assignment and who find it exciting and inspiring



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without having the feeling that they surrender their artistic views. Artists who are able to use different forms of autonomy at different times.

### The artist as an autonomous professional

So let us assume the professional autonomy of the artist. Professionals in all kinds of disciplines outside the art sector work on assignment or in an organization, but only can do their work well if their professional autonomy is respected. When they can decide for themselves how they use their expertise and organize their process. There is a good reason why there is a lot of literature about managing professionals with the result that you should not limit professionals too much because otherwise the result of their work will be of lesser quality. Does not that also apply to artists?

It is time to elaborate more on a deeper understanding of the professional autonomy of artists. And learn from professionals from other sectors. In what direction can we develop this form of professionalism? In other domains such as consultancy or in education and welfare, the term T- shape professional is often used.

The vertical bar of the T stands for your professional quality, your vision and skills to practice your content. The horizontal bar represents the skills you need to connect with others: to communicate, lead processes, negotiate, collaborate, be open, be enterprising, you name it.

Professional autonomy is evidenced by the way artists guard the limits of their efforts, so they have enough room to do their job, regardless of where they work. Of course, the objection is made quickly: for example, governments and other clients who want to impose all kinds of objectives on art. But it is part of your professional competences to make choices. Autonomy is not a given, you conquer it. Through the quality of your work, by arguing or by delivering more value than requested.

Because it is precisely within a professional view of the profession of artist that there is room for a critical position. Good clients understand that this professional autonomy is a necessary condition for the best result.

### Conclusions

It is the combination of artistic individuality and professional skills that enable artists to work in different places, to be able to work with their own and external goals and to





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acquire their own degree of autonomy. It is precisely the professional artist who realizes both artistic and social value of art, by working within different discourses about the value of art.

### *Four conclusions :*

the contradiction between autonomous and instrumental does not exist, there are different autonomous positions within all kinds of contexts, some of which might have an instrumental objective.

the autonomous-instrumental opposition hinders seeing the social value of art by ignoring other discourses on the value of art

the autonomous-instrumental contradiction also hinders the creation of popular support for art, because it recognizes only 1 or 2 discourses on art, and not those of direct interest to the population .

We should focus more on what constitutes professional autonomy for artists.

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