

Return of the Political and the Aesthetics of the Anthropocene

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ABSTRACT The central aim of this paper is to trace how the conditions and purpose of artistic commitment have shifted from the modernist paradigm, through the neoliberal cultural logic, and the current pressures that are associated with the Anthropocene. Beginning from Adorno's account of autonomy—where art's political force lies not in direct engagement but in the negative dialectic internal to form—the paper argues that the avant-garde's legacy of structural critique became progressively absorbed by what is here called neoliberal aesthetics. The recent prominence of the Anthropocene signals further reorientation. Its double demand to render sensible scales of ecological devastation while clarifying differentiated agency, as well as the inevitability of its political embeddedness, resets the dialectic of commitment. Rather than reviving avant-garde manifestos or abandoning autonomy, contemporary practices negotiate infrastructures, milieus, and temporalities that bind aesthetics to material and geopolitical realities. Works that operate within this horizon reconfigure commitment as formally mediated and materially situated, resisting both didacticism and complete subsumption under neoliberal logic. The paper proposes that this constitutes a qualified “return of the political”: not a return to direct address or saturation of its autonomy, but a renewed capacity to stage frictions where responsibility, scale, and agency become thinkable again.

Commitment after Neoliberalism

Among the various ways to understand the political predicament that art brought about in the modernist framework of the 20th century, one approach came from Adorno. He famously posed art's role as opposing social functions, and, at the same time, being socially mediated. Hence, his insight in his *Aesthetic Theory* that "art criticizes society by merely existing." (Adorno 2002, 225-226) At the time of writing, Adorno conceived of art as part of a continuous post-war social democratic order – he never thought it would come to an end, let alone turn into something completely different. Therefore, his notion of political commitment for art is precisely in avoiding direct political gestures because art's ability to criticize society lies in "crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself," (Ibid.) meaning that it should not succumb to the pressures of direct engagement in social and political life.

The avant-garde movements of the time posed their political commitment quite directly, and almost by definition, they carried the modernist promise to change society for the better. The turn towards postmodern cultural logic, as well as the neoliberal socio-economic paradigm, has shifted the notion of politics to a certain post-historical mode of thought. This paper develops a claim that aesthetics, by and large, is returning to a more direct relationship with politics. However, this should not be understood as an attempt to revive the old claims and manifestos of the avant-garde movements, or to oppose claims towards the notion of artistic autonomy with any direct political commitment. The aim here is to articulate a shift in conditions under which works are made, circulated, and received, as well as describe how those conditions bear on the rather classical dialectic between autonomy and commitment. Thus, I start from a fairly simple and stipulative hypothesis: that late modernity and the avant-garde cultivated a strong emphasis on political commitment, but did so – especially in the Adornian register – by making commitment legible negatively, within their form, rather than by instructive address. Neoliberalism did not completely cut this dialectic off but rather reconfigured the ground on which it could operate. In the last decade, when the concept

of the Anthropocene has saturated discourse and logistics, the terms of that dialectic are being reset.

Before moving on, I should like to make a couple of clarifications. Firstly, by “the return of the political,” I do not directly reference Hal Foster’s “return of the real,” though there is a certain elective affinity between these two notions as they both note a realignment that makes it possible to see continuities with, rather than simple departures from, the avant-garde (Cf. Foster 1996). Secondly, the argument is not a general one about “art”, but one about a tendency and configuration that becomes visible and is highlighted here at the level of form, institution, and address. So, the Anthropocene discourse’s entrance (or rather symbiosis) with the art field is part of a wider realignment, and not its sole case (if we can even put it as a cause at all). Despite that, I see it as certainly in a privileged relationship; Anthropocene and the discourse around it combine an epistemic rupture – which indeed rescales our perception and causality – with a material pressure, which pushes us to reform logistics, our footprint, and risks.

The methodology here is a combination of genealogical elements with a dialectical approach. I provide a brief outline of how autonomy and commitment functioned within the modernist paradigm, how neoliberalism displaced or absorbed these terms within the managerial frontier of culture, and how Anthropocene pressures necessitate a reimagining of autonomy as a condition of critique, rather than as a form of detachment. Autonomy, as understood in the Adornian sense, i.e., when art is understood as autonomous and socially mediated at the same time, remains important. It does not follow a purist logic but rather gives a form of resistance against instrumentality, while the notion of commitment must be reconfigured in relation to infrastructures, temporalities, and agencies that exceed the coordinates of postwar industrial status quo.

I will follow in four stages. In the next section, I will focus on the modernist dialectic, emphasizing Adorno’s position, which also started this paper – that art’s political strength appears where works refuse direct political engagement and that they must stage their contradictions within themselves. Another section will trace how neoliberalism affects artistic practice. Essentially, the traits that become the symbols of the new cultural logic, i.e., privatization, market metaphors, art fairs, freeports,

relational managerial forms, assetization, and metrics – all of which pertain to metabolizing dissent as content and hence sabotaging and blunting the avant-garde's committed ethos. This is followed by articulating the Anthropocene turn and why it matters, even if the term is promiscuous, essentially reorienting aesthetic problems toward scale, responsibility, milieu, and temporality in which all the practices exemplify this shift. The last section contains a proposition of how to see the return of political commitment as a formally mediated, materially situated practice. By locating the stakes of such a return amid resurgent reactionary appropriations of transgression, and an art world still saturated by neoliberal infrastructures.

Modernist Autonomy and Negativity

The notion we have already invoked as a modernist framing – which also orients this paper – is that artistic autonomy emerges in the eighteenth century and coincides with the emergence of capitalism and romanticist aesthetics. It names neither isolation nor indifference. Rather, it claims that the work and its organizing laws are immanent to form rather than dictated by morality, religion, or any other externality. Modernism brings this claim to the extreme – the work is formally self-sufficient, but at the same time always socially mediated. Its resistance to society, its refusal of immediate function, and its way of being social constitute a refusal that exposes contradictions at work in what Adorno calls an administered world (Adorno 2002, 31).

This dynamic is at the core of Adorno's position and articulation of the 'function' of art in general. For him, the difficulty (the enigma) posed by an artwork is not a posture – it is the signature of a situation in which direct address risks becoming what he deems culinary, meaning it is capable of being consumed and is directly didactic (Adorno 2018). Commitment can only succeed negatively, i.e., when it works against social antagonism within its own logic, within the tensions and dissonance that are brought forward by its form. Adorno delineates this as a dynamic between semblance [Schein] and truth-content [Warheitsgehalt]. Most importantly, art's autonomy is historical, and not metaphysical. Art is always a product of social contradictions whose critical potential lies in the inner tensions of form – hence Adorno's saying that “art is what it has become, its concept refers to what it does not contain” (Adorno 2002, 3).

Let me follow with a corollary. The avant-garde in its twentieth-century iterations—be it Dada, Futurism, or later Fluxus—appears as a “double.” On the one hand, these movements insist on autonomy as a refusal of instrumental reason; on the other, they formulate politics, engage with technology, and, most importantly, aim for social transformation. Art has to be abolished or fused with life, but both aims have been shown to have historical limitations. What I focus on is the legacy of this structural critique: a commitment to forms that resist easy consumption, that demand reflection, and that make the conditions of appearance – the frame, the institutions, the media – explicit. In Adorno’s account, there is no desire to abolish the artwork, only a sharpened insistence that the artwork as such is where critique can be mounted without succumbing to immediacy. This is why, famously for Adorno, music plays a privileged role. It does not represent, and thus, musical modernism can articulate historical tensions through structure. The formal difficulty inherent in musical works resists commodification not by refusing circulation, but by interrupting sense where the world demands transparency. Importantly, this does not bring us to formalism as *l’art pour l’art*, but rather a way to hold open a space for the non-identical to be inferred, even if negatively.

So, this version of modernist dialectic sees autonomy as a negative form of resistance. Commitment then becomes possible only as a formal contradiction. I argue that it does not belong to a closed past but rather to a paradigm of postwar industrial social order, where media ecology is relatively limited, and where art and its function of autonomy can be posed and defined against a certain consensus. What I aim at here, though, is not to confirm or reject this as either right or wrong, but to claim that it helps us to see how it travels when the world shifts from industrial to postindustrial, from modern to postmodern, and, concurrently, where platforms take over broadcasting while national welfare has been privatized. I insist that the insights coming from Adorno specifically travel farther than the paradigm that produced them, and at the same time find their limits in adaptive capital and the breadth of how it appropriates any form.

From Dialectical Modernism to Neoliberal Aesthetics

Many of the avant-garde's ambitions persist throughout a shift in conditions, as it has not been a clean break from the previous paradigm. David Harvey theorizes neoliberalism as firstly a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being is in direct relation and is achieved by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills. The institutional framework that secures these procedures is characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade (Harvey 2005, 2). According to Harvey, "Neoliberalism has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world." (Ibid., 3) Neoliberal doctrines, such as privatization, which replaced Keynesian welfare and led to market metaphors permeating social life, have had palpable effects in the art world. Fairs and biennials synchronize calendars; Art Basel becomes an emblem of circulation, whereas freeports and vaults warehouse artworks that function as stored value, are insulated from public view, and are aligned with the logics of finance. This resonates with Peter Bürger's critique of the avant-garde's failed institutional sublation (Cf. Bürger 1984). The role of postmodernism in this transition is best read symptomatically, because one can be critical of any periodization and still recognize that, by the time platform capitalism coheres, novelty has been operationalized into a cycle of constant updating, whereas critique becomes just another form of content.

Appropriation has been characterized by the theoretical explications of what is postmodern. Fredric Jameson defines pastiche as one of the most important features of postmodernism as a new cultural logic of capitalism, which renders postmodern culture as a kind of generalized stylistic cannibalization (Jameson 2008, 16-22). Lyotard stressed the incredulity toward metanarratives and the delegitimization of grand narratives (Lyotard 2002, xxiv-xxv).

In Adorno's framework, which corresponds to high modernism, a lot of this is still present. The critical distance has not vanished; it has been folded into the commodity, i.e., the market learns to anticipate and price in dissent. The notion of autonomy, even if conditional, provides distance. Now it turns into a rare interruption, and a situation where artistic refusal of instrumental logic is either valorized as a brand asset or dismissed for its lack of engagement. Both of these outcomes are actually coordinated by managerial cultural style, which is embodied in *Relational Aesthetics*, as articulated and

valorized by Nicolas Bourriaud, who explicitly frames the artist as a facilitator or “coordinator”. In fact, when Bourriaud says that “the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real,” (Bourriaud 2009, 17-19, 31-36, 39) he does so by extending the task already prescribed to architecture by Lyotard (Lyotard, opt. cit., 13).

What I term “neoliberal aesthetics” refers to a set of forms that have become legible over several decades. They are managerial in that they mirror service-economy models of facilitation and networking. What is embodied in Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics is actually an emblematic case of how neoliberal aesthetics may look, especially from a theoretical-curatorial perspective. Temporary cafes, workshops, and micro-encounters are formats whose horizon could be said to be sociality itself. Artworks can be said to become much less an object than a structure of pop-up governance. That being said, this is not to dismiss art as being without content or care. Rather, this is the way this format of aesthetics comes about under neoliberal conditions and turns them into aesthetic predicates. Furthermore, as Lucy Lippard noted, the “dematerialization of the art object” in conceptual art was conceived as a critique of the commodity form (Lippard 2007, pp. vii-xiii). Yet, as Buchloh later observed, its administrative and linguistic procedures made it susceptible to new institutional and economic framings (Buchloh 1990, 143). In the contemporary landscape, forms such as NFTs push this logic further, transforming dematerialized artworks into explicitly financialized assets. Stallabrass argues that conceptual and post-conceptual practices, despite anti-market intentions, were steadily reabsorbed into the market through certificates, editions, and documentation (Stallabrass 2004). It returns as an asset creation, most recently this is embodied in NFTs, which actually prompted art to be destroyed to create more value (Steyerl 2025, 103). Hence, authorship becomes an even more obscene saturation of intellectual property, with data as its second substrate. If we return to the notion of autonomy, while it has always been entangled with social mediation and the commodity character of an artwork, its embeddedness now becomes even more acute—any example where a complete capture is exceeded is rare.

This is where the next turn takes shape. The financial crash of 2008 exposed the neoliberal social order as fragile and, at the same time, cynical. I argue that, despite much of the politicality that emerged afterwards, with growing consciousness of the

imminent climate problems, these issues indeed have entered the public perception and therefore have also turned towards awareness of extraction and precarity. Even though the neoliberal agenda has not been rejected, the pressure under the name of “Anthropocene” has become more apparent.

The Aesthetics of the Anthropocene: Scale, Responsibility, Milieu

The use of the term “Anthropocene” here is pragmatic. As is well known, it was coined to mark human-induced geological change and has become a household term and, at the same time, a very contested one. It does risk universalizing agency and also masking colonial, racial, and economic differences in responsibility for harm. Other terms, such as Capitalocene, Plantationocene, and others, correct for that. There are two main reasons for me to maintain this term. The first one is that the term “Anthropocene,” since its inception by Paul J. Crutzen, Eugene F. Stoermer and Will Steffen (Crutzen et al. 2000), has become a household concept, recognized across disciplines. While I embrace the effort of scholars like TJ Demos and Donna Haraway to emphasize different agents that are responsible for climate collapse through introducing different terms, I think the discussions that have happened have already brought these concerns into awareness. In contrast, more discussion derails many of the conversations that target the core of the matter. Secondly, since the methodological basis here relies on Frankfurt School critical theory, and particularly on the thought of Adorno, I tend to accept the terms as historically transient, and in this sense, “Anthropocene” can very well capture the dialectic that is in play when it is invoked. I argue that it forces a double task on aesthetics: to render sensible scales of devastation that outstrip individual perception and to restore differentiated agency, resisting narratives of a flat “we”.

If neoliberal aesthetics cultivated relational encounters mirroring market logic, then what I call Anthropocene aesthetics reorients encounter toward ecological structures: toward infrastructures and milieus in which art and politics are co-implicated. My own work here intersects with thinking of milieu in the sense of Gilbert Simondon (Cf. Simondon 2020), but the emphasis in this paper is narrower. I focus on how the

Anthropocene brings the political aesthetic back into view by binding form to environments in ways that go beyond mere description.

I would like to emphasise several pressures that come into play when art engages the Anthropocene. Obviously, the first one is scale, because the Anthropocene pertains to disciplines and data from atmospheric chemistry to glacial dynamics, and hence the processes at stake are trans-scalar. Works that take this seriously do not simply illustrate catastrophe; they develop formal means such as montage, indexical layering, temporal braiding that allow the spectator to inhabit the scales that are otherwise inaccessible.

Another pressure is responsibility, which already arose in the debates about the term “Anthropocene” itself. If climate discourse dissolves into a generalized guilt, the aesthetic task is to make visible the broader distribution of violence, including the colonial, postcolonial, racial, and economic. Thinking about practices such as that of Forensic Architecture, verification becomes another pressure. Their work breaches the boundary between art and research, in fact sharing the infrastructure of presentation but being much less about aesthetics. It resists being a commodity as it is not part of the art market. It carries a remainder – claims that demand an address from institutions beyond art (Weizman 2017). Their work exhibits procedures and resists the traditional notion of autonomy, but it is not propaganda either. It may be called evidentiary aesthetics, in which spectatorship is also public reasoning. Other artists such as Hito Steyerl, Trevor Paglen, and Ursula Biemann, to name a few, have worked along adjacent vectors, examining surveillance, data centers, and geopolitical issues. They all share in addressing the Anthropocene’s particular challenge: to scale up perception without washing out accountability.

Commitment Reconfigured: Situated Autonomy, Formal Difficulty, Accountable Worlds

The discourse around commitment under the modernist paradigm is largely negative. Art’s autonomy is understood as a possibility of immanent opposition to the dominant social order and, at the same time, to instrumental reason. We saw neoliberalism

displacing that paradox by folding dissent into content and logistics. I propose that we witness a certain return of the political, where works reexamine infrastructures beyond art while acknowledging art's imbrication in them. I would like to distinguish several traits that become visible in such a shift under the horizon that is brought about by the Anthropocene.

The political dimension of the Anthropocene is not simply a theme – it delineates an epistemic rupture which renders invisible what neoliberal discourses of efficiency and marginal utility usually try to conceal. They are externalities that do not abandon autonomy but rather react to it negatively. This also marks the return of formal difficulty, which blocks instant legibility. But the difficulty brought about by artistic form is no longer a matter of stretching material to its limits in the modernist manner, as we find in the case of the modernist novel or total serialism in music. It is a matter of acknowledging the mutual entanglement while resisting being labeled as a mere signal in the feed.

It is also important to stress that this terrain is contested by reactionary forces. Ultranationalist and alt-right movements have learned to appropriate transgression. We know that the initial historical avant-gardes have had reactionary politics, but later historical iterations have been almost unequivocally progressive. Currently, meme détournements, flash mobs, and other tactics that recall those employed by the historical avant-garde are redeployed to reactionary ends. What this shows is that shock value itself has no inherent political valence, and politics must aim to specify its ends and addressees, thereby demanding that art likewise be way more specific.

A third factor is the redistribution of subjectivity. The liberal subject, which has been essential for both modernist autonomy and neoliberal entrepreneurialism, is dislodged by the emergence of posthumanist discourse. This redistribution pertains to the new emphasis on multi-agency and distributed cognition, which yields practices that are specifically situated – archives built with communities, claims assembled across legal and para-legal registers, investigations that are iterative rather than singular. Autonomy, thus, can be understood as a way to keep open a site where reasons can be given, tested, and contested without immediate subsumption to policy or metrics. It follows that the notion of commitment can be defined less as a program than as a

practice of assembling forms that compose frictions between scales, times, and agencies in such a way that responsibility can be articulated differentially. The artwork's political dimension is not guaranteed by its thematic emphasis; it is secured by decisions about index, montage, procedure, and address. In other words, under conditions where everything can be packaged as content, the durability of commitment depends on withstanding this capture long enough to reshape what counts as appearance and what passes as proof.

Thus, the contemporary art scene in the late 1990s and 2000s has worked with the "current state of affairs" under a banner of critical institutional practice; now it faces narrowed spaces of resistance. Neoliberal infrastructures display their deep entanglement with carbon extraction and social precarity. The repertoire of immanent manoeuvres of turning systems against themselves has grown thinner. Against this, some practices aim at material accountability, which does not promise a solution but a criterion for judging when a work composes a world in which judgment is possible. Furthermore, the value of art in this alignment is not instrumental but constitutive. Art stages frictions where competing temporalities and agencies collide, holds open spaces where perception can still matter, and finds points at which worlds can be recomposed – even if slightly – through critique. This mustn't be nostalgia for the avant-garde, nor ironic play with neoliberal debris. It insists that autonomy, negatively construed, remains a condition for commitment, and that commitment, having undergone a reconfiguration, must be materially situated and exposed to the infrastructure that binds aesthetics to the most pressing political actualities. It must bind aesthetics to carbon, capital, and colonial residues while refusing the short circuits of moralizing immediacy.

The claim that politics is returning to aesthetics risks being misunderstood if one takes it as a direct switch from autonomy to activism. On the one hand, art has always had political content in the same way, for Adorno, it is critical by "merely existing." (Adorno 2002, 225-226). The argument made here is narrower and, I hope, more exact. Neoliberal aesthetics did not eliminate the dialectic of autonomy and commitment; it transformed it by turning critique into a metric. The Anthropocene did not save art from its situation; rather, it pressured the field by forcing questions of scale, responsibility, milieu, and time to the surface. Within that pressure, a more direct notion

of commitment returns not as a program of propaganda, but as formally mediated, materially situated practice.

To speak of a return is to risk circularity. This return is a reconfiguration and a reopening of the space where autonomy can do its critical work by refusing immediate function, while refusing as well to retreat to modernist purity. What high modernism has shown us, and what should be retained, is that complexity is important, and it prevents capture by ready-made sense. Neoliberalism has shown that format and structure are not neutral, and the Anthropocene has given an understanding that art should stick to one of its few remaining strengths – the capacity to compose appearances adequate to the world’s wounded complexity. Hence, the return of the political does not mean that art proclaims solutions. It cultivates sites of judgment, where responsibility can be seen and argued over. The notion of its (negative) autonomy can still yield the slow work of commitment.

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