

Against autonomy as Idea

Grant Kester, *The Sovereign Self: Aesthetic Autonomy from the Enlightenment to the Avant-Garde* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023). 280pp., £21.99 pb., 978 1 47802 042 4

Grant Kester, *Beyond the Sovereign Self: Aesthetic Autonomy from the Avant-Garde to Socially Engaged Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023). 296pp., £23.99 pb., 978 1 47802 042 4

Much like Western civilisation in general, aesthetic autonomy would be a good idea. Or would it? The first volume in Grant H. Kester's diptych on the interrelations between art, autonomy and political action, *The Sovereign Self: Aesthetic Autonomy from the Enlightenment to the Avant-Garde*, presents an ambitious critical genealogy of the notion of aesthetic autonomy from the eighteenth century through to the present. In it, Kester is concerned with demonstrating the continuity of what he argues to be the discursive structure of aesthetic autonomy in thought on the relationship between art and political emancipation over some two centuries. As the title suggests, this also involves an interrogation of the dominant form of subjectivity attendant to this discursive structure.

Aesthetic experience and thought, Kester demonstrates, emerged for thinkers like Schiller and Kant as a privileged site for theorising the mediation and conciliation between a burgeoning bourgeois insistence on personal liberty, on the one hand, and the simultaneous emergence of larger social wholes (institutions, states) to which the individual must wilfully subject themselves, on the other. The aesthetic, it is shown, assuages this contradiction in that it becomes the domain in which something approximating political freedom may be temporarily sampled or prefigured, absent the historical conditions of actual emancipation. As such, it may at best inspire or incite political agency, and at worst perpetually defer it by functioning as its surrogate or as a distraction.

Equally, the aesthetic's reconciliatory capacities in fact rely on a profound philosophical devaluation of sensory and physical experience, which must always remain subordinate to the regulative force of the subject's cognitive capacities. Kester shows that this hierarchy – in which it is not hard to recognise the opposition of materialism and idealism – is also instrumentalised in Enlightenment discourse to justify the oppression of entire groups of people: it is because the working class, women,

and colonised peoples are presented as all body and no spirit, mired entirely in the immediacy of sensation and incapable of reflexive self-regulation and governance, so necessary for political autonomy, that they may legitimately be dominated.

The figure of the artist, by stark contrast, comes to function according to Kester as the paradigmatic example of the sovereign self, capable of grasping and giving form to the tensions of their times, and of transcending them in the process. In order to do this, however, the inner subjectivity of the artist must remain uncompromised by any form of attachment to the outside world. The artist must become a monad, enclosed upon itself and eschewing any form of relationality, including direct political engagement. The successful artist may, and will, influence and steer the consciousnesses of others and as such impact the course of history, but this process is emphatically not to be reciprocal. The celebration of such unrealistically heroic and hubristic forms of artistic subjectivity is especially apparent in the historical avant-garde, where it reaches its high point, Kester argues, but persists among present-day practitioners as well (albeit generally in refracted, less high-fatulin' forms).

If this seems like an incisive yet somewhat one-sided representation of how the aesthetic domain and artistic subjectivity has been dealt with in Western thought, then that's because it is, and Kester is fully aware of this. In some of the more interesting and fruitful moments in the volume, he effectively manages to 'preserve an understanding of the aesthetic as a discourse that is both with and against the Enlightenment', retaining a more dialectical understanding of autonomy itself, as well as a more complex positioning of the aesthetic vis-à-vis dominant modes of thought – as well as real instances of historical domination and violence. Discussions of Herder's Romantic theorisation of the importance, for the artist, of *Einfühlung* (commonly translated as empathy, but really a feeling with and within the other), of Pis-

cator and Brecht adjusting their plays in dialogue with working-class commentators, and of the *Tucumán Arde* exhibition/manifestation, are at once highlights in and important correctives to Kester's exposition.

But such moments are relatively few and far between, and certainly it is fair to say that the core argument in *The Sovereign Self* remains that, *mutatis mutandis*, this model for thinking about the role of the aesthetic and the position of the artist in (non-)relation to political change stays both dominant and essentially consistent to this day. In a chapter on the parallels between the relations between the historical avant-garde and vanguard party politics, Kester compellingly argues Lenin's thought and the aforementioned schema of aesthetic autonomy to coincide near-perfectly. Subsequent chapters attempt to do much the same thing for Adorno and the critics and theorists affiliated with *October* journal, but also show how the discursive structures of aesthetic autonomy and the sovereign self underpin the work of neo-avant-garde collective 'Chto Delat?' or Thomas Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument* (2013).

If *The Sovereign Self* is a critique of the discursive structure of aesthetic autonomy, then the second volume, *Beyond the Sovereign Self: Aesthetic Autonomy from the Avant-Garde to Socially Engaged Art*, is a re-affirmation of the politicised and activist artistic and aesthetic practices that have been at the core of Kester's scholarship to date. Picking up where its counterpart left off, this second volume is concerned with showing that such practices have been historically misunderstood and underappreciated, precisely because they challenge deep-rooted assumptions about art's relations to the political domain and the subjectivity of the artist. To this end, the volume opens with an extensive critical engagement with the work of Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière, which feels like an extension of *The Sovereign Self* in that Kester demonstrates how these aforementioned assumptions are operative in their theoretical work – and, equally importantly, in the artworks that they champion.

Kester's counterproposition in *Beyond the Sovereign Self* will be that socially engaged practices of the last thirty years or so productively violate notions of autonomy and sovereign selfhood. This is first, Kester argues, because these practices actively seek to transgress the boundaries (institutional, discursive, symbolic) that demarcate and sequester the artistic field, directly

engaging directly in political action. Second, these practices are not authored by artists bent on individualism and isolation, but are initiated and maintained by people and groups in open and dialogic intercourse with one another. Finally, a third theme arises here as well: these are practices that all insist on the necessity of more or less direct forms of political action and position-taking in the present. This, Kester claims, is in contrast to a totalising insistence (in the discourse of aesthetic autonomy) on an all-or-nothing revolutionary form of political change – for which it is perennially too early or too late (or both), and in comparison to which any practical engagement with politics will always appear compromised, futile or doomed to recuperative instrumentalisation.



Such practices, it is argued, issue from and critically elaborate on certain aspects of the turn to dematerialised art 'objects' in the 1960s and 1970s. They may involve attempts to transform individual or collective consciousness, experiments with group formation and collective artistic production, concrete challenges to repressive regimes, counter-institutional organisation, and interventions in policy and decision-making, among other things. While some are recognisably 'artistic' (and have

been marked as such), many others are more commonly thought of as popular culture (like Chilean *Arpilleras*) or are intrinsic to the social movements with which they co-emerged (like artistic contributions to Black Lives Matter or initiatives to decolonise public spaces around the world). Certain practices are only ever mentioned in passing, to exemplify Kester's broad understanding of socially engaged artistic practice, but others are engaged with more in-depth, like Saba Zavarei's *Radio Khiaban* (a podcast on the politics of gender and space in Iran), or a fashion parade organised at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, to express discontent with Museveni's dictatorship.

Simultaneously, *Beyond the Sovereign Self* also wants to establish an alternative theoretical lineage, and to expose a tradition of thought concerned not so much with autonomy-as-absolute-autarky, but rather with collaborative, processual and action-based ways of negotiating and wresting away greater degrees political freedom under concrete circumstances, both within and beyond the cultural domain. Given the emphasis on relationality, it is not surprising that Glissant emerges as a figurehead; the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and Habermas's theory of communicative action (some aspects of which Kester remains sceptical of) feature very prominently as well. Taken together, the ideas of such authors form a framework that would allow for an adequate evaluation and analysis of the kinds of work that interest the author.

It is important to stress that, like *The Sovereign Self*, *Beyond the Sovereign Self* features moments that usefully complicate or ease the overly binary oppositions that do emerge between artworks and practices that would either reaffirm or contest what Kester argues to be the dominant paradigm of aesthetic autonomy and its accompanying ways of thinking and imagining the societal position of the artist. Towards the end of the first volume, for instance, Kester writes:

How do we decipher the complex modes of both resistance and ideological manipulation that emerge in contemporary artistic production (socially engaged or otherwise)? I would suggest that it requires a situational analysis of both the immanent forms of power operating at a given site of practice and the artist's strategic, creative, and improvisational response to them.

One would be hard-pressed to find or articulate a more lucid and sensible programme for the critical the-

orisation and historicisation of artistic work – as well as its political aims, ambitions, and agency – today. However, precisely because of these instances in the texts, it becomes all the more remarkable that Kester's readings and analyses of specific artworks invariably appear rather less fine-grained and nuanced than this programme would necessitate. My contention here is not necessarily that Kester's critique of, say, Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument* misses the mark; it's quite clear that someone like Hirschhorn presides over his purportedly relational and radical projects in a manner reminiscent of enlightened despotism, working not so much with but rather *on* the social, treating groups of people (the artist's 'masses') as so much inanimate matter to be sculpted, moulded and (re)composed.

Rather, it is just that one is ultimately left wanting for discussions of works that actually do demonstrate and engage the intricate imbrication of resistance and ideology – of autonomy and heteronomy. Ultimately, all concrete artworks and practices that Kester touches upon seem to fall wholly within either the 'autonomous' or the 'socially engaged' bracket, and to function as more or less equivocal examples of these two opposing paradigms. This becomes especially blatant when Kester specifies that these paradigms, 'the conventional avant-gardist orientation we encounter in Adorno's work and what we might term a "dialogical" aesthetic paradigm evident in James's writing, Proletkult, and elsewhere', can coexist in a single artist's body of work, without ever really showing how the two can – and in fact almost always *do* – come together in specific artworks. Thus, even though the works are from the same year (1968) and both are a clear response to the Onganía dictatorship in Argentina, Graciela Carnevale's *Acción del Encierro* (in which Carnevale locked visitors to her exhibition up in the gallery space, forcing them to finally break themselves free by shattering the building's glass facade) becomes a perfect illustration of the arrogance of the artist who deems herself autonomous, instrumentalising and homogenising the public to get her point across, whereas the aforementioned *Tucumán Arde* manifestation, to which Carnevale contributed, becomes a reference point in the alternative lineage – effectively a counter-canon – of engaged, dialogical practice.

When one considers the many artworks and forms of artistic activism, from vastly differing geographical,

historical and cultural contexts, that Kester considers to make up this counter-canon in *Beyond the Sovereign Self*, it becomes evident that the fact of their non-adherence to essentially eighteenth-century European ideas about political autonomy and selfhood may not always be the most interesting or relevant thing that there is to say about them. Inversely, supposedly autonomous and monologically authored practices are inevitably socially and historically situated, as Kester is well aware and recognises at several turns. One way, then, of shattering the illusion of absolute aesthetic autonomy and its concomitant claims is to read artworks (including the most apparently formalist and detached ones) for the

political consequences and implications of this situatedness. Seemingly having little patience for such meditations, Kester generally takes the opposite approach of taking claims of autonomy very seriously – one might also say: at face value – and of tracing what he takes to be their performative historical effects. Throughout the two volumes, this results in an insightful, well-documented and often convincing critique of a certain *idea* of aesthetic autonomy; Kester's is a 'strong' theory, the strength of which lies in its reading and re-evaluation of key philosophical and art theoretical texts, more so than in the heuristic purchase it demonstrates on artistic – and political – practice, past or present.

Steyn Bergs

Graffiti horizon

John Lennon, *Conflict Graffiti: From Revolution to Gentrification* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021). 296pp., £27.00 pb., 978 0 22681 569 5

We seem to have reached a point in the development of the idea of 'centring the victim' where even a study of graffiti is compelled to declare that it 'centres the walls themselves'. This begs any number of questions about the adequacy of the practice of 'centring' and its extension or application, not least that regarding its capacity to alter the conditions that produced the victims. In this particular case however we are confronted with an awkward spatial metaphor – walls in the centre of what, exactly? – that speaks as much to an apparent tendency toward metaphorisation in writing about graffiti as it does to any wider scholarly convention. Graffiti, that is, appears peculiarly bound to something like Walter Benjamin's notion of baroque allegory, where the word tends toward the image and history fades into the landscape.

In *Conflict Graffiti*, John Lennon asks the related and intriguing question of the evident connection between social crisis, whether ruin or riot, and the practice of aerosol graffiti. Why in the midst of rebellion or catastrophe would someone stop to spray a picture on a wall? Can it even be considered stopping, taking a break from the action rather than a form of participation in it? Lennon's book suggests it is not, that no matter the message, no matter how ambiguous, something is being actively ad-

ded to a discourse. Taking a note from peace and conflict studies, Lennon approaches graffiti through its discursive and its violent character. The basic argument is, 'In short, graffiti are messy politics.' This mess of conflict can be organised, as Lennon sees it, in 'waves' of graffiti: the first wave is anticipation, the second is eruption, and the third is suppression. Perhaps most importantly: 'they crash down upon a particular area.' Place, geographically delimited location, is for Lennon the foundational consideration. Some tension or contradiction persists between this insistence and the arc of the book, which, as its subtitle *From Revolution to Gentrification* suggests, follows the crash of the waves, yet does so through or across or above the various sites of conflict. The wave metaphor, a handy image drawn perhaps from the chapter on New Orleans in the time of Hurricane Katrina, cannot quite encompass the movement of history. Place is made to compensate such that territorial defence is raised to an honour or ethic, rather than understood as a result of damage done.

An example occurs in the section on artist Tyree Guyton, who turned the overgrown lots and abandoned houses of his Detroit neighbourhood into a kind of installation, painting murals of whimsical dots and Martin