

Translated excerpt

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Art after the End of its Autonomy

Translated by Allison Brown



Exposition

Five pairs of shoes and farewell to one and a half others

Anyone interested in contemporary art no longer deals only with paintings, photographs, installations, and performances. The different varieties of art can meanwhile also include furniture, make-up, protest rallies, or handbags. One could even say that art today is especially appreciated when at the same time it is also something else. The great contrasts of classical modernism, on the other hand, have become less significant. Distinctions are hardly made anymore between free and applied art, high and low art, artworks and consumer products.

Even sneakers can be art and nevertheless also sold as fashion. They then take on the character of sculptures while at the same time satisfying the everyday requirements of functional running shoes. Or in addition to their status as exclusive collectors' items they can also make a political statement. Or they are conceptual art as well as a climate-neutral high-tech product. In each case, they satisfy the criteria in a number of areas. In a nutshell: Just because they are not solely art makes them art in the first place. How different they can look will be illustrated in five examples:

Example 1: In August 2019, Japan's best-known artist worldwide, Takashi Murakami, reported on his Instagram account how "satisfying" it was for him to design sneakers for the first time in his career. Whereas he had often been invited by the major brands to suggest a pattern or packaging for a pair of sneakers, after being cheered by fans – so-called sneakerheads – when he visited the ComplexCon, a festival of pop culture phenomena, he took that as a call for him to take the initiative himself.¹ At first, however, he felt "the reality of the distance between sneaker culture and [him]self." It was all the more important for him to truly understand its rules, so he let himself embark on his own "sneaker journey."²

One of the rules of the sneaker culture is to perceive every shoe in its traditions and genealogies. The quality of a design does not depend on its being original and presenting a unique, never-before-seen model. Instead, the nimbus as it were grows with the family tree that comes with the sneakers by drawing upon previous famous models as well as signs and elements of design from other areas.

Murakami understood that, so the design of his sneakers is informed by the fighting robot figures from the popular Japanese anime TV series *Mobile Suit Gundam* (1979). The olive-green sneakers therefore resemble military dress; the side pouches (which can be increased to have up to four per shoe) also bring to mind bicycle panniers or fishing vests, and thus also Joseph Beuys. As a partner for the elaborate production due to the different materials used, Murakami selected the Porter label of the Yoshida company, which has specialized in bags, and the packaging carton is an homage to SF3D, an action figure designed by Kow Yokoyama in the 1990s [figs. 1a–c]. According to a statement by Murakami, he wanted to combine the sneakers in this way with the "Otaku taste," that is, a consumer-oriented fan culture in Japan.³ The design also contains typical elements of his own artistic motifs, such as the smiley face flowers imprinted on the soles. With that, the sneakers can at the same time be identified as artifacts of the Murakami artist label, which is associated more than many others with capitalization of the art business, with the glamour of a market in love with records and superlatives.

A sneakerhead from Texas wrote enthusiastically that the design and ideas behind Murakami's conceptualization were closely related to the traditions from which he himself was also inspired, and in the *artnet* art journal, the shoes and package design were praised as a "multilayered love letter to the Japanese fanboy culture of the '80s."⁴ The same object, at an original cost of around \$600, was acclaimed both in the sneaker scene and the art world.

Example 2: As of November 2020, the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) offers sneakers in its shop that were designed together with the artist Faith Ringgold and produced in collaboration with the Vans brand [fig. 2]. These shoes continue to acknowledge an artist, long known at most in professional art circles, who had already entered the spotlight when the museum reopened in October 2019. At that time her painting *Die* (1967) was displayed next to Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1907), one of the museum's main works, which offered a particularly good representation of the worldview of a white man at the time of the avant-garde. This hanging was intended as an act of reparations, as Ringgold, an African American artist, was active both in the Black civil rights movement and the struggle for equal rights for women. As an activist in the 1970s, she protested the one-sidedness of collections in museums such as the MoMA, and as an artist, in 1991, one of her quilts in a series of story quilt paintings – under the title *The French Collection* – offers a critical look at Picasso's painting.

The design of the sneakers refers to Ringgold's 1995 book *Seven Passages to a Flight*, in which she captures in hand-colored etchings some of the discrimination she has experienced as a Black woman. A pattern of multicolored triangles in various arrangements, which forms a frame on each page of the book, now returns to the sneaker upper. On the side surfaces of the sole a sentence from Ringgold's book is printed, in her own handwriting, which succinctly expresses the double discrimination she has suffered: "My mother said I'd have to work twice as hard to go half as far."

With that sentence, the artist created a product for two world-famous brands, which might also serve as evidence that ultimately, more work and effort does in fact pay off. Whoever purchases Ringgold sneakers might feel joy regarding the artist's life work and at the same time support her goal of a society free of discrimination. In the end, owning the shoes might even be connected with hopes of releasing new powers within oneself. They become an incentive, even functioning as charms or as tools of empowerment.

Whereas Ringgold's book, with its limited circulation of forty-five copies, was an exclusive work of art, the sneakers are produced in response to demand and sold at a price of \$100 a pair. Whoever complains that the path from the book to the shoes marks a decline from high culture to mere merchandising should remember that Ringgold's books disappeared as precious items into a few private collections and found limited resonance. Her shoes, on the other hand, can continually offer the owners occasion to identify with strong emotions, and above all they literally carry the artist's sentiments to a wider public. The book was *just* art and thus rather powerless, whereas the sneakers, precisely because they are *more than just* art, can assume a firm position in the life of the people and develop a strong presence. Because you can move in the shoes and also show yourself and post pictures in social media, they take on the character of activist basic equipment.

However, precisely the political credibility of the sneakers weakens when the selection of cooperation partners appears not to be chosen with as much care as in Murakami's case. The Vans brand is associated first and foremost with the skater scene, but long were its members all white, and Blacks were sometimes even actively denied admittance. The fact that Vans, of all companies, is now supporting the struggle of a Black woman for more equality can be viewed as a great triumph for Ringgold, yet it also raises suspicions that it could be a marketing maneuver by the shoe company to polish its dubious image, thereby even receiving support from the museum.

Example 3: Collaborations between major brands arouse distrust in general. The design and marketing are so professional and the story told usually moves toward a happy ending, leaving little room for dissonance. Many want to sell optimism and be progressive, cool, and fit into the imagery based on the aesthetic standards of Instagram and Netflix. As long as they are oriented

around demand, they do not want to be too provocative or question all too much at once. Traditional orders and boundaries also always function more or less as visible instruments of power that establish hierarchies and thus ultimately support the unequal treatment of people. Anyone who dreams of a freer world will therefore presumably not only want to break down the boundary between high and lower art, but also protest the gap between classes, between genders, and between ethnic groups.

Shoes can also originate from just such a general distrust of boundaries and standards. They are then the opposite of manufactured products, which follow prescribed categories and are based on mass production. But they aren't made in limited editions, as the exclusivity would merely create new boundaries. Instead, the shoes cannot be purchased but are owned by those who produce them.

That is how it is done, for example, in the online live workshop performances by a group named Estileras, founded in São Paulo in 2018 by the multimedia artists Boni Gattai and Brendy Xavier.⁵ The group consists of members of the LGBTQ+ community, which has been the target of attacks by right-wing populist and religious circles in Brazil. Members are working on various projects to deconstruct the commonly held notion of fashion and to confuse the codes through which a piece of clothing can be assigned to a particular gender or social class. Their performances use sorted out clothing, and they cut up sneakers, shoes, and high heels made by a number of companies and create new pairs made up of many individual pieces, which is then reinforced through names such as "All at Once" ("tudo de uma vez") [fig. 3].

The demonstrative individualization – not even the left and right shoes match – undermines any form of standardization or assignment. To avoid the shoes being copied, and thus becoming the source of new codes or standards, the do-it-yourself activists make sure they are amateurish and clumsy.

The performances named "Calçado de Monstro," "monster shoes," also parody the fashion trend of "ugly sneakers," which has been popular for several years. Luxury brands such as Prada and Balenciaga design clunky, monstrous models that are doubly difficult to enjoy: due to the high price as well as their lacking functionality. Their buyers want to flaunt wealth and coolness, whereas the unusual and bizarre form of an Estileras shoe aims to signal the opposite, that "people who deviate from prevailing beauty ideals and gender roles create a sculpture – for their own feet – that does not conform to the market's oppressive parameters."⁶

While recycling old shoes might also make sense for ecological reasons, for Estileras it is more important to destroy the consumer status symbols and to promote the attitude "that clothing is just fabric – not gender, sexuality, or political views."⁷ The more people create shoes and clothing out of existing materials, and the more standards they ignore in the process, all the more likely – according to the promises of the activists – can new freedoms beyond the dictates of fashion emerge and all the more conceivable will a pluralistic and open society become.

Example 4: Surface Project, a Danish company that offers sneakers and sandals made of recycled materials (especially plastic waste found in the sea), hired the graffiti artist André Saraiva in 2020.⁸ His task was to design limited series of one hundred pairs each with his own motifs. Saraiva has been one of the best-known graffiti artists in France since the 1980s. As of the 1990s, he no longer tags his work with letters, but with a figure – "Mr. A" – recognizable through long wiry legs and two striking eyes: one in the shape of an "X" and the other as a circle with a dot in the middle. These two eyes have taken on a life of their own and have reached logo quality, which Saraiva no longer uses only for his graffiti. Instead, he paints pictures and designs signs, spends his time on commissions for almost any random surface, or, as a partner for various firms, he decorates smartphone cases, skateboards, or balls with his trademark. The

sneakers for Surface Project therefore fit perfectly into his established business model [fig. 4]. For the company, the collaboration with a graffiti artist like André Saraiva promised to be perceived as humorous and fresh, whereas products in which every element is optimized according to sustainability criteria would otherwise quickly give an impression of being boringly correct and a bit nerdy. Offering the sneakers only as a “limited edition” brings art practices to mind, but can also stand for the limited availability of raw materials. Furthermore, owners of such a pair are given the flattering feeling that they don’t have to share their proud, clean conscience with all that many others. The limited collection, complete with numbering of the sneakers, makes them suitable as collectors’ items and in contrast to normal products they might even increase in value over time. If for that reason the shoes are not even worn, but instead preserved in their straight-from-the-factory condition, they almost take on a status symbol function. Rather than lowering the raw material use, they tend instead to increase the number of superfluous objects.

Aside from such contradictions, Surface Project sneakers can serve as a model for a new notion of the perfect product. While shoes were long judged by how comfortable or elegant they were, or if they were good for walking, and while it was thought that art should be strictly art, now the demands continue to grow. In the prosperity culture, shoes, artworks, and many other things were first refined into designer objects or luxury items, but now, due to heightened crisis awareness, they are also combined with ecological and sociopolitical concerns. And this can be taken farther and farther ... up to an artifact with qualities consistent with an all-encompassing responsible design. Presented as highly reflected and integrated into various discourses, it is packed full of positive features. Whether it started out as a consumer commodity or a work of art no longer matters.

Example 5: An ambitious artifact can also be part of a larger project. Then it surfaces together with other elements that steer and stimulate how it is interpreted. Instead of relying on a pair of sneakers to gather sufficient codes on its own in order to convey a discerning statement or trigger diverse reactions, it is integrated into a more comprehensive program. This is how the queer African-American country music singer and rapper Lil Nas X, together with the MSCHF artist group, introduced sneakers onto the market accompanied by a new music video. While it is possible in a video to tell a multifaceted story, sneakers—as a material object—offer a sort of verification to something otherwise fictional, thereby creating a connection to the real world.

The music video to the song *Montero (Call Me by Your Name)* races through unreal landscapes in a computer game aesthetic. At first seemingly idyllic-sensual, it quickly turns out to be a journey from the Garden of Eden into the Satanic realm, using Christian iconography.⁹ Neither the snake nor figures with horns are missing, and a pentagram and fire both also play a role. In some scenes you can see the singer being tormented by residents of hell. Toward the end of the video, Lil Nas X slides down a pole dance pole to hell and lap dances with Satan before he snaps Satan’s neck and becomes the devil himself [fig. 5a]. Lil Nas X sings about the fears and repression connected with living out his homosexuality in a white, heterosexual mainstream society that continues to demonize homosexuality and discriminate against it as diabolically evil. In this way the video aggressively takes up a prejudice in order to make it visible in a drastic way.

The subject is finally played out in full through the sneakers named Satan Shoes [fig. 5b]. The series was limited to 666 pairs sold for \$1,018 each, referring to Luke 10:18, which speaks of Satan (there is also a reference to the Bible verse on the shoes themselves). While this can still be dismissed as a gimmick, it is indeed a bit more exhilarating that the air cushion in the sole of each shoe supposedly contains a drop of blood. This emphasizes the character of the sneakers as something “real,” and is also reminiscent of the practice of keeping a relic of a saint in every altar in the Catholic church. This parody of a Christian custom might seem frivolous or even blasphemous, but the Satan Shoes also turn another model upside-down. In 2019, MSCHF had

already created a special edition of the Nike classic Air Max 97 with the name Jesus Shoes that had water from the River Jordan in the sole's air cushion. Down to the packaging and the website, the Satan Shoes were modeled around the Jesus Shoes.¹⁰ What they neglected to do, however, was get permission from Nike to use the Air Max 97 and the Nike logo. This deliberately illegal action would add a very real aggressive, evil dimension to the sneakers, and make them all the more desired by collectors. When Nike immediately filed charges, it made the incident into an outright scandal, providing the hoped-for viral spread of the case.

But beyond this, Lil Nas X and MSCHF also speculated debates in the social media. In fact, especially among conservative Christians and the right wing, the Satan Shoes (much more than the video) triggered a storm of protest. Thus, Kristi Noem, governor of South Dakota and Trump supporter, criticized in a tweet that “more exclusive” than the supposedly exclusive pair of shoes is the “God-given eternal soul.” But right now, she continued “We are in a fight for the soul of our nation,” and “We have to win.”¹¹ In the course of the upcoming showdown between good and evil, God and Satan, Noem also sounded the attack against the sneakers and Lil Nas X, who responded with his own tweets and further heated up the debate by deriding accounts with a strong following, such as that of Candace Owens, founder of Blexit, a right-wing Black organization opposing the Democratic Party, who called the Satan Shoes a major idiocy of Blacks (“How stupid can we be?”).¹²

Aggressive, homophobic attacks, such as ones by pastors, and fanatic condemnations (“Satanist,” “pervert”), which often got hundreds and thousands of comments and were frequently accompanied by new inflammatory slogans, prove how justified it was that Lil Nas X made an issue of his perspective as someone faced with multiple marginalization.¹³ By connecting music videos, sneakers, and interaction in the social media, he opened up to a wider audience a powerful picture of the insults that he and others like him encounter daily. And why should precisely that not be art – art that does not have to depend on being labelled as such because it is at once activism and fashion design?

Shoes sometimes also surface in art history, mostly as the motif of a work, such as a painting. Vincent van Gogh, for example, painted a number of pictures in 1886 that depict nothing more than a pair of shoes. They presumably belonged to the artist himself and can thus be considered indirect self-portraits. One of these paintings attracted increasing attention after it played a key role in one of the most noted art philosophy texts of the modern age: In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, written in 1936 but not published until 1950, Martin Heidegger developed his understanding of art based on van Gogh's painting of shoes [fig. 6]. The philosopher interpreted them as “a pair of peasant shoes,” however, and felt that every detail revealed something about peasant life.¹⁴ The fact that the shoes in the brown-toned painting appeared clunky and heavy led him to conclude “the tenacity of the slow trudge through the far-stretching and ever-uniform furrows of the field” and he associated “the dark opening of the well-worn insides of the shoes” with “the toil of the worker's tread.” Based on the shoes, he later even imagined the different seasons and phases of peasant life.¹⁵ “The more simply and essentially the shoe-equipment” in van Gogh's work serves its purpose, “the more immediately and engagingly do all beings become ... more in being.”¹⁶

Heidegger thus declares art to be a booster to reality. It provides meaning and richness, giving things a face, offering orientation and reliability. A work of art, however, can also lead to an exceptional case, when “everything [becomes] other than it was.”¹⁷ Heidegger distinguishes works especially from everyday items, that is, from something such as shoes, which he saw as mere “equipment,” whose purpose was “to disappear into usefulness” and function smoothly.¹⁸ Such things of use had for him a “boringly oppressive usualness” that would even lead to a

“dwindling” of references to the world. As much as the “equipment” seems “worn out and used up” to him, Heidegger in turn also proclaims with pathos that through an artwork, “the extraordinary is thrust to the surface and the long-familiar thrust down.”¹⁹

While the spirit of the avant-garde – involving radical change and living intensively – resonates in such wording, Heidegger goes even further in contrasting art and equipment using van Gogh’s shoe painting as an example. Because equipment alone is not conspicuous in its ordinariness, it needs a work of art to allow the experience of its essence. What distinguishes a pair of shoes cannot be determined from the shoes themselves. Only a work of art – a poem or painting – can convey the character of shoes as equipment, and the impact is perhaps so great that the meaning of shoes gains a new expression, bringing to life something like a sense of home: “What comes to explicit appearance first and only through the work is the equipmental being of the equipment.”²⁰

In creating such evidence, art needs a counterpart: people who are open to it. Only someone who quietly ponders van Gogh’s painting will be able to feel the world that is embodied in the painted shoes. According to Heidegger, the work can only “come into being” if there are people who “restrain all usual doing and prizing, knowing and looking, in order to dwell within the truth that is happening in the work.”²¹ To hold oneself back and be open for what happens in the work; to take time – these conditions must be satisfied for art to have its full effect. As an object of science, a market event, or something “enjoyed merely as art,” on the other hand, a work is robbed of its possible validity. Heidegger expressly warned against “art business.”²²

Such concepts were long regarded as self-evident, as apparent by the fact that adversaries of Heidegger’s political worldview, such as Theodor W. Adorno, also expressed it in a similar manner. In *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Adorno claims that “whoever concretely enjoys artworks is a philistine,” as that would only be a pleasant “devouring” of art, whereas “on the contrary, the beholder [should] disappear[] into the material.” Only then could its “truth ... open[] up.”²³ At times Adorno formulated it more harshly, even demanding the “self-negation of the contemplator.” All that counts is “whether one understands a work by submitting to the work’s own discipline.”²⁴ Only those who take its autonomy, its intrinsic logic, seriously and acknowledge that it constitutes an independent and, in particular, higher order, can do justice to it and thus transcend one’s own limits, the heteronomy of one’s own life.

Adorno distinguishes the autonomous work of art from other artifacts with even greater harshness and polemics than Heidegger, whereby he focuses less on inconspicuously useful things and more on merchandise and products of cultural industry and popular culture. For him they are corrupted from the outset because they are used merely “as a backdrop for all kinds of psychological projections” and viewers are very pragmatically reduced to merely “having ‘got’ something.” Adorno refers to this as “consumer art,” which serves merely as “unbroken self-preservation,” a flattering self-affirmation, and instead of becoming liberated for at least a moment from an alienated life through the power of the autonomous work of art, one becomes entangled in it all the more, at the mercy of capitalist-consumeristic affects and constraints.²⁵

Insufficient reception behavior and artifacts oriented solely around demand thus lead, also for Adorno, to the experience of autonomous art being an exception. According to him, autonomy is always at risk and must always be expressly defended and reflected upon. The art of his time also depicts a similar attitude, especially in the examination of consumer aesthetics oriented around seduction. In this context we again encounter shoes. In 1970–71, Daniel Spoerri filled a single woman’s shoe with brown spray insulation foam, supplementing and disturbing the sensually elegant, perfected form of the consumer product with fecal associations [fig. 7]. His intervention has the character of an improvised, spontaneous gesture that is intended to demonstrate the autonomy – the independence – of art. Because Spoerri placed the shoe object

in a glazed wooden box, he virtually let it become a monument. It is as if he had read Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (published that same year), which states that "art must resist fashion," though also admitting that through fashion art "sleeps with" something so extrinsic and random, and thus stimulating, it "draws the strength that otherwise must atrophy."²⁶ The opposition between sublime art and fleeting commerce thus also harbors the potential for sophisticated dialectic relations in which nothing unfolds as smoothly as today's artifacts that want to be art and, at the same time, fashion, design, and luxury.

The most consequential difference from the ideals of Western modernity is that artifacts such as sneakers depend on possession, whereas autonomous artworks – like van Gogh's shoe painting and Spoerri's shoe object – prescribe forms of reception and are usually only appreciated by being viewed at locations such as the museum. Merely viewing and interpreting the sneakers, on the other hand, is unsatisfying and generally accompanied with suspicions of missing something, of not knowing how they "really" are. Not having purchased them also implies not belonging to the community of those who have access to a piece of the same edition or brand, and thus precludes hopes of becoming part of something greater, thereby being strengthened.

Art defined by possession and participation promises more to those who give everything for it than to others. This applies not only to sneakers or artifacts treated as status symbols due to their high prices, but rather it equally affects many other types of contemporary nonautonomous, use-related art, such as projects of art activist groups in which one can participate as a demonstrator or in social media, or by giving financial support. All these forms of consumer-activistic art also occupy a different place than autonomous art. Processes of catharsis, knowledge, creating meaning, emancipation, and redefinition, which one can expect of the latter, thus take place outside of one's everyday life. Only after reception of the art does one return there having been changed accordingly. Art that one possesses and which at the same time is also something else – fashion, luxury, politics – on the other hand, takes place from the outset in one's everyday life. You surround yourself with it, adorn yourself, engage yourself, are proud or feel safe. It takes on representative functions or is suited for declarations. Even for the increasing number of people who prefer to spend their everyday lives surfing the Internet or on social media, there are meanwhile artifacts in the form of form of cryptoart that satisfy the same functions. Their sites are the memories and screens of the computers and because with cryptoart every purchase and every change in owner is noted in a blockchain and thus becomes part of the file of the digital work, ownership plays an even more significant role than it does for other forms of art. Anyone owning a file as an NFT (non-fungible token) is entered into the work, which is, as art critic Kolja Reichert notes, "accessible forever and can never be changed."²⁷

Art that is part of everyday life cannot break out of it. In comparison to autonomous museum art, which is often very large scale – room-filling installations or larger-than-life sculptures – postautonomous art is generally small but also adapted to the limited means of those who prefer to buy it. It becomes homey and often even cute. Things that you are surrounded by every day require different qualities than something you see only once or far outside your own four walls. Something friendly or cute is more called for than something provocative, sublime, or disgusting.

Instead of initially sparking curiosity as an intellectual, psychological, and emotional challenge, as was typical of autonomous art, postautonomous art forms are oriented around creating the feeling of wanting to have something or to be in on something. The dialogical, hierarchical vis-à-vis relationship between artwork and recipient that was typical for modernity is replaced by the experience that the artifacts are on the same page as those who own them. To the extent that they bundle qualities from different areas or arise out of collaborations, they have a strength at their disposal that ultimately can even lead to their being superelevated to magical objects and

talismans. More generally, a new thing culture emerges in which long-repressed longings come to the fore. Whereas a picture of shoes was more than the shoes themselves in modernity, the reverse is meanwhile the case.

Ad Reinhardt's famous remark in 1962 that "Art is art-as-art and everything else is everything else,"²⁸ with which he summarized the purity and autonomy imperative of modernity, can be turned around virtually to its opposite, reduced to "art is everything else."

Some people are already seeking positively connoted terms for art that at the same time is a "thing," a commodity, a product of the culture industry. Media scholar Thomas Hecken speaks for example of "avant-pop," acknowledging its "genre mixtures," but also the "reluctance to examine artworks with respect to their deep hermeneutical meaning." The new ideal, according to Hecken, is a "seamless connection between boutique and gallery, fashion and painting, autonomy and commerciality, free forms and functional design, and artistic demands and momentary spectacle."²⁹

Despite occasional new coinages of this kind, there has been insufficient discussion up to now on developments that have impacted art in recent years. It is regrettable for a number of reasons if the autonomy ideals virtually disappear without much ado. When nonautonomous forms of art only assert themselves because – in contrast to Adorno's time – there is longer any resistance to them, then they quickly seem self-evident and threaten to develop streamlined. But it is also not a dignified end to autonomous art for it to simply disappear from the visible areas of the art world and exist only in niches – studios and independent "off spaces." In view of its history and achievements, it deserves to be the subject of debate and having people write eulogies to it or debate the opportunities and advantages of a revival.

But isn't there too much debate? Don't precisely autonomy ideals continue to be asserted loudly? There is resistance especially when individual artists are accused of showing a lack of sensitivity for the experiences of minorities or are too indifferent toward concerns that have nothing to do with art itself. Anyone who, with postautonomous convictions, demands that one should also maintain social, civic, and ecological standards in art is then indignantly declared an enemy of artistic freedom. Complaints are then voiced about so-called "political correctness" and the "cancel culture" – and that art and all of Western modernity are being destroyed by an army of philistines and moralists.

While autonomy is becoming a battle cry, there is not all that much among its supposed proponents that remains of what it meant and demanded in modernity. It can even be speculated that the concept of autonomy today is being damaged more by those who continue to swear by it than by those who represent postautonomous art forms. Whereas the latter are largely indifferent to the notion of autonomy, which is why they refrain from distorting it in a one-sided manner, most of those who invoke it tend to reduce it to an overly simplified concept of freedom that ignores how important it was considered in modernity to negotiate formal questions as fundamentally as possible in art, that is, independent of any declared purpose.

Among the few places where you can get an idea of what a developed concept of autonomy involves and how it differs from guidelines of nonautonomous art is the artistunderground blog of the artist and art theorist Milena Burzywoda. In 2017 she created two lists juxtaposing the principles of the two contrary ways of understanding art, with the goal of expressing specifically the features of autonomous art, which she herself supports. She sees "autonomous art [as] art which has, and seeks to solve, an art-intrinsic 'problem.'" Thus, it could also be described as basic research. Nonautonomous art, on the other hand, is determined by "art-external concerns

and strategies [that] replace the active art-intrinsic quest." Freedom, Burzywoda says, is first and foremost "reduced to a choice" between a "number of pre-defined standards." One decides which areas, subjects, and demands an artifact is to cover, but without redefining each one.³⁰

Burzywoda maintains the possibility of an objective discussion by advocating a sophisticated, not merely inflammatory concept of autonomy, but postautonomous art should also be viewed not only from a pessimistically distorted perspective, but instead analyzed in its features and expressing its options. Rather than sentimentally re-invoking old discourses, the present book intends to conceptualize recent developments and understand them better.

First it must be understood how such a comprehensive change in the concept and practice of art could even come to be. The following chapters offers three perspectives on this. The first approach reiterates the history of the concept of autonomous art. As described in chapter 1, the concept was exhausted and emptied, which led to the reaction of recharging art with qualities from other areas. With this, however, the autonomy ideal was abandoned.

Chapter 2 examines the globalization of the institutions of the art market and the curated exhibition business. In recent decades this has led to a relativization of the idea of autonomy, especially because other parameters of attention and success are decided upon transculturally. On the global market, this involves the suitability of art as a branded product; at curated events it is about the ability to combine it with current discourses that are relevant beyond art.

Chapter 3 offers a media theoretical response to the issue of the end of autonomous art. Social media, with their internal logic and special attention economy, change traditional classifications and therefore also boundaries between artworks and artifacts that are oriented predominantly around consumerism and activism.

The three answers to the opening question clearly show that the notion of autonomy has also caused a crisis for modernity's relatively firm work concept. But then how can artifacts that are presently considered art be described? Chapter 4 is devoted to this question, which will also offer insight into why, from a Western position trained in autonomous art, it is so difficult to take the new art standards seriously.

The resulting conflicts and especially the debates on artistic freedom are increasingly being brought into museums, which is discussed in chapter 5. Born and matured in the course of the ideals of autonomous art, museums for their part have come under legitimation pressure ever since the objects they collect and display are at the same time viewed and judged by more than solely art-specific criteria. Precisely for this reason, however, they can contribute better than any other institution of the art scene to having the paradigm shift take place with reflection.

The two final chapters are devoted to individual forms and features of the artifacts that emerge in accordance with the new understanding of art. Some typical forms of failure are analyzed in chapter 6. These arise, for example, from the situation that the interplay between the standards of different areas lead to imbalances. Some remain a copy of modern art, and others leave their field too broad, thus losing formal stringency, yet also unable to support a comparison with artifacts in other areas. Individual intentions push too strongly into the foreground, or the wish to cover a lot all at once leads to the impression of art satisfying a checklist.

There are also specific forms of success, however. Based on the work of some artists who deal with Black empowerment and questions of representation of people of color, chapter 7 analyzes how it is possible to equally consider criteria from different areas and formally take up political-activistic motivations. In doing this, it is not least stylistic devices and achievements of

modernity that are suitable, versatile resources. After being part of the basic research on autonomous art, they are now experiencing a second career under new conditions.

¹ See <https://www.instagram.com/p/B1g0fWT19Ot/>

² https://www.instagram.com/p/Bpl_EX-FdZX/

³ <https://www.instagram.com/p/B1g1g9FF08j/>

⁴ <https://www.instagram.com/p/B3Hxg0OA8qi/>; <https://news.artnet.com/artworld/takashi-murakami-gundam-porter-sneakers-1634890>.

⁵ Videos of some performances at: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC51J3vxjh0fxYqVBTqqeeag/videos>.

⁶ <https://estileras.com.br>; <https://terremoto.mx/en/online/calzado-de-monstro/>.

⁷ Quoted from Dominic Cadogan, “The anarchic Brazilian label sticking a middle finger up at the status quo” (2018), at: <https://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/42097/1/brazil-sao-paulo-estileras-underground-label-ss19>.

⁸ See [Surfaceproject - About Surface Project](#).

⁹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6swmTBVI83k>.

¹⁰ See <https://satan.shoes>; and <https://jesus.shoes>.

¹¹ <https://twitter.com/govkristinoem/status/1376239196709478400>.

¹² <https://twitter.com/RealCandaceO/status/1376253935737057291>; and <https://twitter.com/LilNasX/status/137625458333249028>.

¹³ See <https://twitter.com/pastorlocke/status/1376307358167666689>; <https://twitter.com/RightWingWatch/status/1376233608868986882>; <https://www.rawstory.com/greg-locke-satan-shoes/> (“bunch of Satanism, ... bunch of devilism”).

¹⁴ See Geoffrey Batchen, *What of Shoes? Van Gogh and Art History* (Leipzig: E.A. Seemann Henschel, 2009).

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press, 2002), 14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 15, 40.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

²² *Ibid.*, 42.

²³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1997), 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 265

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 265–66, 13.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 316–17.

²⁷ Kolja Reichert, *Krypto-Kunst. NFTs und digitales Eigentum* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2021), 13.

²⁸ Ad Reinhardt, “Art-as-Art” (1962), in *Art-As-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. Barbara Rose (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 53–56, here 53.

²⁹ Thomas Hecken, *Avant-Pop. Von Susan Sontag über Prada und Sonic Youth bis Lady Gaga und zurück* (Berlin: Posth 2012), 12, 22.

³⁰ Milena Burzywoda, “What is Artistic Freedom? What is Autonomous Art?” (2017), at: <https://www.artistunderground.co.uk/what-is-autonomous-art>.