Reinterpretation of the autonomy of art in the contemporary environment

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Abstract   This paper examines current status of art in society from the perspective of 'Yin and Yang' philosophy (Chinese Philosophy of Change) by using the notion of 'the power of art' as a critical lens to: (1) analyse the internal logic of the relationship between autonomy and heteronomy of art, (2) illuminate the superiority of artistic ideology, (3) clarify the transformative role of critique in contemporary art. And this article emphasise that art is not an accessory to authority, politics, technology or other, but—a memory system—the last defender of freedom. In other words, today, art need to be (or will be) once again liberating from the sin of fetishism (technology), as it was.

The poet—the contemporary—must firmly hold his gaze on his own time. But what does he who sees his time actually see? What is this demented grin on the face of his age? I would like at this point to propose a second definition of contemporariness: The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness.

Giorgio Agamben, What is an Apparatus P44.

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Introduction

With the emergence of various art movements in modern times, such as Dadaism and Fluxus, art has changed from 'agreeable art'[1] to 'fine art'[2] (Haskins 1989), with more diverse meanings. Rudolf E. Kuenzli states, in *Dada and Surrealist Film* (1996), after describing how ready-mades are variously presented or displayed: 'This decontextualisation of the object's functional place draws attention to the creation of its artistic meaning by the choice of the setting and positioning ascribed to the object' (p. 47). The creation of contemporary art can actually be described as a problem of selection. Joseph Beuys practised as a social activist in *7000 Oak Trees*. He chose trees as his creative material and led the citizens of Kassel to plant trees together. This work cannot give viewers a sense of visual pleasure. Its process was via performance and participation with people to highlight environmental issues. Its function is similar to that of the environmental movement, with its ambition to protect nature. Everyone in this art movement was challenging the system of 'agreeable art'. Thus, the anti-traditionalism of contemporary art led to the collapse of the original art system. In this art ruin, the human understanding of art is being rebuilt, and the art ecosystem is also being transformed. Nowadays, art is no longer what Kant believes, that art becomes aesthetically pure only when it appears 'as if it were a mere product of nature'. On the contrary, art has broader and complex political and ethical values, and it governs itself. In this case, the ecosystem of art is more and more wide-ranging: artists' thinking and ideas are more significant to the whole of society, involving the expansion of the right to speak. Taste is defined by the criticism of democracy through the system of art criticism.

After a series of technological revolutions triggered by photography, art began to be ruled by technology. On August 19, 1839, the French government officially announced the birth of photography at the French Academy. However, from this moment to the middle of the twentieth century, photography never entered the highest echelons of fine art. The main reason was that photographs were small compared to paintings and sculptures. They functioned often merely to fill gaps in an exhibition. This phenomenon prevailed until the emergence of the Düsseldorf School, established by the Bechers (Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher) and their students, such as Thomas Ruff and Andreas Gursky in the 1980s. Ruff and Gursky created many huge-scale photographic works to counter and respond to the grand scale of Abstract Expressionist paintings and other art forms of the period and contributed to photography's entry into the fine art arena. Two points are important here: firstly, it is obvious that scale represents the power of art to a certain extent; secondly, art cannot avoid its original sin, i.e. fetishism. The first point is easy to understand: that is, larger size, more power. The second point is more complicated. Fetishism is the original sin of art, and it is inevitable. Although there have been some movements

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[1] 'Agreeable art': which applies where the end of the art is that the pleasure should accompany the representation considered as mere sensation.

[2] 'Fine art' is a mode of representation which is purposive for itself, and which, though devoid of an end, has the effect of advancing the culture of the mental powers in the interests of social communication.

towards the dematerialization of art, such as conceptual art, at the same time there is no such thing as absolutely dematerialized art, which is beyond doubt. Since the birth of photography, it has never stopped pursuing technological development (higher definition and larger scale). This is seen especially in the work of the Düsseldorf School. Adorno comes to a similar conclusion: 'since magical fetishes are one of the historical roots of art, there is in art works a fetishistic quality that transcends mere commodity fetishism and which can neither be discharged nor disavowed.' (p. 244).

In addition, I have heard that a number of artists wanted to publish a joint letter to declare Bitcoin as contemporary art. The logic is that Bitcoin is a virtual currency concept created by Satoshi Nakamoto to bombard the unfairness of the currency value system in the real world. Nakamoto's behaviour is similar to that of artists like Ai Weiwei with his *Mom Hoof Flowers*, that critiques the dark side of political authority. These thoughts are ridiculous. It is crazy to think that technology is art! First of all, Nakamoto's original intention in creating Bitcoin was not for art at all. Thinking through this logic we can imagine that everything in the world is art, and then art does not exist. We can see from his approach that people lack an awareness of the boundaries between art and technology. With the invention of many other technologies, such as film and virtual reality, artists are infinitely seeking new ways of working with these. From Klein Blue to Anish Kapoor's stated monopoly on super black materials, art is increasingly dependent on technology. Art will once again become a vassal—completely dependent on technology and new materials.

In this era of the explosion of artworks and images, the boundaries of art are becoming increasingly blurred. For some artists, technology is a key tool for them to express their ideas. However, currently this function of self-expression has largely been lost in contemporary artists' practice owing to their obsessive pursuit of technology. So it is urgent to emphasises the autonomy of art, which means that art is independent. This paper attempt to analyse the power relations in the art ecosystem, and use the philosophy of 'Yin and Yang' to regulate the contradiction between artistic autonomy as well as heteronomy, and to propose a way of mediating it, tentatively called: the power of art. By introducing the concept of power, and further emphasising that art is a system of memory, artists can enhance and clarify the art ecosystem and save it from domination by technology, authority and politics. This text always highlights that art has always been the most reliable source of freedom.

The power of art: the internal logic of the relationship between the autonomy and heteronomy of art

Art has a primitive power, and this power is real. The power of art is not its production: it has always been there, waiting for people to discover it. The power of art is its neutral position between autonomy and heteronomy. It encourages freedom, the sum of memory. Art movements emerge with the development of the means of production, and social factors directly affect it. The power of art is the internal logic in

the two aspects of autonomy and heteronomy, *art's laws of movement*[3] (Adorno & Hullot-Kentor 1997b, p. 3). Art is a bridge connecting autonomy and heteronomy, and constantly reconciles the relationship between them.

The power of art originates from the birth of art: it carries the memory of humankind's search for freedom, and accompanies the development of human society; the power of art originates from the autonomy of art, because the essence of art can be found solely in autonomous art (O'Connor 2000a, p. 240); the power of art originates from critique, as the only way that art can prove it is useful to society is by critiquing it (O'Connor 2000a, p. 242); this power also comes from its symbolic value, as the more widely art is recognised, the greater its influence in society.

A museum such as the British Museum encapsulates many different essences of art and the visitor experiences different aspects of the power of art there.

The galleries of ancient art are evidence of the moment that art was just born. Art was used to record early people's hunting trophies, or to depict ferocious animals in an era when there was no written word to warn others to stay away from danger. So we have reason to speculate that the purpose of the paintings in the Altamira caves, in Spain, was as an educational tool. At this time art had been purely heteronomous, and there was no difference between art and other kinds of labour. It was one of the tools that maintained the operation of human society, and had an entirely practical value.

In the medieval galleries of the Museum, art depicts the world of religion as a paradise, describing the relationship between god and mankind. At that time, the heteronomy of art was superior to the autonomy of art. With the development of painting technique, art acquired the ability to model reality. However, medieval paintings mostly depicted religious subjects. In this period, artists lacked freedom of speech. Art only served religion. Painters in the Middle Ages celebrated the Crusades and offered artistic justification for the cruelty and barbarism of the Crusades. As Adorno observed, 'Art could not find its own value, because it did not oppose society' (p. 242). Artists could have portrayed a range of subjects in painting, but they did not, because religion controlled their spirituality. As a part of society, they could not break free from the shackles of its ideology, and could not use art to explore other themes. The power of art was weaker than the power of religion, so art could only be ruled by it.

In galleries of modern/contemporary art, however, you will see that art is no longer bound to form, and has become more autonomous. The dematerialisation of art actually means that the autonomy and heteronomy of art have reached a balance: art has enough power to break through the spiritual shackles set by religion. Art finds its own position in society in opposition to that society—creating the conditions for freedom. Eventually, art can transform itself, thus achieving

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[3] This view is based on Adorno's theory. He mentioned in *Aesthetic Theory*: 'the tension between what motivates art and art's past circumscribes the so-called questions of aesthetic constitution. Art can be understood only by its laws of movement, not according to any set of invariants. It is defined by its relation to what it is. not. The specifically artistic in art must be derived concretely from its other; that alone would fulfil the demands of a materialistic-dialectical aesthetics. Art acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of; its law of movement is its law of form.'.

redemption from its original sin of fetishism. This can be reflected in two aspects: (1) art practice, and (2) postmodernism theory. In the former, we can see that the Impressionism, Post-Impressionism or Dadaism have shifted the direction of their creations from the theme of 'God-Man' to 'Man-Man'. As for the latter, we can see the concepts of *Artworld*, *Institution* and *Field* proposed by Danto, Dickey and Bourdieu around the (elite) aesthetic power system.

It is known that postmodernism theory—the legitimate of art field—contribute to the liberation of art (breaking restrictions of religious on art), at least for a time and until they become a hindrance to this. For Bourdieu, he actually used the authority of aesthetic judgement to distinguish between the internal members of art (galleries, museums, academies, salons, art schools, dealers, critics, art historians, collectors, etc.) and the external members (everything except the former), and to grant the internal members the supreme interpretative power— 'capable of imposing a specific measure of the value of the artist and of his products' (Bourdieu 1987). He comprehends the system of art as a state of detachment/withdrawal, divorcing art from society and creating a representation of an extreme autonomy. Bourdieu reduces almost everything in art to 'the legitimate belonging to a field (which is the question of the limits of the world of art)' (Bourdieu 1987). Field theory is an expansion of artistic autonomy compared to the *finitude* of the 19th-century academic art. But meanwhile it is trapped in another 'finitude', whereby the authority or legitimacy of those inside the field of art excludes its outliers—the enclosed field. In other words, the division of labour is reinforced, and each field (e.g. legal, political, etc.) is polarised and does not interfere with each other. It seems to be a triumph of autonomy in art, but it is another blockade of art by its own—self-satisfied arrogance of small-scale people. We can visualise the theoretical skyscrapers built by postmodernism as countless castles, with few exchanges from one to the other, giving those in the castles the illusion of prosperity, namely, return of feudalism. It is also what Menke (2017) called: 'the privilege, or the peculiarity, of the separate cultural sphere' in Western modernity. Modernism appears to be free from its historical religious strictures, but it has entered a different sphere of power, which is one dominated by art institutions, curators, collectors and art market. The autonomy it seeks can be constrained or influenced by these external factors.

Contemporary art has thus escaped from fetishism but has fallen into another field of power (essentially another heteronomy)—the art system itself, or more precisely: the Artworld. This is why the introduction of the notion of the 'power of art' is so important and urgent. For the very notion of the power of art (the inner logic of autonomy and heteronomy) is the key that takes us into this game (mediation of artistic autonomy and heteronomy measurement). It is vital to acknowledge that the autonomy of contemporary art is a complex and multifaceted issue. While it strives for liberation, it remains intertwined with the institutional dynamics that shape the art world. The true autonomy of art may not be fully realised until it transcends these external influences and gains recognition for its intrinsic value and significance, independent of market trends and institutional validation, viz. freedom returns again.

The dual nature of art: both autonomy and heteronomy

The failure of postmodernity, in my point of view, was not a failure of the autonomy of art, but a cognitive bias that resulted from an overemphasis on it. They (postmodernism theorists) merely saw one side of the equation (art is autonomous) without seeing the dual essence of art: autonomy and social fact (heteronomy) (O'Connor 2000b). Thus falling into a false proposition of an elite class and thus refusing to see a more egalitarian and harmonious art system. Apparently, some scholars have realised this and have launched an attack on the autonomy of art, claiming that it has been lost (Baldacchino 2014; Tratnik 2021). But to this view I am also against.

Here is an example that gives an intuitive sense of the autonomy of art: two California teenagers visited the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and they placed a pair of eyeglasses on the floor, stood back and watched as, within minutes, visitors regarded their prank as a work of art, with some even taking photographs of the fake installation (Mele 2016). In this example, the first thing that strikes the eye is the mischief of two teenagers, but meanwhile the essence of the autonomy of art is implicit in it. One thing that needs to be made clear is that these two teenagers created this 'performance art' or 'ready-made art' since they 'wondered if they could do better'. So their starting point was artistic. The fact that this artwork, which is not on the display list, being photographed and admired by the audience is due to the audience's preconceived notion that what they are looking at is art (because it is on display in the museum). Therefore, the audience consciously distinguishes between the 'eyeglasses' (in the concept of art) and the 'eyeglasses' in the concept of manufactured goods. From this phenomenon, two artistic distinctives reveal themselves: (1) When industrial 'eyeglasses' become artistic 'eyeglasses', they lose their practical value, as glasses on the floor do not enable someone to see more clearly; (2) The characteristics of artistic autonomy are mapped out from the previous point, that is, the reason why a work of art is a work of art is because it is different from other human labour (it is not created on the basis of pragmatism).

This is also what Menke argued: the aesthetic experience would consist, in the abandonment of everyday routine (Menke 1998, pp. 9–15). Unlike everyday objects, which have a concrete meaning for us (a hammer is a hammer and serves, for example, to hammer nails), works of art would be enigmatic, they would not simply have a meaning, but would be objects whose meaning would remain hidden (Adorno & Hullot-Kentor 1997a, pp. 171–174; Bertram 2019, p. 15; Zúñiga 2019). To be more specifically, the value of art (the break with everyday life) lies in being an expression of power (Menke 1998, p. 181).

On the other hand, art must include the orientation of the specific values of a society at a specific stage of development, as works of art are social products in a specific era and contain the subconscious context of a specific society. This can also be understood as the *Abbildungstheorie* or 'reflection theory' (most notably in the work of Louis Althusser or Georg Lukács) advocated by some Marxists: the nature of the artwork is determined by the socio-historical context in which

the artist's activity is taking place. As such, the artist is incapable of acting autonomously—his artistic decisions, and the horizon of the possible decisions which he can entertain, are preformed due to the influence of external processes (Hulatt 2013). Damien Hirst talked about his work *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, that was influenced by Richard Serra's sculpture *Olson* and the film *Jaws.* He hoped that his work could bring a similar feeling of shock and fear to audiences (Smith 2014). Consequently, there is no unconditionally personal work; or in other words, there exists no such thing as an absolutely isolated art in which neither relates to any other thing.

Thus, art has a double quality: autonomy and heteronomy, and both qualities act on art simultaneously. We can imagine these two attributes (autonomy and heteronomy) as two differently directed forces acting continuously on a certain object (art). The difference in space and time will inevitably lead to an inequality of forces, for example, an inclined road surface, an external force or a sudden desertion of one of the parties. This mismatch is a necessity for the dynamics of art.

Dynamic changes: the superiority of artistic ideology

If the power of art is a reflection of authority, then the concentrated representation of power in some works of art comes from the superiority of their artistic ideology. Those who hold analogous conceptions of art have gathered together to form various artistic genres. Those ideologies (artistic genres) do not represent good and bad respectively (O'Connor 2000a, pp. 250–251), but this does not mean that they are not different in terms of superiority. Therein is the contradictory nature of genres of art. Abstract Expressionism, epitomised by Jackson Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm*, championed spontaneity and the power of the subconscious. This exemplifies how artistic ideologies can challenge traditional forms (Academic Painting) and offer new perspectives, further emphasising art's transformative potential. One of Pop Art aims, nevertheless, is to use images of popular (as opposed to elitist) culture in art, emphasising the banal or kitschy elements of any culture, most often through the use of irony […]. Pop art is widely interpreted as a reaction to the then-dominant ideas of Abstract Expressionism, as well as an expansion of those ideas (Gardner et al. 1975). It can be seen that Abstract Expressionism is ideologically superior to Academic Painting, while Pop Art is ideologically superior to Abstract Expressionism. Forthemore, in the realm of contemporary Chinese art, the Political Pop movement of the 1980s, serves as a compelling as well as interesting case study of ideological superiority.

Since Pop Art entered China in 1985, it has triggered a sensation in the Chinese art world (particularly in the non-mainstream art community). The social effects of the 'Reform and Opening-up' began to manifest themselves clearly, mass consumer culture developed unprecedentedly, and Chinese society entered a post-ideological period in which people's ideology and values underwent significant changes, with economic interests dominating people's mindspace and idealism being mercilessly ridiculed (Zhiling 2008). Artists, disillusioned with the rigid propaganda of the past, embraced a new form of expression that fused

Western pop culture with Chinese Communist imagery. The political pop art movement was born. Wang Guangyi's *Great Criticism* series, for instance, juxtaposed Mao Zedong's image with Western consumer logos, highlighting the collision of ideologies during China's opening to the world. This movement served as a powerful critique of the Communist regime's control over visual culture while demonstrating the ability of artistic ideologies to challenge dominant political narratives. From a cultural perspective, Political Pop in China opened doors to international dialogue. It offered a unique lens through which the world could view China's complex sociopolitical evolution. Artists like Ai Weiwei, with works like *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, challenges cultural norms and forces viewers to consider issues of transformation and destruction of the past. Political Pop artists contributed to the promotion of dialogue between Chinese and Western, bridging the East–West artistic divide. It was soon known and extoled by the West. Apart from ideological factors, there are two important reasons for this. Firstly, formally, it adopted the language of internationalisation, the linguistic approach of postmodernism under the conditions of globalisation; and secondly, the commercial success of Political Pop (Ying 2007). The international success of Political Pop made it a stir in domestic and attracted many imitators. More art genres were born as a consequence, e.g. Gaudy Art and CynicalRealism.

In China, Political Pop was not a reaction to Abstract Expressionism in a Western context; rather, these Western styles and genres of art grew almost in parallel. The reason for this is that they all came to China at almost the same time, and Chinese (young) artists did not have a complete system of knowledge of Western art history, which meant that they were unaware of which genre was more avant-garde than the other. For this reason, Chinese artists were working with different art forms, including, but not limited to: abstraction, conceptual, pop, collage, and installation. Political Pop was born out of such a context. Its avant-garde nature and representational narrative were more in line with the visual conditions and experiences of Chinese audience at time compared to other art styles. This is a temporary state of affairs due to information asymmetry. But we can also draw conclusions from it: the superiority of artistic ideology not only comes from the avant-garde, but also resonate with the cultural values, beliefs, and trends of a particular time and place. It would be more accurate to state that the superiority of artistic ideology is a dynamic product of the aesthetic measure. A force in relation to aesthetics as an 'aesthetic force' allows for freedom from generality and norms, enabling the successful enactment of rational faculties (Menke 2010).

Reliable evidence points to the fact that there are distinctions in artistic ideology between works of art, and one of the factors of the relationship between the stratification of the power of art comes from the dominance of artistic ideology. Also, the power of art thus further affects the balance between autonomy and heteronomy in art, which owes its origin to the notion of a measure (internal logic). Here I introduce the traditional Chinese philosophy of 'Yin and Yang' to further elaborate on this issue.

Yin and Yang: the power of mediation

> Yi has Taiji. Taiji generates two complementary forces. Two complementary forces generate four aggregates. Four aggregates generate eight trigrams.
> *Chinese Philosophy of Change (Yijing)*

'Yin and Yang', ancient Chinese philosophy, conveys the wisdom of Chinese ancestors. It is a philosophy that focuses on mediation and opposes dichotomy. Naive materialist thinkers in ancient China summed up everything in the world as contradictory, in two opposing categories, 'Yin' and 'Yang', and explained the movement and change of the material world by the principle of the changes in both of these. Yin and Yang focuses on a process and fusion, instead of absolutely a black/Yin world or white/Yang world. Everything in the world is integrated, namely black with white, white with black. What is static, guarded, descending, condensed, cold, dark, and restrained are all Yin. Everything that is opposite to this is Yang.

The power of art is not a compromise, but a philosophy that contains Yin and Yang. When the power of art reaches any critical point between autonomy and heteronomy, art will no longer exist. In ancient times, art was actually no different from other forms of manual labour. It was just a certain 'action' of the human collective subconscious that refers to structures of the unconscious mind which are shared among beings of the same species (Jung 1966). Art at this time could not be called art: instead, as some psychologists said, 'art is already present in language and even instinctive communication in nature' (Dalibar 2015). These thoughts, on the contrary, will merely lead us to nihilism—a permanent heteronomy. The logical outcome of this point of view is that art exists in everything. However, if this were the case, art would not exist. Whereas absolute artistic autonomy allows art to fall into the trap of *l'art pour l'art*, as '*l'art pour l'art* fails to engage with reality and thereby becomes false consolation' (O'Connor 2000a, p. 240). These two views do not recognise that the bounds of the autonomy and heteronomy of art are limited. Adorno argues that 'the dual essence of art is social fact and autonomy' (O'Connor 2000a, p. 241). But social fact includes heteronomy parts. So when talking about the essence of art, arguments about whether art is autonomy or heteronomy are pointless; instead, the focus is on the internal logic between them, In other words, the issue of measure. As an artwork's formal properties can only be constructed through the importation of heteronomous content as organizing principles […] If one opts for a theory of artistic autonomy, this dependence must be allowed for (Hulatt 2013, pp. 1–12). Only in this way can art be truly liberated.

The philosophy of Yin and Yang can bring us inspiration. It pays attention to balance, and opposes extremes. This means that a concept of mediation. Art needs be regulated reasonably, so that the autonomy and heteronomy of art can reach the best equilibrium. Art embodies a seamless synthesis of self-expression (autonomy) and societal significance (heteronomy). It is essential to recognise that autonomy and heteronomy need not exist in perpetual conflict; rather, they can exist harmoniously within a coherent artistic vision. Mediation, in this context, entails acknowledging that both facets contribute to the depth and intricacy of art, and they possess the capacity to collaborate in conveying profound insights. Schiller and Snell (2004)

wrote: 'we must be at liberty to restore by means of a higher Art this wholeness in our nature which Art has destroyed' (p. 45). This 'higher Art'should not involve the extremes of both autonomy and heteronomy, but rather their golden point. However, reality will always be ruthless. Many artworks are not on or even close to this golden point. They ruled and destroyed by the other parts of society. Nazi Germany, for instance, employed artists to create propaganda posters and films that promoted their ideology. Similarly, Soviet propaganda art played a significant role in shaping the political narrative of the Soviet Union. Equally, the big-character poster art that was popular during the Chinese Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was deeply influenced by politics, and was actually reduced to a political propaganda tool. History warns us that crisis occurs when the balance of artistic autonomy and heteronomy change is so significant that it threatens this integrity of society—videlicet, liberty will be undermined.

To overcome the crisis, we must re-accentuate and re-conceptualise the autonomy of art and draw on the Yin and Yang thought to mediate the autonomy and heteronomy of art. Mediation aims for a holistic approach that embraces both autonomy and heteronomy as integral aspects of the artistic process. Art can be seen as a complete expression when it successfully integrates these elements. Only then can the arts grow in an environment most favourable to its growth. In order to make a distinction between art and other part of society, this paper propose here the following two points: the memory system and the critical tradition.

Art is a memory system

We recognise ourselves repeatedly in the sum of the diversity of the pictures. In art, separation still exists, not as a distinct thing, but as a unified life to encounter life again. Life is an accumulation of memories, and every individual forms memories, which, as Halbwachs (1947) has shown, are inherently linked to collective identities shaped through interactions with specific communities (families, neighborhood and professional groups, political parties, associations, nations, etc.) that define their unity and distinctiveness through shared historical narratives. Assmann and Czaplicka (1995) divide memory into everyday communications as well as cultural memory[4]—'islands of time' and memory spaces of 'retrospective contemplativeness' [*Retrospective Besonnenheit*]. The former is a high degree of non-specialisation, reciprocity of roles, thematic instability, and disorganisation. The latter is a collective experience crystallises, when touched upon, may suddenly become accessible again across millennia. Art, as a special emotion of human being has both, like Happening Art for everyday communications and *Les Fauves* for cultural memory.

Art is not an ecosystem of causalism, and there is no point-by-point accuracy and unity in art, but essentially an ecosystem of memory. When a man looks at a photo, he inadvertently engages his memories. This kind of memory does

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[4] Cultural memory, a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation.

not necessarily relate to the scene in the photo, but when the scene of the image is parallel to our own life, memories are triggered. The work of art is a futural object because it both retains a memory of not being and is also a projection into a feature yet to come. Jean-Luc Marion (2004b) proposes that the image has already been liberated and that 'it infiltrates, besieges, reigns' (p. 49). For Marion the 'world is made into an image' and as a consequence: 'we live in the audio-visual epoch of history'. Modernity proper was a projection, in the words of Peter Osborne (2013), of 'A present of permanent transition, forever reaching beyond itself, the contemporary fixes or enfolds such transitoriness within the dura-tion of a conjecture, or at its most extreme, the stasis of a present moment.' (pp. 16–17) In simple terms, the power of contemporary art explodes as a result of its distinctive engagement with contemporary temporality—'the stasis of a pre-sent moment', which will lead us into the future. The image in this guise 'covers the surface of the earth', expanding without reference or restriction. The realm of the image expands by disconnecting itself to the original and thereby having no other 'original than itself'. The condition of the image is in the form of memory from every original, and 'the image is valued in itself and for itself'. In other words, image is autonomous, and it is 'form without matter, the image maintains only a ghostly reality, completely spiritualised' (Marion 2004a). This concept of withdrawal is what we called 'an apparitional Modernism': a form of modernism without Idea and thus a form of withdrawal of image as well.

Jean-Luc Godard is a paradigmatic case of an artist whose *oeuvre* contains the truth of memory despite him. His *Histoire(s) du Cinema* (1998) wich is a 266-min cinematic epic assembled from clips from numerous cinemas and books, pro-posals an evaluation of both cinema and art, but also a new way of presenting his-tory—'the history of history'. Expressed in a different way, it is the aggregator of human memory ('the memory of memory'). But it is not 'characterized by sharp distinctions made between those who belong and those who do not' (Assmann & Czaplicka 1995), to be precise, it transcends the realm of cultural memory—blurring individual and collective memory. Godard deconstructs the memory's original memory (history) and then puts the memory fragments back together to form a new memory that imprints 'the image is valued in itself and for itself'. This approach also confirms Halbwachs (1985)'s agreement: 'which society in each era can reconstruct within its contemporary frame of reference'. For God-ard, images are ghostly reality, completely spiritualised. Through deconstruction and reconstruction of the films, he attempts to discover the hidden connections (or histories that might have been) and considering those things that might have escaped the attention of the camera or are in other traditions invisible. In this way, he makes art that without stepping in to and through to record a passing. And those passing that no longer has foundation, or even index in any historical sense, will be 'order' again. This is the power of memory. Via the juxtaposition of isolated narratives with personal thinking (individual and collective memory) it become possible to think of the notion of history beyond the assembly of facts and to make a critique historicism through the montage, a philosophical history that is in part chaotic or interrupted.

The transformative role of criticism and interpretation in contemporary art

Art criticism serves as a bridge between the artist's creation and the viewer's interpretation, and at the heart of this discourse lies the power of reason. Adorno argues that 'The social content of art resides in the principle of individuation, which for its part is social. This explains why art cannot gain insight into its social essence by itself but has to rely on interpretation to do the job.' (O'Connor 2000a, p. 250) From Adorno's point of view, the principle of the individuation of art is contained in sociality. Schematism is the mediation between concepts and sensible intuition. Therefore, art cannot be a comprehensive and accurate reflection of the whole of society from within. It needs to rely on interpretation. Georg W. Bertram came to a similar conclusion, and he insists on the autonomous character of art as a special kind of praxis: the human form of life is reflexively constituted, and art would be a specific form of reflexive praxis (Bertram 2019, pp. 114–120), more specifically, a specific form of critical practice (Bertram 2019, pp. 174–181). Society has injected its own flaws into art. The function of interpretation is to right the principle of the individuation of art that is blinded by sociality, so that art can better reflect on society. This is why Peter Bürger (1984) said 'Critical science does not consist in inventing new categories to then set them against the "false" ones of traditional science.' (p. 4).

We can compare art to artificial intelligence (AI). If people want to make AI smarter, they must feed AI a sea of data, e.g. pictures and text. If people want to make art smarter, they need to critique it more.

At the birth of a work of art it contains merely the artist's own comprehension. When a work of art is made public, it can absorb criticism from outside. This criticism goes more or less beyond the original intention of the artist. It is what Assmann and Czaplicka (1995) called: practice-reflexive, namely, 'it interprets common practice in terms through proverbs, maxims, "ethno-theories," to use Bourdieu's term, rituals (for instance, sacrificial rites that interpret the practice of hunting), and so on'. Works of art will absorb it as a baby absorbs nutrients, thus increasing its power. This is the effect arising from the free play of our powers of cognition. Additionally, with the constant criticism, the critical point of the boundary of art slowly becomes clear. Along with the re-exhibition of the work of art by museums and galleries, the context of the work of art and the meaning conveyed by it will occur with the changes in time, space and the cultural environment. It is the second reflexive way in Assmann's Reflexivity: 'self-reflexive in that its draws on itself to explain, distinguish, reinterpret, criticize, censure, control, surpass, and receive hypoleptically' (Marquard et al. 1979, p. 358; Ritter 1969, pp. 64, 66; Rüstow 2003, p. 12). Finally, the criticism and views of audiences in different periods will once again become the nutrients for the growth of the artwork, and the added value it has been given will increase again. In this process, works of art continue to enhance the way they reflect society through criticism by that society, till becoming 'accessible again across millennia'. This is the third Reflexivity of Assmann's argument: 'it is reflexive of its own image insofar as it reflects the self-image of the group through a preoccupation with its own social system' (Luhmann 1967). So, more criticism, more power. Today's works of art no longer have only practical value and appreciation value, but also a broader and comprehensive value, one which is political and ethical.

Henri Cartier-Bresson is a good example of how works of art are influenced by criticism. He created the concept of 'the decisive moment', which became a significant reference point in 20th-century photography. The decisive moment is essentially a type of waiting. The photographer is on the scene in advance, looking for a good composition, and waiting for the moment when it occurs. It could be the next second, the next hour, the next day, or even in several years. This was a groundbreaking discovery for photography at that time. However, some theorists and photographers now question the notion. They think that photography is presentation rather than representation. Imagination is the faculty of presentation. So, presentation is a journey of becoming, rather than a stable identity. Hence, Bresson is proposing a kind of stable identity, capable of capturing a moment in time and able to understand *the decisive moment*. So, you can fix yourself in time—and wait. Whereas presentation is both identities in the process of becoming rather than stable. It is divided, and the image is also divided and torn. They both fluctuate. Therefore, the decisive moment would not theoretically take place. Bresson died a long time ago, but his work has been analysed and interpreted many times (a process of practice-reflexive). His philosophy of photography and his imagery exist now, not in the context of the twentieth century. The spiritual core it contains is becoming fuller and fuller, and the power accumulated is getting stronger and stronger. The autonomy of the concept of *the decisive moment* is not only reflected in its opposition to society, but also in its opposition to Bresson himself. It has been separated from Bresson and has become an independent artistic concept. The whole process is a portraiture of self-reflexive.

Through the analysis of artistic memory and critique, both, as two tools of Yin and Yang philosophy, participate in the mediation of the art ecosystem from two perspectives: sensibility and rationality. Namely, art as a memory system (sensibility) unlike other social divisions of the causal system, it is the objectivised embodiment of the memory of presence and absence—a collective experience crystallises. Meanwhile, art and hermeneutics (rationality) are closely related, which is an objective proof of the fact that art participates in, reflects, and critiques society, instead of a *purely* metaphysics (*l'art pour l'art*), on the contrary—a democratic system. This two are part of the art ecosystem, reconciling and checking each other. Only in this democratic ecosystem can art not be ambushed by its own power. And only when artists participate in this system can they avoid being blinded by their own narrow vision.

The integration of memory system and critical tradition

It is interesting to note that when art stepped into the digital epoch, memory systems and critical traditions showed an unprecedented trend of fusion, which we can witness in *RMB City* created by Chinese artist Cao Fei. *RMB City*, a virtual city where people can experience a parallel life as an alternative to real life. It is part of *Second Life*. Many viewers have joined in with the creation of *Second Life* through the Internet, and they have shared their parallel life on YouTube and Instagram. At this point, *Second Life* no longer just includes the artist's own expectations and interpretations in the work of art, but also engages with the participation of the wider population

and the negotiation of the Internet, which allows the works to prompt wide online discussion, thereby contributing to the making of the works of art themselves: the meaning thus becomes diverse and complex. This is a dual practice-reflexive, in that *Second Life* are critiqued not only from the exterior (those not involved in the game), but also from the interior (those involved in the game). The prior is generally considered to be professionals who comment on works of art rationally, logically and systematically—the domain of cultural memory. The subsequent is generally considered to be amateurs who review works of art non-specialised, disorderly and unpredictably—the domain of everyday communication. This also responds to the previous question: art is a synthesis of everyday communication and cultural memory. Consequently, the relationship between the artist and the audience becomes extremely delicate. It is difficult for us to distinguish, for example, whether the work is Cao Fei's personal creation or a collective creation. We should realise that we cannot arbitrarily assume today that it is only artists who are responsible for producing works and that audiences are only responsible for the appreciation of the works. Instead, the role of the audience is fundamentally altered from that of passive observer to active contributor.

Second Life is the comprehensive embodiment of the sum of memories. The artist has established a virtual utopia, guiding participants to put forward their own thoughts, entwining different ideologies, and the power of the work exploded at this time. And it is worth noting that, as far as *Second Life* is concerned, our definition of art criticism should not just stop at interpretation, but should pay attention to social participation itself as a kind of criticism: in the virtual world, people are discussing and criticising all the time.

In this case, is a 'double form of eraser', first of the subject and next the finitude of artwork. As such, the subjectivity of a new media artwork like *Second Life* can be described as evaporating, and with it the finitude of the artwork is challenged. The challenge of finitude is twofold, firstly in the form then evaluation system. Infinite art removes the limits of form and steps into the realm of the intangible. Dematerialised art replaces the joy and material consciousness of the direct sensory experience provided by material art with high-level aesthetics. It provides the audience with multi-dimensional aesthetics of form, concept and process. This is different from the elite art of modernism. Dematerialised art not only provides a democratic platform for artists but also provides a way of collective reflection in society. As Hui (2012) emphasises digital objects, in this context, dematerialised art, act as externalised memories that shape our interaction with the world and influence our understanding of reality. In digital art, such as AI-generated images, the issue of finitude is pushed into a new realm. An infinite within presence opens out an infinity within the database or model library field. In other words, infinity comes from the memory of all human beings.

Nevertheless, the autonomy of art, in the context of its dematerialisation, has been challenged as never before. It falls into another cage, one built by technology. Such as the aforementioned 'Bitcoin as an art' as well as Blockchain art. Technology has taken precedence over art. While Adorno argues for, autonomous art, a historically necessary not eternally desirable state of affairs precisely since it is a symptom of the division of labour (O'Connor 2000a), I do not believe that the autonomy

of art is lost as a result, since society has not yet been able to completely eliminate the social division of labour or even the arts have not yet been completely liberated.

The liberation of art: from the veil of witchcraft to the challenge of technology

> What appears in the artwork as its own lawfulness is the late product of an inner-technical evolution as well as art's position within progressive secularization; yet doubtless artworks became artworks only by negating their origin. They art not to be called to account for the disgrace of their ancient dependency on magic, their servitude to kings and amusement, as if this were art's original sin, for art retroactively annihilated that from which it emerged.
> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* P3

To clarify the ambiguous relationship between art and technology, one must first acknowledge the contribution of technology to art—technology rescues art from being subordinated to, and dependent on, religion. However, prior to this, ancient witchcraft actually informed the power of art. It cast a veil of mystery on the artwork, freeing art from pure pragmatism and enabling it to become more imaginative. Sacrificial rituals and heavenly imagination prevailed. *Figure, Dragon and Phoenix*, a silk painting from the middle to late Warring States period of Eastern Zhou Dynasty, c. 256 years ago, shows a woman depicted from the side, with a long skirt and wide sleeves, her hands clasped together as if praying. On the top of the woman's head is a bird flying in the sky, with its tail feathers curled up. On the left is a twisted dragon, rising upwards. The woman seemed to be performing some kind of sacrificial ritual, leading dragons and phoenixes to guide the tomb dweller's soul to heaven. When we compare this image with *La cueva de Altamira*, we can see that the difference is that the image in the silk painting depicts something in another universe—a non-real one—which includes dragons and phoenixes. This is the 'polemical' freedom of the subject, Menke (2017) mentioned: 'being able to distinguish itself from "external" determinations, that is, determinations that are naturally pregiven'. It is also a concession to the ideological superiority of art, where pragmatism gives way to imagination.

After the power of art was informed by witchcraft, paintings and sculptures were no longer limited to depicting reality. However, the revolution of technology and the transformation of the orientation of aesthetic value triggered a series of contemporary art movements: art once again negated its origin. However, in the twenty-first century, in our materialistic world, art engages with its new ruler, technology. The challenge that art faces today is no longer the relevance of witchcraft, nor whether photography is art, but the explosion of technology and the integration of different disciplines.

Freedom is a process, according to Menke (2017): 'Liberation, in order to bring about one's freedom, has to have been be one's own deed;' along the lines of Menke's work we can argue that art must be liberated by the art itself, rather than by the intervention of the outsider. This is therefore the root cause of why art is not free after its liberation by witchcraft and technology. But this liberation is also valuable, as it provides the prerequisites for the self-liberation of art in the form of *bildung*[5]: the subject needs to liberate itself, is itself the result of a prior liberation; and '*Bildung*, the formation of the subject, consists thus in the subjection to the determining powers of social forms and norms.' (Menke 2017) So art needs to submit to social forms before it can liberate itself, and then it can exercise the power of negativity. Obviously, Adorno and Hullot-Kentor (1997a) realised it early on: 'artworks became artworks only by negating their origin' (p. 3). Adorno is actually implying a kind of recapturing of the power of art. When we further discuss how art liberates itself, one thing that must be made clear is the 'identity' issue. Menke hold the opinion: 'domination lies in the dominated subject itself: in its having an "identity." This identity is produced by mechanisms of habituation: to have an identity which bounds us to our place in orders of domination (or to be unfree) means to be defined by habit' (Menke 2017). For art, this 'habitus' can be understood as everything other than the essence of art, including witchcraft, technology, politics, authority, ideology, etc., and the key to the self-liberation of art lies in the negativity of all of these, or, in Hegel's words: the higher liberation, which is endless liberation or liberation that has become permanent (Hegel 1991, Rph, § 187 A). This is why art can only find its essence in the autonomy of art. And the essence of art as we think of it must be distinguished from other human labours. It is not an accessory to authority, politics, technology or other, but—a memory system—the last defender of freedom. In other words, today, art need to be (or will be) once again liberating from fetishism (technology), as it was.

Here, we cautiously contemplate the union of art and technology, a notion fraught with both promise and peril. Traditionally, art has grappled with its subjugation, struggling to delineate its relationship with the external world. However, Hui (2017) introduces the concept of 'Cosmotechnics', challenging the binary view of magic/mythical and science. He advocates for a holistic perspective that recognizes the speculative organization of the sensible world. In the quest to liberate art from the clutches of technology and power, cosmotechnical thinking offers a fresh outlook: an awareness of technological consciousness—a vital awareness of the role of technology. This means that explore the broader cultural and cosmological context in which technology operates. Technological consciousness empowers artists to critically engage with their tools, materials, and processes, questioning embedded assumptions and biases. By doing so, they explore alternative avenues for creating

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[5] *Bildung* is the formation of the subject. Subject-formation is the acquisition of capacities in becoming a social member, a competent participant of social practices. These capacities define our identity to which we are bound and from which we thus need (or want) to liberate us Menke, (2017). *The Experiment of Freedom*. Goethe Institut. Retrieved 9 September from https://www.goethe.de/resources/files/pdf139/experiment-of-freedom_christoph-menke1.pdf.

and experiencing art. Armed with this awareness, artists can resist the homogenizing effects of dominant technological paradigms, asserting their creative autonomy. Furthermore, technological consciousness equips artists to challenge power structures tied to technological advancements, addressing the unequal distribution of resources and the influence of institutions and corporations. Through this awareness, artists reclaim agency over their craft and confront the hegemony of technology and power.

The interplay between art and technology unfolds as a captivating symphony of form and meaning. It is a story of art's journey from ancient roots, informed by witchcraft and mythical imaginings, to its contemporary encounter with the digital age. Yet, this evolution should not be seen as a subjugation but rather a dialogue. As we delve into cosmotechnics and embrace technological consciousness, a richer narrative emerges—one of art's ability to adapt and transcend external influences. This newfound awareness empowers artists to engage critically with their materials, tools, and the broader socio-cultural context, reclaiming their creative autonomy. In this dance between art and technology, aesthetics finds not a battle for dominance but a harmonious fusion, where the essence of art, its autonomy, remains preserved and ever-evolving. It is through this lens that we witness art's ongoing journey, reaffirming its role as a beacon of memory, imagination, and the eternal quest for freedom.

Conclusion

This paper uses the power of art as an entry point to delve into the intricate and ever-evolving relationship between art, memory, criticism and technology within the contemporary art landscape. Through a journey that traversed the realms of sensibility and rationality, it become evident that art is not a static entity but a dynamic force deeply intertwined with the collective memory of society. Art serves as a memory system, encapsulating the essence of presence and absence, a crystallization of collective experiences across time and space. The principle of art, however, of individuation relies on interpretation to gain insight into its social essence. The autonomy of art remains intact through this critical dialogue, ensuring that it does not succumb to its own power but continues to engage with society democratically. And the integration of memory systems and critical traditions in the digital age brought forth new dimensions in art. Art become a dual practice-reflexive endeavour, inviting both professionals and amateurs to contribute to its growth, thus challenging traditional roles and definitions.

In the end, the liberation of art is an ongoing process, with each epoch contributing to its evolution. In this case, we should thus stop arguing about the autonomy and heteronomy of art. Instead, we need consider the philosophy of Yin and Yang, to rebalance the autonomy and heteronomy of art, then art can harmonise with society, to prove that it is beneficial for society, viz. can challenge society. In a society increasingly driven by technological advancements, art, armed with technological consciousness, continues to shape our understanding of reality, offering a counterbalance to the homogenizing forces of the digital age. As we move forward, the dialogue between art, memory, criticism, and technology will remain a dynamic and ever-relevant conversation, ensuring that art's liberating potential endures as

a inspiration of creativity, imagination, and critical engagement in our world. It is what Kant had begun to recognise: that what was at stake in art was not the representation of the truth, but—to put it briefly—the presentation of freedom (Osborne 2013, p. 42).

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