Autonomy, which is a synonym for freedom, is a privilege that artists tend to enjoy only in modern societies. Free or sovereign artifice is a powerful force. In traditional societies that rely heavily on poetic language, carved and painted figures, and buildings to generate the mysteries of state or cult, art is granted relatively little autonomy.

In the West over the last five hundred years, art gradually lost its traditional connections to state and cult, and the idea that the fine arts might be liberal arts, and therefore permitted to run free, emerged as a compensation. At first the autonomy of art was guaranteed by local potentates who hoped that by protecting art they might harness it to their parochial political ends. The first haven of the modern artist was thus the princely court of the Renaissance. The princely patron extracted a talented artist from the coils of urban guild restrictions and from the levelling mechanisms of a craft whose interest it was to run art as if it were a business. Eventually, by the nineteenth century, European society as a whole came to share the prince’s belief that artists were properly exempt from the old customs. From then on, artists were permitted to do what they liked, more or less, without having to answer for it.

Autonomy in a different sense was also an internal goal of art, again one that could only be realized after the fundamental disengagement of art from religion and statecraft carried out in the early modern period. This is the sense that the artwork itself, and not just art-making and the art-maker, might be self-motivated and self-sufficient. Since artworks are not living, sentient things, this can only be a metaphorical goal—unless the artwork is literally, magically, meant to come to life. Animation of the artifact was in fact a central, if unrealistic, goal of much of ancient art-making. The ancient craftsman, disciple of the engineer Daedalus, dreamed of fashioning an automaton that would speak and move of its own accord. This conception of artistic “realism” actually survived deep into modern European times. As late as the eighteenth century, artistic time and talent were still being invested in the project of constructing an artificial vitality. An automaton would be a work of art with meaning, for a work such as this would naturally be capable of declaring or revealing what it was intended to say.

Nineteenth and early twentieth-century artists and thinkers, dissatisfied
with the meager technologies of artistic realism at their disposal, resigned themselves to a merely metaphorical vitalism and automatism: the idea of a work of art closed in upon itself, infinitely dense, irreducible in much the same way that a human soul is irreducible, and signifying nothing. Some described this new ideal of closure and independence as monadic, invoking a term central to the metaphysical philosophy of Leibniz. The early twentieth-century aesthetician Benedetto Croce, pointing to the distinction between artworks and symbolic representations, said that the artwork had no doppio fondo, no "double" or "false bottom" like a magician's suitcase. Representations, when explored, yield hidden meanings; artworks, by contrast, simply are what they are. Artworks do not issue any invitations. Many modernist theorists have held this view of the artwork, and yet at the same time felt it necessary to justify the artwork to modernity. Theodore W. Adorno, for instance, in order to rescue the monadic work from complete irrelevancy, argued that the very existence of a self-sufficient, self-contained artifact is an implicit critique or negation of the practical world.

With such arguments, the modernist artist has been licensed to make things that are no longer used in ordinary ways. These pointless but strangely potent artifacts are cordoned off from the rest of the material world by various framing and labelling devices. Some makers of these privileged things win great fame and material rewards, but it is arguable that they do so only by betraying their commitment to autonomy—by performing as glorified interior decorators, for instance, or by penetrating the spheres of glamour and celebrity. Most art-makers are not at all famous. Negation is meant to be its own reward. Art-making, according to the logic of autonomy, successfully finds its target in direct proportion to its disengagement from the business of the world. Autonomy is just another word for nothing left to lose.

Architecture, by contrast, is always answerable and never disengaged from the business of the world; and it would have plenty to lose if it were to disengage itself. Unlike painting, architecture historically never gave up its close connection to authority. Architects still represent society's understanding of itself, still shelter and shape the central symbolic activities of social life, and still mediate between man and nature in ways that painters or sculptors can only envy. Architecture does not need to simulate vitality through a posture of monadicity. And there is clearly no need for society to compensate architecture with the gift of autonomy. It is amazing that architects would try to claim this ambiguous privilege, unless they were announcing their own withdrawal from the world.

There are places of privacy, leisure, and luxury imbedded within the architectural field where quasi-autonomous experiments can be carried out: villas, pavilions, gardens, caprices. Here, and in its virtual projects, architecture does win for itself some of the freedom and eloquence enjoyed by painting or poetry. Architecture's situation resembles that of fashion. The inescapable tasks of clothing and sheltering prevent either fashion or architecture from attaining autonomy. But clothes and buildings are symbolic machines and those who operate these machines naturally crave discursive freedom. Fashion and architecture are thus always striving towards autonomy, but only achieving it ephemerally and spectacularly in the experimental modes of their respective industries: on the one hand, haute couture, and on the other, the architectural caprice and the utopian project.

Once beyond the caprice and the project, the ideal of autonomy in architecture is not much more than a mystification. It is true that individual buildings can eventually, by the mysterious workings of reception, achieve something like autonomy. It is not completely meaningless to say that the Parthenon or the cathedral of Reims are monads. But it is hard to set out to build an autonomous building. In the modern world, where people tend to disagree wildly about the ultimate grounds of meaning and value, it is impossible to do so. The vision of an autonomous architecture descends from the early Romantic idea that life itself may be thought of as a work of art and shaped according to aesthetic principles. This idea encouraged the inflated and heroic image of an artist who would teach non-artists how to live. Trying to reshape the world by making poems or paintings is one thing; trying to do it by making buildings is like operating heavy machinery under the influence of a potent drug. Architectural self-rule would be misrule.

Of course, architects do blunder into the lives of cities and perpetrate quasi-criminal affronts to human dignity and freedom, again and again. Soci-
eries seem to forgive them this. It is ironic that the much feeble finer arts, with their philosophically well-established claims to autonomy, are from time to time made to answer for their crimes in petty ways, with injunctions and obscenity charges and the like, whereas architecture goes completely unpunished. The reason for this is that painters and poets are almost universally conceded their sovereignty, even if their exemption from responsibility is sometimes absurdly contested. Architects, by contrast, whatever they themselves might imagine, are not at all held by society to be sovereign; rather, buildings are rightly understood to be the products of complex collective forces, conjunctions of circumstances, and the efficacies of technology and materials. There seems to be no other way of explaining why architects are not held responsible for the crimes of architecture.

To be fair, architects who ask for autonomy today usually are not asking for carte blanche or a heroic license to shape life for the rest of us. They are asking for a recognition of the systematicity of architecture. Architecture is autonomous or free, in this view, because it is capable of generating meaning out of its own internal symbolic resources without having to rely on auxiliary iconographical devices and without having to wait for its cue from the commission, the function, or the materials. Architecture is seen to be capable, for instance, of exercising an Adornian, oppositional critique by manipulating differential relationships conventionally within the history and the system of architecture. This model of a closed system of art is the ideal cultivated in art academies since the Italian Renaissance: the ideal of an art about other art, and not about the world, an art that manages yet to say something about the world through its transfigurations of prior art. More recently, the doctrine has been updated with structuralist and hyperstructuralist linguistic theory. This body of theory has become the model for any theory of systematically generated meaning. One can see why a theory of autonomous architectural meaning would turn to structuralist linguistics for support. Structuralism provides a model for the non-motivation, or freedom from external directives, of the architectural sign. Signs themselves, in structuralist theory, are meaningless marks that take on meaning only when differentiated from other similar-looking or sounding marks. According to a structuralist theory of architecture, signs are linked to signified contents only by the internally established customs or conventions of architecture itself. Architects generate meaning by manipulating those conventions — by making choices and combinations among intrinsically meaningless conventions. Here one sees how the old ideal of the work of art as autonoma might survive in a modern context.

A deconstructive approach, meanwhile — which is not an overturning but an extension of structuralism, a neo- or hyperstructuralism — maintains that the link between sign and signified is inherently unstable by virtue of the material conditions of signing. Traditional structuralism, according to this view of things, had naively treated signs as if they were ideal, abstract entities. But real signs in time and space are constantly drifting away from the historical and local convention-systems that alone endow them with meaning. According to hyperstructuralism, any linguistic statement will always be revealed to be a statement of the impossibility of stating anything. Once you accept the linguistic model of architectural meaning, you can easily see how the deconstructive project, with all its explosive potential, could be translated to architecture.

But the linguistic model of architectural meaning is a spurious contiveness. It is a weak metaphor that has been allowed to serve as the foundation for entire edifices of architectural theory. To understand how this could have happened, one has to look back to more general theory of artistic autonomy: the "formalist" and "aestheticist" thinking of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, itself a kind of moderate, domesticated version of the enthusiastic "absolute" idealism of the early nineteenth-century German philosophers. The art critic and aesthetician Konrad Fiedler, for example, dismissed by crassly materialist theories of artistic creativity and by the "realist" project in painting, argued in 1886 that art had no need to emulate the world and no reason to be constrained by it. For Fiedler, the world itself was the creature of the mind. "The truly artistically gifted nature," he maintained, "brings forth in itself so to speak that process, now arrived at a new freedom, in which reality is generated for man." Art for Fiedler was real enough without having to look like reality.5 The Viennese art historian Alois Riegl, following Fiedler, argued at the end of the nineteenth century that the historical mutations of artistic form obeyed an internal logic that unfolded independently of practical function or material conditions. Riegl demonstrated this with relative ease in his 1893 history of the development of ornamental motifs in the ancient world. More provocative was his later attempt to see through the superficial mimetic or symbolic content of early medieval and eventually Renaissance and Baroque sculptures and paintings, and instead perceive their deep structural formal principles — one might say their ornamental principles. By seeing through content, Riegl prepared these works for insertion into an immanent, independent history of form.6

Riegl was less interested than some of his contemporaries were in the notion of the closed or monadic work of art. In his writings, it was the spirit of art-making itself that was autonomous: self-sufficient, self-propelling, a mysteriously vital force. For Riegl, the work of art generated by the spirit, once it had been broken down by the critical eye into its formal elements, turned out to be wonderfully open to the world. In principle, the work's deepest meaning — its bearing on politics and society, on fundamental ethical questions — was legible in its manipulations of line and color in the picture plane and in pictorial space.

Riegl's scheme provided the framework for a sophisticated cultural history of art. But it seems that his vision of the homology between art and life does not support a critical aesthetics, a doctrine of art's autonomy that would undermine art's exceptionalism and justify its fictional, hypothetical moment. Consequently, there have been a number of attempts to assimilate Riegl's vitalist "will to art" to theoretically more complex models of systematic autonomy.
It has been tempting, for example, to compare Riegl’s reduction of pictorial meaning to a matter of simple formal choices to the structuralist linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. Riegl was an exact contemporary of Saussure. The rediscovery and theoretically-informed rereading of Riegl in art history since the 1970s followed closely upon the post-war discovery of Saussure. Since then there has been a tendency to project the insights of language-based structuralism back onto late nineteenth-century German aesthetics and art history. Francesco Dal Co, for instance, credits Fiedler and Riegl with recognizing that artistic products, no less than linguistic statements, must be understood as representations, that is, as negations of any “simple reflection between subject and object, as “artificial constructions” cut off from any foundation of meaning, and as “autonomous events” yielding up truths only about themselves.

But this attempt to justify the aestheticist project by linking it to modernist insights into the groundlessness of linguistic representation, an attempt launched by Fiedler himself, is impossible to sustain. Painted pictures and buildings can bear meaning, but it is seldom their principal function to do so. And even when they do represent something, paintings and buildings do so in ways that have little to do with linguistic representation. Any later extensions of Riegl’s ambitious formalism that imagine they are underwritten by linguistic theory must be evaluated with care. Certainly there are special cases when artists and architects seem to be choosing among an array of formal possibilities whose links to various concepts are agreed upon by a given community of beholders, an array functioning therefore something like a code. Through these choices, the artist or architect seems to be generating textual meaning. But such quasi-codes are never really agreed upon within a community, nor do its members agree which elements of pictorial or architectural form are coded and which are not. Architects may argue that the code is established by the history of architecture. But the history of architecture has to be learned from travel and books, and every individual learns it differently. Every student of the history of architecture has his or her own constantly shifting idea of the code. Real language cannot afford this pluralism. Language functions only because grammar is embedded in the brain at birth and because the local linguistic code is learned in early childhood and only incrementally expanded later. Beholders of painting or architecture who are not at all familiar with the alleged code can derive pleasure and meaning, not to mention use-value, from the picture or building, whereas language is nearly useless to someone unfamiliar with the code.

Language, finally, derives all its flexibility and its economy from two principles: the arbitrariness and the double-articulation of its material signifiers. The form of the signifier is arbitrary in that it is unconstrained by any external considerations; any signifier will do as long as everyone agrees to recognize it. The signifier is doubly articulated in the sense that words, which can be multiplied infinitely, are built from combinations of a tiny number of phonetic modules. Pictorial or architectural signifiers are neither doubly articulated nor arbitrary. Ornamental motifs seem to be the closest to arbitrary formal signifiers, and it is in this domain that writers on art have been most tempted to turn to the model of language. But here, too, the analogy is weak. A truly arbitrary signifier gets attached to its concept not because any feature of the signifier makes it especially appropriate to that concept, but entirely because of custom. In art and architecture, there is always some reason why one signifier is formally preferable to another for representing a given content. Horizontal elements in a building cannot simply be used to signify anything at all; it would be difficult to have them signify “verticality,” for instance.

Structuralist systematicity may appear at first to hold out the hope of an articulate, possibly critical representationality – a discursive autonomy – for buildings and pictures alike. Yet without true arbitrariness, conventionality, and double-articulation, pictorial and architectural representation can only attain that weaker, more general sort of autonomy described by late Romantic aestheticism: the fine, pure vision of the formal imagination as a perpetuum mobile.

A stronger version of the analogy between architecture and language is even harder to sustain: the idea that art or architecture’s autonomy might be guaranteed not by the arbitrariness of its signifiers, but by their very non-arbitrariness. If horizontal elements mean what they do for deep and ineluctable reasons, the argument goes, then perhaps architecture has a kind of grammar which can be manipulated to generate meanings. Riegl himself introduced the analogy in planning a “historical grammar” of the visual arts. But this analogy underestimates the power of grammar and unfairly borrows the prestige of grammar to justify ultimately non-grammatical operations. Grammar is innate and cannot be manipulated. The system of pronoun designation of the first and second persons, in particular, is indispensable to the construction of a sense of self – literally, not figuratively, indispensable. Since grammar is inseparable from human subject-formation, it is not easily manipulated to poetic or representational ends. When architects generate meaning by deliberately confusing our expectations about inside and outside or wall and support, they are operating with a freedom that language-users do not enjoy. The architects here are provisionally liberating architectural elements from their customary functions and meanings in order to introduce them into a systematicity in which they will carry new meaning. To argue that architecture thus does what language does is to mix two levels of language, and to imagine that the elements of grammatical deep structure can be loosened and pushed around as if they were signifiers. The better analogy is not with language itself, but with poetry; the building behaves as a text in the way that poetry behaves as a text. The difference from poetry is that words have no other purpose than to carry meaning, and no one mistakes a poem for a non-poetic use of language, whereas an architect who builds a poem cannot be certain that all the future users of the building will recognize it as a poem. What architects are asking for when they ask for autonomy, and what societies will want to think about twice before granting, is poetic license.

In assessing claims that architecture might make to discursive autonomy, one has to be alert to hidden and restrictive idealisms. The art historian Riegl understood the supposedly free generation of meaning as a manipulation of a finite supply of markers within a severely regulated system. Riegl’s sense of the limits of human freedom was characteristic of his epoch. By the late nineteenth century, the achievements of inductive scientific research and empirical historical scholarship weighed heavily on the imagination. Laws of nature had been discovered and confirmed by repeated experiments. The mind and the spirit, too, it was feared, would soon be submitted to definitive explanation. If a Romantic philosopher around 1800 could still conceive of freedom as the invention of entirely new laws – new societies, new forms of the spirit – the disillusioned thinker of 1900 could only conceive of freedom as, at best, a capacity to operate within a framework of pre-existing laws. History itself seemed a monumental burden that threatened to stifle all creativity and all reflection. Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater agreed that the human will would never again enjoy that “naive, rough sense of freedom” that it had enjoyed in pre-historicist times. In Problema of Style, Riegl chided the contemporary Arts and Crafts movement for encouraging modern artists to choose their motifs freely from the natural world, contrasting these meaningless options with the self-generating, “essentially more artistic,” and lawful unfolding of ornamental form in the classical Mediterranean. Riegl conceived of freedom as a surrender to the laws of history.

It seems that Saussure’s structuralism derives from a similar impression of the limits on the symbolizing faculty. Riegl and Saussure, as noted, were contemporaries. But again the analogy between art and language is flawed and cannot be used to vindicate the idealist aesthetics entailed by Riegl’s schema. Language’s laws are real, and they are the basis for language’s efficacy. The limiting conditions of language did not develop historically and cannot easily be dismantled. Saussure was describing an ahistorical system; languages may have their histories, but language does not. Art, by contrast, has few laws, and it certainly has a history. What Riegl presents as a permanent “grammar” of artistic form is in fact not much more than a taxonomy
of form derived from a descriptive history of Western art. Laws of formal morphology of the sort Riegl divined in art history are fictional and dangerously easy to exaggerate. Art in Riegl’s system is thus not at all free, but rather always hurtling towards a projected future where art will converge with spirit and embody the highest aspirations of humanity. Riegl’s notion that art is disengaged from matter and pursues its own abstract ends independently of any practical or symbolizing tasks imposed on it—that art is an autonomous activity—is an idealist and potentially an illiberal notion.

The restrictive idealism hiding within the ideal of autonomy, and the consequent threat to practical, everyday freedoms, takes various forms. The eighteenth-century German writer and art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann, for example, saw social and political freedom literally embodied in the ideal Greek nude. As Alex Potts has explained, freedom for Winckelmann is “not just the condition that makes possible the imaginative creation of an ideal beauty. It is also the subjective state of being figured by that beauty, through its apparent embodiment of a state of unconstrained narcissistic plenitude, which he identifies most immediately with the self-absorbed, free-standing, naked male figure.”16 For the neo-classicist Winckelmann, freedom was not an opening outward but an arrival at a fixed aesthetic resting point. For others, freedom was a mystical aspiration, perhaps the aspiration to escape from the humiliating conditions of earthly and temporal life: the ideal of Weltflucht, or flight from the world. An echo of that yearning is heard in the architectural theorist’s dream of a “language of architecture, which in a sense exists outside of and thus autonomously of any style,” an architecture no longer doomed to register its own historical time.17

One further proof of the inappropriateness of the linguistic model of meaning to architecture is art historical formalism’s inability to deal with architecture. Early twentieth-century art historians like Heinrich Wolfflin submitted both painting and buildings to formalist analysis; the levelling use of photograph or slide comparisons made this easier. But in the long run formalism could not keep architecture in play. Most important formalist art history and criticism of the twentieth century, from Lionello Venturi and Clement Greenberg to Michael Fried and Rosalind Krauss, simply leaves architecture aside. This omission is surely an acknowledgement that architecture is about empathy, appetite, movement, absolute dimensions, and the passage of real time and the occupation of real space. It cannot easily reduce all these to metaphor as painting and sculpture manage to do if they want. The vectors of need and desire and the calculus of absolute dimensions disturb the premise of systematic autonomy upon which formalist analysis depends.

Architecture is so patently involved with the problem of somatic experience that a formalist treatment of architecture, in order to make sense at all, must subscribe to a dualist, ever, idealist conception of the mind-body relationship—that is, a conception of mind’s superiority to body. The Renaissance artist and art historian Giorgio Vasari, for instance, was able to bring painting, sculpture, and architecture under the idealist common denominator of disegno, or the mental idea underlying a work of art. In his Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects (1550), a biographical history of Renaissance art that was at the same time a theory of disegno, Vasari gave painting, sculpture, and architecture equal status and attention. Vasari had no reason to isolate architecture because for him all three arts were self-evidently “semi-autonomous,” capable of generating meaning through disegno, but only within the confines of their practical functioning in the world. Not until the modern doctrine of the autonomy of painting and sculpture emerged in the nineteenth century did architectural history begin to be cut off from the rest of art history. In the twentieth century, architectural history and criticism has followed its own paths, in many ways independent of the development of art history and art criticism. Any formalist art history is a contrivance, but a rigorously formalist architectural history would be an outright fantasy.

Much twentieth-century architecture asserted its own representational freedom, even claiming that architecture could articulate critical or oppositional views by manipulating the “language” of architecture. Given what we know about the political opportunism of the makers of some of the most formally eloquent buildings of the century—Ludwig Mies van der Rohe or Philip Johnson, for instance—it seems that formalist freedom amounted to little more than the intellectual freedom to change sides when it was convenient. Even more pernicious is the use of the doctrine of autonomy as a mask for a vulgar-Nietzschean conception of the “strong architect’s” arbitrariness and superiority to constraint. Only the strong architect, the theory goes, can resist the pressures of the world and deliver an authentic critique. It is astonishing that architectural theorists loyally rush to the defense of this self-image of the architect by invoking autonomy, arguing, for instance, that a “critical signature” allows the architect to resist the “massive centralization and standardization of the postwar building establishment.”18 How gratifying it must be to architects to be compared to the auteurs of the cinematic nouvelle vague! But all this carpings is perhaps unfair, given that political opportunism is part of the job description of the architect, who must treat constantly with corporate and state power. The intellectual community seems to realize this; how else can one explain the consistently charitable critical treatment of celebrated architects, sharply contrasted to the constant ideological vigilance and moralism that canonical modern poets and philosophers face.

Some conservative thinkers have seen aesthetic autonomy as one of the keys to the larger catastrophe of Modernism, with no more striking emblems of that catastrophe than the utopian projects of high modernist architecture. Hans Sedlmayr, for instance, a reactionary Austrian art historian and critic, derided the “cosmopolitan” and supposedly “pure” architecture of Le Corbusier. Sedlmayr, here drawing on the research of Emil Kaufmann, traced the rootlessness and despiritualization of modernist architecture back to the visions of the French Revolutionary architects Ledoux, Boullée, and Lequeu.19 Autonomus architecture as envisioned by Ledoux and realized by Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier was architecture that had “become conscious of its own true nature.” But architecture achieved this, according to Sedlmayr, by abandoning its representational responsibilities and instead pursuing absolute geometrical ideals. Quoting a contemporary reviewer of Kaufmann’s book, Sedlmayr declared that “autonomy was slavery,” anticipating, by a single year, the famous mantra from George Orwell’s novel 1984: “Freedom is Slavery,” one of the three slogans inscribed on the façade of the Ministry of Truth, a building, incidentally, that might have been built by Ledoux, pyramidial in form, in white concrete, three hundred meters high.20

Sedlmayr was a follower of Riegl and a radical formalist, and in his own art history not only preserved Riegl’s model of an autonomously unfailing “life of forms,” but also developed a concept of the density and irreducibility of the individual artwork more explicit than anything found in Riegl. This is paradoxical, for Sedlmayr was at the same time identifying the idea of autonomous art as the source of all Modernism’s troubles. He deplored modernity’s loss of a stable and ideal image of man and modern art’s abandonment of the project of representing that image. He deplored the self-relativism and solipsism of the modern work of art. I find that this apparent contradiction persists in writing on modern art to the present: it is often the conservatives lamenting modernity’s chaotic dynamism who most fiercely defend the two kinds of autonomy, both the independence of the artmaking process and the irreducibility of the artwork. The reason for this seems to be that these two ideals of autonomy still imply humanism: an integral image of man, confidence in the range and capacities of the will, hope for betterment. Autonomous art, however, even if it has its historical roots in that image of man, was never required by its constitution to contribute to that image, as Sedlmayr would have pointed out regretfully.

So the anti-modernist Sedlmayr supported the idea of autonomy against what the avant-garde had done with it, while the avant-garde itself embraced the critique of autonomy. Indeed, the avant-garde was in many ways framed as a critique of autonomy. This paradox persisted into the 1960s and 1970s, when the so-called neo-avant-garde was able to draw on new theoretical weapons
and mount an apparently final, devastating challenge to the idea of aesthetic autonomy. The neo-avant-garde espoused an outright anti-humanism, involving a critique of authorship that followed from the hyperstructuralist and psychoanalytic critique of integrated subjecthood, and a critique of the aesthetic that followed from the philosophical deconstruction of the work and the frame. We are in a strange situation now, in the wake of that challenge. The critique of artistic autonomy carried out in the 1960s and 1970s has to be said to have failed, repeating the failure of the “historical,” early twentieth-century avant-garde. The sharp critiques of the ideology of artistic “freedom” levelled by the neo-avant-garde have been instantly and eagerly absorbed by its own institutional targets, the museums, commercial galleries, and art history textbooks. Those institutions were designed to protect the freedom of the visual arts and are not easily rattled when painters and sculptors exercise that freedom, no matter how unpredictably. Artistic autonomy in our society is as safe as it ever was. The critique of architectural autonomy, by contrast, carried out concurrently in these same years, was quite successful. Those who carry on defending architectural autonomy seem to be animated by the same spirit of futility as those who carry on critiquing artistic autonomy.

The two fields, art and architecture, are thus intellectual mirror images of one another. Adornian neo- or post-avant-garde art criticism, exemplified by the influential writings of Benjamin Buchloh, is intellectually paralyzed because it feels itself bound to identify and endorse art that purports to dismantle the ideal of autonomy, even as it must recognize that art is inseparable from the ideal of autonomy — that we wouldn’t know how to recognize art at all if it were autonomous. It is a thrillingly hopeless task to try to undo that knot. The dilemma of the post-avant-garde is sometimes sentimentalized as an aporetic stance, a proud refusal to compromise leading to a severe narrowing of the conception of the artistically permissible. Architecture, meanwhile, is clearly not an autonomous activity and the critic who persists in making the case for architectural autonomy is equally, symmetrically, obtinate. The sheer stubbornness and vanity of such arguments must be the source of their appeal within the architectural field, an appeal that is otherwise perplexing to an outsider.

Autonomy in architecture can never be more than one of the vectors of its force, one of the multiple frames of mind that make up the building process. That seems self-evident. Architecture cannot afford the aporetic disengagement of the post-avant-garde, which is essentially the fastidiousness of the mandarin, ultimately a gentlemanly ideal of withdrawal from the world. Architecture, in fact, has an appetite for the mêlée. All the theoretical talk of autonomy is surely a blind! Sincerity and authenticity, the criteria of ideal personhood that emerged in modern times alongside the doctrine of the pure and independent work of art, are only confusingly, unhelpfully imposed on a practical architect. Architecture, the discipline, and the practice, will build the right buildings not by presenting the world with the truth about buildings, but by convincing the world that the world itself knows which buildings are the right ones. Successful architecture calls for a certain political cunning and even duplicity.

The autonomous artwork, ultimately a religious ideal, is a beautiful modern contrivance. Architecture is perhaps best thought of as a pre-modern art.

I am grateful to Romy Golan for her thoughts on this topic.

NOTES

8 Francesco Dal Co. Figure of Architecture and Thought: German Architecture Culture 1880–1930 (New York: Pizzoli, 1993), p. 108.
10 Alois Riegl, Historische Grammatik der bildenden Künste (Graz and Cologne: Böhlaü, 1966), a posthumous publication based on lecture notes; the concept of a “historical grammar” was Riegl’s own.
12 Riegl. Problems of Style, p. 207.
17 Sedlmayr, Art in Crisis, p. 110, 101.