

Challenging the Autonomy of Art: An Exploration of the Nature and Impact of Progressive Art Critique

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ABSTRACT

In recent years art is often being criticised from a politically progressive perspective, such as on sexism and racism. Such ethical critique collides with two dogmas of the artistic field: its emphasis on aesthetic evaluations and the autonomy of art. These dogmas, having emerged during the nineteenth century, are often challenged by both (upcoming) members of the artistic field and outsiders. This paper aims to sociologically analyse current debates by exploring the media coverage of two diverse art controversies, in the United States and the Netherlands. It shows that members of artistic fields and allies often defend themselves with arguments drawn from said dogmas, while the critics' counter-arguments are in line with more recent ideas, developed in the humanities. The essay proposes several explanations of this recent phenomenon, related to changing power relations. It calls on scholarship to more structurally study this presumed trend.

Keywords: art critique, aesthetics and ethics, autonomy of art, cancel culture

INTRODUCTION

In the past, there have been many art controversies that are focused on the content of the work rather than its aesthetic features. Paintings, novels, films and other artworks that are considered sacrilegious, sexually subversive, unpatriotic or simply immoral have come under fire from conservative groups and authorities (e.g., Heinrich, 2000; Tepper, 2011). Artists and cultural institutions often defend their work, not only by countering conservative criticism with their own progressive ideas, but, moreover, by emphasising the autonomy of art and the superiority of aesthetic over ethical valuations (ibid.). These arguments refer to two dogmas of the artistic field, that emerged in the nineteenth century. First, art is said to have an autonomous position in society, meaning that external influences such as money and politics should play a minor role. Second, artworks are often evaluated with aesthetic criteria, such as form and innovativeness, rather than ethical criteria regarding their political or moral content (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996).

In the 2010s and 2020s, however, a large number of art controversies from a politically progressive angle can be observed that meet more diverse responses. Art that is perceived as racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, et cetera, is being criticised for offending historically underprivileged groups. Due to the emergence of social media, such criticism can easily gain a wide following, leading to immediate calls for action, such as 'cancelling' the work or the artist (e.g., Ng, 2022; Matthes, 2022). In such cases, members of the artistic field face a dilemma. On the one hand, they may continue using the field's dogmas as a defence mechanism against any political or moral criticism, regardless of its political perspective. But on the other hand, a defensive attitude is

frequently left behind, in favour of a more ambivalent or even compliant response (cf. Matthes, 2022), in line with liberal attitudes in the cultural sector (McAndrew et al., 2020). For instance, in 2017, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis removed a sculpture by Sam Durant, which was intended to commemorate crimes against Native Americans but which highly offended this same group. In 2020, HBO Max temporarily removed the 1939 Hollywood classic *Gone with the Wind* from its streaming service after protests on its racist character and added an introduction by an African American film scholar. Book publishers hire so-called ‘sensitivity readers’ that check manuscripts for potentially offensive language that may harm certain minority groups.

Although academic scholarship in the humanities and philosophy has been providing art critique from a feminist, anti-racist or queer perspective for decades (e.g., Mulvey, 1975; Booth, 1988), sociologists of art have rarely addressed this type of critique. Art controversies as such did receive sociological attention, most comprehensively by Heinich (2000) in France and the US, and Tepper (2011) in the US solely, but they focus on the dominant presence of conservative issues. Both identified a large number of controversies in the US, often associated with the so-called ‘Culture Wars’, while Heinich described such debates in France as rare and anecdotal. Both discuss progressive issues relatively briefly and theorise them only moderately. This lack is an indicator of the low prominence of progressive art controversies in the 1990s, when the data for both studies were collected.

This essay does not try to objectively prove a rise of progressive art critique and its impact, although it gives many clues (cf. the ‘repoliticisation’ of the public sphere (Nieuwenhuis and Zijp, 2022) and the emergence of ‘cancel culture’ (Ng, 2022)). The aim of this essay, however, is to unravel and explain the used arguments from different sides and to try to sociologically explain this presumed trend. It does so by exploring the media coverage of two recent cases. Although the selected cases differ in many aspects, they share similarities regarding used arguments and social dynamics: members of the artistic field itself challenge the established institutions’ defence mechanisms. One case is on the accusation of racism in literature in the United States (Jeanine Cummins’s novel *American Dirt*), the other on sexism in the visual arts in the Netherlands (Erik Kessels’s installation *Destroy My Face*). These cases move beyond unfounded criticism by angry social media crowds, often labelled as ‘cancel culture’ (e.g., Ng, 2022), even though this does play a role.¹

The next two sections respectively theorise and historically trace the dogmas of the artistic field. Subsequently, two recent cases are analysed, which shows that art is partially defended with arguments from the discussed dogmas, while opponents question their self-evidence. The ensuing discussion proposes several explanatory factors that contribute to the recent developments. I argue that members of underprivileged fractions in the artistic field are able to challenge its dogmas by drawing on ideas developed in the humanities, magnified through social media. Finally, the conclusion proposes several lines of possible research in order to give this presumed trend more empirical substance, opening up a potential new terrain of sociological inquiry.

THE DOGMAS OF THE ARTISTIC FIELD

Bourdieu (1993, 1996) portrays the artistic field – or any sub-field within – as a dynamic battleground in which actors compete for power and status. At the autonomous side art is regarded as relatively independent from external influences, particularly of a commercial nature but also regarding political and social constraints, compared to the heteronomous side. Even though such autonomy cannot be absolute, it serves as a strong distinction mechanism that shapes the power dynamics within the field.

Artists acquire field-specific status, ‘symbolic capital’, by innovating in form, by following their inner feelings and by serving a small audience of like-minded peers who prefer more complex art forms. Hence, the dogma of autonomy is related to the dogma of aesthetics. Art is evaluated with a ‘pure aesthetic’, deeply ingrained in the habitus, in which form and a detached view prevail over the immediate functions that art can have, such as invoking strong emotions or representing recognisable content (Bourdieu 1996). Similarly, art should only be *criticised* with an aesthetic yardstick, rather than looking at the content that art refers to through an ethical lens (Heinich, 2000). The interpretation of the concept ‘aesthetics’ is not universal, though: some refer only to form and beauty as such, while others include originality, inspiration, symbolic meanings, et cetera (cf. Heinich, 2000: 186). I follow the broad definition.²

Although the supremacy of aesthetic valuations is not absolute (see Discussion), their dominance can empirically be observed in reviews by professional critics, that function as gatekeepers in the artistic field. For instance, between 1955 and 2005, aesthetic criteria such as writing style and structure dominated literature reviews in Dutch newspapers, while moral, sociopolitical and religious criteria were applied only marginally (op de Beek,

¹ This essay focuses on controversies regarding the artwork itself rather than controversies regarding an artist’s *behaviour* (such as #MeToo cases) or expressed *opinions* beyond their work itself (such as J. K. Rowling’s stance on transgender people).

² One may argue that the dogma of aesthetics is in itself an ethical stance: the ethics of *not* involving ethics (cf. Devereaux, 1993: 209).

2013; Linders, 2014; cf. Purhonen et al., 2019: 68-75). Oft-cited content analyses of film and music reviews do not incorporate moral criteria at all (Baumann, 2001; van Venrooij and Schmutz, 2010). Moral judgements in professional reviews have only been studied in specific cases (e.g., Hall, 2001).³

Members of the artistic field and consumers with high cultural capital distinguish themselves from others by applying this pure aesthetic; they exercise 'symbolic violence'. Although Bourdieu (1984) does not explicitly discuss morality, one can deduce from his work on distinction that cultural elites easily dismiss moral judgements as the non-artistic opinions of ignorant 'philistines' and as unjust heteronomous intrusions (cf. Heinich, 2000; Stewart, 2017; Kuipers et al., 2019). However, moral valuations remain an overlooked phenomenon in taste studies, whether of a conservative or progressive nature (for exceptions, see Friedman and Kuipers, 2013; Stewart, 2017).

One caveat must be made on the somewhat arbitrary distinction between conservative and progressive issues that are central in this article. Conservative objections often regard sex and nudity, religion and patriotism, whereas progressive criticism usually regards underprivileged groups (Heinich, 2000; Tepper, 2011). Some types of issues are politically more ambiguous, though, such as art that mocks Islam (either perceived as criticising a conservative religion or as insulting a marginalised group), art that may incite physical violence or art that harms animals.

THE ARTISTIC DOGMAS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

As distinction mechanisms result in the continuous reproduction of the dogmas of the artistic field, these are often perceived as universal or static. However, until the nineteenth century, art had been created mostly for purposes external to art itself, most notably religious ones. Works were evaluated in terms of craftsmanship and morality. Heated debates on art's moral values – or dangers – date back to the ancient Greeks (Belfiore and Bennett, 2008). For ages, the 'fine arts' have been propagated for their individual and social effects, be it personal well-being, education or actual moral improvement (ibid.).

In the Western world, this gradually changed with late eighteenth-century Romanticism, when Kant and other German thinkers developed a conceptual distinction between ethics and aesthetics (Bell-Villada, 1996; Heumakers, 2015). Kant argued that beauty should be distinguished from morality and truth: an artwork or poem is not beautiful because it serves a higher moral purpose, but it is beautiful solely because of its aesthetic features. These aesthetics *serve* morality accordingly. In other words, Kant analytically separated two dimensions, but, in the end, the *aim* of art remained of a moral nature. In early nineteenth-century France, however, several writers and artists adopted Kant's views with an unintended twist: the aesthetic should not only be *distinguished from* the ethical, but it should be *favoured over* the ethical. Art can deal with immoral issues or may even provoke, but it should be evaluated predominantly with an aesthetic yardstick (Bell-Villada, 1996).⁴ Originality and innovativeness in style and form gained prominence over art's external functions, such as morality (Bourdieu, 1996). Furthermore, another potential argument against ethical criticism was fed by twentieth-century ideas on the 'death of the author' (Barthes, 1967): if the meaning of an artwork is not fixed but constructed by individual spectators, the artist cannot be held accountable for supposed moral flaws.

Bourdieu (1996) studied power dynamics between different strata of society in order to explain the incorporation of these emerging ideas into an autonomous art field. The autonomisation of the arts as a distinct field in society already has its roots in the seventeenth century. The clergy and the aristocracy had long been artists' main benefactors, but faced increasing competition from a newly formed bourgeoisie and upcoming middle classes. These classes formed the basis for a growing market for artworks and books. In the nineteenth century, a new, 'bohemian' style of artists emerged from both the lower classes and impoverished elites. They romanticised living in poverty by turning 'their marginal position (...) into a badge of honour' (Belfiore and Bennett, 2008: 183). With their 'authenticity', they openly distinguished themselves from the 'superficial' lifestyles and conservative values of the elites. As a 'dominated fraction of the dominant class' (Bourdieu, 1984), they proposed an alternative way of acquiring status. They started to define their own artistic rules and criteria, not to be intervened by anyone external to the artistic field, whether commercial (cherished by the upcoming middle classes) or moral (imposed by the church and conservative elites). The rapidly increasing number of artists oriented themselves more and more towards their peers, including an emerging group of artistic professionals, such as gallerists, publishers and critics. They started to create 'art for art's sake' within a relatively autonomous field, in which new avant-garde movements continuously challenged the previous ones (Bourdieu, 1996).

³ Purhonen et al. (2019: 153-159) observe a high rate and an increase of 'political' terms in cultural sections of quality newspapers in six European countries between 1960 and 2010, but these include articles on cultural policy, censorship in non-democratic countries, et cetera.

⁴ Belfiore and Bennett (2008: 177) show that this idea has many precursors that date back centuries; yet, until Romanticism, it had never been explicitly propagated.

In the course of the twentieth century, this logic was extended to upwardly mobile forms of popular culture (e.g., Baumann, 2001; Lena, 2019). Distinctions between ‘pure’ and popular aesthetics, between form and content, between relatively autonomous and commercial forms, were made regarding film, popular music, et cetera (Holt, 1997; Lizardo, 2008; Jarness, 2015; Lena, 2019; Purhonen et al., 2019: 75-80). This can be explained with the increased upward mobility through education of members of the lower and middle classes and the professionalisation and institutionalisation of popular culture (Baumann, 2001; Lena, 2019). Consequently, the artistic field’s dogmas remained strong across cultural fields, albeit in various degrees.

The enduring impact of these dogmas does not mean that they are set in stone. Over the years, there have been many exceptions, while art history develops as a less linear process than may have been suggested above. Heumakers (2015: 353-362), for instance, presents it as a continuous tension between art for art’s sake and social involvement. Furthermore, artists can only be *relatively* autonomous from the rest of society, while a purely aesthetic gaze is nearly impossible. The latter would imply that not only ethical *criticism* is dismissed but also ethical *appraisal* – not only the fear of negative impact in society but also the aim to have a positive impact. However, artists often wish to invoke certain emotional and cognitive responses. Over the years, many artists have explicitly kept aiming for social impact. Nevertheless, many in the artistic field do not take engaged or critical art seriously (Bourdieu, 1996: 71-77; Bishop, 2006). Many still use the dogmas of autonomy and aesthetics as a means of distinction, turning them into a sort of artistic myths with strong performative power.

TWO RECENT ART CONTROVERSIES

Over the past few years, there have been many examples of progressive art criticism that caused heated debates between defenders and challengers of the artistic dogmas, eventually resulting in ‘cancellation’ or – a moderate solution – contextualisation (e.g., Matthes, 2022; Ng, 2022). Rather than presenting a broad overview, two cases were selected for an in-depth analysis. By adopting a strategy of maximum variation sampling (Patton, 1990), this essay shows the similarities between two cases that differ in three significant aspects: country, art discipline and type of moral issue. Hence, the aim of maximum variation is not to compare these cases in search for differences, explained by looking at national and field-specific properties, but to study the *shared* patterns in the used arguments *despite* large heterogeneity (Patton, 1990: 172).⁵

The starting point of the research was a case on the issue of gender in the visual arts in the Netherlands.⁶ Subsequently, I searched for a second controversy that differed in the three mentioned aspects, resulting in a case on the issue of ethnicity in literature in the United States. A further, unintended difference between both cases might be the more commercial nature of the latter one: the novel at stake was marketed as both a new literary classic *and* an unavoidable bestseller, making it a hybrid of the autonomous and heteronomous poles of the literary field (Sánchez Prado, 2021). Also, this case involves the accusation of cultural appropriation: the author’s ethnical identity magnified the perception of moral flaws. An unintended and somewhat unfortunate similarity between both cases appeared to be an underrepresentation of aesthetic arguments (see below).

Both cases were studied by analysing publicly available material. Even though most art controversies initially erupt on social media (Ng, 2022), I focus on the resonance in more established media, that report on the debate within the field itself and feature lengthier arguments.⁷ NexisLexis was used for searching news articles, opinion pieces and letters to the editor in English and Dutch respectively, around the months in which the specific issues were debated most. This was complemented with several sources that newspaper articles referred to, such as activists’ petitions, online essays and some audio-visual material. Only sources that featured opinions were included in the analysis, predominantly by – but not restricted to – participants of the artistic field, resulting in 38 relevant sources for the American case and 15 for the Dutch case. These were coded according to different arguments pro and contra ethical critique.

Below, I first present the issues at stake and the institutional responses. Subsequently, I analyse the defensive arguments by members of the artistic field and their adherents, followed by the initial critics’ counter-arguments. References are listed under ‘Primary sources’.

Stereotypes and Misogyny: Presenting the Two Cases

Chronologically, the first case is the novel *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins, released in January 2020. It tells the story of a Mexican woman and her young son who are taking on a highly dangerous migration route by train to the United States, on the run from a local drug lord. The author intended to educate American readers and let

⁵ Many other cases were encountered, yet these were studied in a less structured and in-depth way. The arguments used show many commonalities with the two presented cases, except that aesthetic arguments often feature more prominently.

⁶ Previously, I wrote a blog post on this case (van den Haak, 2020).

⁷ But see Hopman’s (2021) Bachelor’s thesis for a thorough analysis of Instagram reactions on the Dutch case.

them empathise with Mexican immigrants, who are often perceived as a ‘faceless brown mass’, as she states in her epilogue. However, the novel was criticised heavily by Mexican-American and other Latinx writers for using one-dimensional stereotypes, telling a migration story in the genre of gruesome thrillers and portraying the US as the promised land. Moreover, the novel was perceived as an act of cultural appropriation, as it was written by a white woman, who – despite years of research – was accused of including many factual errors on life in Mexico. Cummins, who self-identified as Latina due to her Puerto Rican grandmother, admitted her limitations in her epilogue by stating she wished ‘someone browner than me’ had written the book. However, these disclaimers further contributed to the uproar. A month prior to publication, Latina writer Myriam Gurba (2019) opened the debate with a scathing online review. This was followed by other Latinx writers on social media, in blogs and in op-eds in established newspapers.

Had it been a modestly published novel, the backlash would not have been as harsh. However, the manuscript had been acquired by Flatiron Books (an imprint of Macmillan) for an alleged ‘seven-digit sum’ after a bidding war between nine publishers. Flatiron promoted it as *the* novel on migration and as a literary masterpiece; a blurb on the cover compared Cummins to renowned author John Steinbeck by calling it ‘[t]he *Grapes of Wrath* of our time’. But despite their inside knowledge or even lived experience, Latinx writers do not receive equal opportunities to publish work on similar topics, let alone to be massively promoted. Gurba (2019) therefore accused Cummins of operating ‘opportunistically, selfishly, and parasitically’. However, she and other critics mainly targeted the publishing industry rather than the author. Writer Reyna Grande (2020), for instance, wrote in *The New York Times*:

It took me three tries to cross that geographical [US-Mexico] border. It took me 27 attempts to get past the gatekeepers of the publishing industry who time and time again make Latino writers feel that our stories don’t matter.

When Oprah Winfrey selected *American Dirt* for her influential Book Club on Apple TV+, a group of 82 Latinx writers signed a petition, asking her to withdraw the book (Literary Hub, 2020). They warned for the novel’s potentially harmful effects for the ‘depiction of marginalized, oppressed people’ in politically conservative times. Many of them organised themselves in the collective DignidadLiteraria. Cummins’ book tour was cancelled due to unspecified threats. There were also more constructive responses: publisher Macmillan promised to more actively recruit Latinx writers and editors in order to prevent future mishaps, while Oprah Winfrey hosted a discussion on the issue that had a broader scope than initially intended. Cummins herself apologised for several mistakes. The turmoil did not prevent *American Dirt* from becoming a bestseller, though.

The second case regards the art installation *Destroy My Face* by Dutch artist Erik Kessels, which opened in September 2020 in Breda, the Netherlands. As part of the photography biennial BredaPhoto, he covered a local indoor skate rank with sixty large algorithm-generated pictures of women’s faces that had been ‘deformed’ by excessive plastic surgery. In order to criticise such ‘Insta-perfect’ beauty ideals and promote self-acceptance instead, Kessels invited skaters to ride over these pictures, which would gradually erase them and hence ‘destroy the destruction’. Though intended as a socially critical artwork, it received immediate criticism on social media. Skating over women’s faces and finally erasing them was considered an act of misogyny and objectification, particularly within the predominantly masculine skate world, in which female skaters do not always feel safe.

The (initially anonymous) artists’ collective We Are Not a Playground (2020) wrote an open letter to BredaPhoto and the skate rank, accompanied by a petition that quickly gained a global following of both artists and skaters.⁸ They argued that Kessels ‘completely disregards any of the social, cultural and/or patriarchal implications of why more female-presenting people decide to have plastic surgery’. Similar to the first case, though, the petition was directed towards the organisation rather than the artist:

We would like to acknowledge the work and effort that goes into creating projects like these and know all too well how long it takes for a work to be greenlit, researched, conceptualised, produced and ultimately become suitable for visitors. It, therefore, feels incredibly jarring that this conversation was not held internally. We think that this speaks volumes not only about Kessels’ practice but about the field he exists and functions in.

Within a week, the skatepark removed the artwork due to the backlash by its own followers and sponsors. BredaPhoto did not applaud this cancellation but did later organise an open debate on the issue and on inclusion in the art world, featuring both Kessels and critics (BredaPhoto, 2020). Kessels himself was asked to withdraw from a photography jury in the UK, even though ‘cancelling’ the artist himself had never been the petitioners’ intention. Also, he received many hateful e-mails (Maassen, 2020).

⁸ The collective, run by young artists, later turned into a more sustainable group that calls for changes in the art world in general, particularly regarding diversity and inclusion (<https://www.instagram.com/not.a.playground/>).

Hence, in both cases, artists aimed to create a socially critical work of art, intended to spark a debate on a social issue or to invoke empathy with a marginalised group. However, they both received objections regarding the content of the works, potential unintended social effects for which the artist did not take responsibility, and the lack of diversity and inclusion in the institutions involved. A further striking similarity is that the most vocal critics are artists and writers themselves, showing serious institutional critiques from within the artistic and literary field beyond unfounded protests by social media crowds.

Freedom and Interpretation: Defending Art

Although both *American Dirt* and *Destroy My Face* were rarely defended with aesthetic arguments, unlike in many other cases in recent years, the autonomy of art does come forward strongly.⁹ The Dutch case shows the most straightforward form, by means of angrily written newspaper pieces. For instance, columnist Elma Drayer (2020) writes: “Once upon a time, the art world was a free place where artists could do their divine thing. And that’s how it’s supposed to be” (my translation). Others refer to the freedom of speech in general, while Kessels himself argues that, “as an artist you have your boundaries, of course, but you should feel an enormous freedom to do things” (Maassen, 2020, my translation).

In the American case, this narrative comes to the fore in rejections of the cultural appropriation argument: writers should be able to write about whoever they wish, regardless of their own identity. Despite her openness to criticism, Oprah Winfrey opened the Cummins episode of her Book Club with: “I fundamentally, fundamentally believe in the right of anyone to use their imagination and their skills to tell stories and to empathise with other stories.” Cummins herself and others ridicule accusations of cultural appropriation in a slippery slope type of rhetoric:

Would that mean therefore that I am only allowed to write stories about Irish Puerto Rican girls who were born in Spain and grew up in Maryland? (Jeanine Cummins, cited in Conroy, 2020)

Shakespeare should not have written ‘Othello,’ Joyce ‘Ulysses,’ Flaubert ‘Madame Bovary’ or George Eliot ‘Silas Marner.’ Everyone is condemned to write autobiographies. (letter to the editor by David Jelinek, 2020).

[W]e will end up with nothing but novels about novelists, and there are quite enough of those already. (literary journalist Jake Kerridge, 2020)

Related to the autonomy of art is the idea that art is *supposed* to provoke or to incite debate, which is particularly salient in the case of *Destroy My Face*. At several instances, BredaPhoto director Fleur van Muiswinkel emphasised the difference between serious criticism and calls for removal:

That one of our works elicited a reaction, we really liked. That’s what we stand for. That’s why we display work in which photographers and artists take a stance and provide the audience with a mirror. We precisely want images to encourage reflection. But please then start a conversation [rather than a call for removal, MvdH]. (cited in Wijnands, 2020; my translation)

A second line of defence regards the discrepancy between the artist’s intentions and the audience’s interpretations. On the one hand, some argue that there cannot be a fixed or correct interpretation, as it is up to the public to decide what a work means, in line with Barthes’s ideas on the ‘death of the author’. Erik Kessels maintains that his work was supposed to raise questions, but: ‘Which ones? Everyone can decide for themselves. I don’t judge, I only bring an issue to attention’ (quoted by Wijnands, 2020; my translation). On the other hand, those who freely interpret the work are criticised for their *incorrect* interpretations. Erik Kessels contradicts himself, backed by festival director Van Muiswinkel and others, by complaining in several media outlets that his critics did not dive into the work to understand what it is ‘really’ about and to detect the intended irony.

Such discrepancies also occur in the Cummins case, yet in a different way. The author intended to let (non-Latinx) American readers empathise with Mexican migrants but was criticised by members of that very community. Many readers and reviewers who like the book, however, emphasise that the intentions worked for them. When Oprah Winfrey asked her audience whose views on migrants had been positively altered, many raised their hands (Oprah’s Book Club, 2020).

Finally, and most vocally, the critics are accused of ‘cancel culture’. In the public eye, substantiated criticism by writers and artists is often conflated with calls for boycotts by masses external to the artistic field, who show a lack

⁹ On Kessels’s work, not one aesthetic judgement is made in the public debate, whereas Cummins’s novel is mainly praised with a – in Bourdieu’s (1984) terms – popular aesthetic, particularly its page-turning quality. Several reviewers do *criticise* the novel with aesthetic criteria (writing style, narrative clichés, lack of complexity), often complementary to their moral critique.

of cultural capital by quickly liking or sharing social media posts without properly informing themselves. Hence, art's defenders accuse critics of a 'vicious backlash' (columnist Jawad Iqbal, 2020), 'sadism' (historian Jonathan Zimmerman, 2020) or 'fascism' (Erik Kessels, cited in *Medialogica*, 2020) while associating them with a 'mob mentality' (literary agent Doug Stewart, cited in Deahl, 2020) or 'the Taliban' (message cited in *Medialogica*, 2020). Note that some of these accusations compare critics with ultra-conservative groups (fascism, Taliban) that were usually associated with moral art critique. Some artists fear a future of self-censorship, which would run counter to the artistic ideal of autonomy.

Responsibility and Talking Back: Countering the Defence

The abovementioned arguments in defence of art are, in their turn, countered by the critics of these artworks. First, although most critics support the autonomy of artists to create whatever they want and to write about whoever they wish, they set certain boundaries. Rachel Morón, one of the young artists who founded We Are Not a Playground, says: "If you hurt (...) or discriminate someone with your words or your work, it has its limits; you will receive something back" (quoted in *Medialogica*, 2020; my translation). The petitions in both cases emphasise that freedom comes with responsibility:

Many of us are also fiction writers, and we believe in the right to write outside of our own experiences: writing fiction is essentially impossible to do without imagining people who are not ourselves. However, when writing about experiences that are not our own, especially when writing about the experiences of marginalized people, still more especially when these lived experiences are heavily politicized, oppressed, threatened, and disbelieved—when this is the case, the writer's duty to imagine well, responsibly, and with complexity becomes even more critical. (Literary Hub, 2020)

As an art institution and your specific recurring role within Breda's cultural field, we find that you need to take responsibility rather than see yourselves as something that is 'outside of society.' (We Are Not a Playground, 2020)

The latter quote disputes the autonomy of art as a sacred domain distinct from the rest of society. One of the artists who had signed the petition, Jan Hoek, sarcastically adds: "Sometimes it seems like everyone, such as politicians, can be criticised... but *artists* can, no, *should* be free, and therefore we cannot heavily discuss things" (cited in *Medialogica* 2020, my translation). Therefore, also the argument that art is supposed to provoke or to incite debate is countered: there *is* a debate but perhaps a different one than the artist wished.

The second defensive argument, on the dissonance between the author's intentions (if relevant in the first place) and the audience's interpretations, is disputed, too. Some critics claim that the author can still be held accountable for possible effects of their work. @Not.A.Playground (2020) writes on Instagram: "Whatever your intention may be, the effects of your work once it is placed are not in your control. (...) Your work has an impact, which can be reviewed separate from your intentions." Kessels's other complaint, that his critics did not inform themselves on his intentions, could easily be disputed: the petition explicitly and thoroughly discussed his aims. Similarly, though Jeanine Cummins aimed to educate white readers and to invoke empathy, she is accused of not taking notice of potential further effects. Mexican-American writer and social justice advocate Julissa Arce (2020) argues:

I do believe that books, films, and TV shows have the ability to ignite cultural change, which can in turn create political change. But when these mediums perpetuate dangerous stereotypes, they do not build bridges; they tear down the ones we've been working to build.

Finally, all actors involved deny the accusation of cancel culture. In both cases, the most vocal critics did not demand destroying the artwork or boycotting the artist, even though the petition against Destroy My Face strongly 'suggested' its removal from the skate rank.¹⁰ This 'suggestion' was largely informed by the location of the work outside the artistic field, as Rachel Morón later explained: "Removing an artwork is really very harsh, but this is an artwork in a public place" (cited in *Medialogica*, 2020; my translation). Similarly, the petition directed at Oprah's Book Club states: "This is not a letter calling for silencing, nor censoring" (Literary Hub, 2020). Cummins's book tour was cancelled after unspecified threats, but the petitioners felt they were held accountable: Julissa Arce blames the publisher that 'our very thoughtful critique about the book and about the industry was minimised as being vitriolic rancour' (Oprah's Book Club, 2020). Some critics deconstruct the label 'cancel culture' as a defence mechanism by powerful actors and institutions who aim to silence rightful criticism by members of underprivileged groups (cf. Ng, 2022). Mexican-American author David Bowles, for instance, writes that it 'feels like more of a move by white hegemony – often an unconscious move, but a move nonetheless – to continue to marginalize the

¹⁰ The 'suggestions' in the petition might be interpreted literally, as something for BredaPhoto to consider, but they can euphemistically be read as demands.

voices of color' (cited in Humphries, 2020). With their allusions to power differences and unconscious hegemony, these critics hint at the type of sociological analysis that will be continued below.

DISCUSSION: EXPLAINING THE CHALLENGE OF ARTISTIC DOGMAS

The two studied art controversies show a clash between those who keep adhering to the dogmas of the artistic field that emerged in the nineteenth century and those who challenge these dogmas in light of twenty-first-century developments. Many established participants in the artistic field and their allies stay close to the dogmas that feel natural to them: artists have total freedom in what they create and should not be curtailed by anyone; they cannot be held accountable for alternative interpretations or social effects; and, though less visible in the two discussed cases, aesthetic valuations are more valid than moral or political ones. On the other hand, different artists and professionals – in many cases younger, female and non-white – are challenging these views: autonomy and freedom go hand in hand with social responsibility; art is no sacred domain that is immune to external criticism; and the spectator might talk back with ethical rather than aesthetic arguments. In other words: the arts are not distinct from but an integral part of society.

The observed ubiquity of such progressive moral art critique in the 2010s and 2020s – of which the discussed cases are only two – as well as the often compliant responses within the artistic field and the culture industries suggest that something is changing. How can we try to sociologically explain this supposed development? Above, the emergence of the artistic dogmas in the nineteenth century was explained with the dissemination of previous intellectual ideas on ethics versus aesthetics and with changing power relations in society. In the next sections, I propose several possible factors that may contribute to the waning of these dogmas that partially rhyme with the above: the influence of academic ideas, such as developed in the humanities; changing power relations between established and upcoming groups; technical innovations, particularly the rise of social media; and finally, increased responsiveness by established institutions.

Building on Academic Ideas

The twenty-first century developments are preceded by academic ideas in the second half of the twentieth century. In a 1993 article, Devereaux already pointed at changes within academia, such as 'the end of the dominance of analytic philosophy, the influence of postmodernism, and most especially, the impact of feminism – both as a social movement and as a theoretical discipline' (p. 211). Besides feminism, I would add critical race theories and queer studies. For decades, works with sexist, racist or homophobic elements have been disputed by academics. One can think of the 'male gaze' with which women are portrayed in film (Mulvey, 1975) and the stereotypes of Black characters in American literature (Brown, 1933). The perpetuating of stereotypes of marginalised groups, it is said, immediately affects the majority population's perceptions, with possibly harmful effects. Another pressing issue is the underrepresentation of certain groups, both regarding narrative characters and artists themselves. This movement has led to the deconstruction of the (white, male) art history paradigm, including its emphasis on autonomy and aesthetics, and the subsequent presentation of alternative canons (Wolff, 2008).

Some scholars, therefore, argue that ethical and aesthetic valuations cannot be separated, because most artworks cannot be judged without taking into account the content.¹¹ Art often teaches us something, broadens our understanding or lets us empathise with other people, even when the artist does not have the intention to do so (Booth, 1988; Carroll, 1998; Currie, 1998). Hence, art often has an explicit moral value, which makes it not unfair to also allow critical reviews of alleged moral failure or unintended interpretations (Gaut, 1998).

Hanson (1998) links this rebuttal of aestheticism with arguments against the autonomy of art: if art is a human activity and if humans are judged with moral criteria, then artists cannot be shielded from such judgements. Moreover, if it is the artist's deliberate purpose to create politically critical art, like both Kessels and Cummins did in a way, one can put the defence strategy on autonomy into doubt. If there are concrete walls between art and the rest of society, why should society listen to what 'autonomous' artists have to say? (den Hartog Jager, 2014).

Changing Power Relations

How did these twentieth-century academic ideas trickle down to the rest of society, including the artistic field? First, there are some trends in the art world itself that coincide with moral art critique. In the 1990s, a so-called 'social turn' occurred, involving collaborative art projects that can be evaluated with both aesthetic *and* ethical criteria (Bishop, 2006; cf. Peters and Roose, 2020). Moreover, a certain social impact is often demanded by governments to legitimise funding (*ibid.*, cf. Belfiore and Bennett, 2008). Other trends are so-called 'artivism', that uses art for political activism (Weij, 2021) and 'relational art', that requires a different type of aesthetic judgement (Bourriaud, 2002).

¹¹ See also Kuipers et al. (2019) for a sociological argument for blending aesthetics and morality.

Moreover, an important factor may be the gradual upward mobility of groups that are historically marginalised due to gender, ethnicity and other non-class features, often ignored by Bourdieu (cf. Prior, 2005). They acquire knowledge in college, notably new perspectives and a certain conceptual vocabulary developed in the abovementioned academic disciplines, and in their turn educate others. For instance, Shively's classic 1992 study on Native Americans' opinions on the Western movie genre shows that while the majority of this group simply enjoyed the films, a small portion of academically trained viewers criticised the stereotypical depiction of 'Indians'. It is likely that this latter group has increased since then. This upward mobility gives minorities more and more critical mass to call certain widely spread beliefs into doubt (cf. Tepper, 2011: 189-198). They claim their voice to question the dynamics behind their historical lack of power. Another aspect of this development is that they often face challenges *despite* their mobility, making them more sensitive for boundary drawing and subsequently more combative (e.g., Waldring, 2018). Although factual information on diversity in the cultural sector is still scarce (e.g., van Haaren and Nadimi, 2023; Malik and Shankley 2020), it is likely that the share of minority groups working in this sector is – albeit slowly – increasing.

Hence, I suggest that it is not simply a matter of a new avant-garde challenging the established artistic elite, once the challengers themselves, but that we are observing an underprivileged group within the artistic field challenging the avant-garde rules in the first place. We may interpret this development, again in Bourdieu's terms, as a claim to power by a slowly upcoming 'dominated fraction of a dominant class', by means of an emerging form of cultural capital (cf. Prieur and Savage, 2013; Prieur et al., 2023). They challenge the acts of symbolic violence, such as the use of the label 'cancel culture', with which their criticisms of allegedly racist, sexist and homophobic art have often been – and still are – dismissed.

New Technology

The visibility of this critical mass is magnified thanks to the technological revolution of the internet, in particular social media. Although social media can lead to unsubstantiated mass behaviour and demands of dogmatic purity, as well as vicious backlashes in return, both led by polarising algorithms, they are ideal means to get oneself heard (Ng, 2022). Social media give the traditionally powerless and the anonymous a means to send rather than solely receive, while hashtags, retweets and other tools can greatly increase their audience (Jackson and Foucault Welles, 2016; Ng, 2022). Hashtags – here #DignidadLiteraria and #WeAreNotAPlayground – can lead to a bandwagon effect: they make others in similar situations more confident that the opinions or feelings they may privately hold, or were not even aware of, are worthy of being heard and shared (cf. Alaggia and Wang, 2020).

Social media also play a role in the globalisation of these academic and activist ideas. Heinich (2000) suggests that, in the 1990s, there were far more art controversies in the US than in France, including several cases on progressive issues. This raises the question whether such debates and arguments have since been 'imported' into Europe. After all, a large part of the conceptual framework of feminist and anti-racist activism has been developed in the US, too (cf. Ng, 2022: 101-136, on cancel culture in China).

Finally, the internet significantly altered the way art criticism functions more generally. It makes art critique more democratic and more immediate: it is no longer only professional critics that share their articulate evaluations in print, but the general public and fellow artists talk back directly (e.g., Gat, 2013).

Compliant Reception

A final possible factor is that such calls do not remain unnoticed but actually lead to responses from majority groups, who may change their minds. Stewart (2017: 49) suggested that social distance 'makes it harder to see why others, in a different subject position, might be offended' by a certain artwork. The mechanisms described above may gradually reduce such distance between the established and the challengers, even though more diversity on the working floor does not inevitably result in more inclusive productions (Saha, 2018). Despite defensive movements, artists and institutions seem more and more responsive to criticism. In many cases, this might be an opportunistic move, motivated by fear: under pressure of powerful masses on social media, conceding can be the best option commercially. Also, governments and other funders increasingly demand social legitimacy, such as policies on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) (cf. Prior, 2005). In other cases, though, actors seem sincere in their expressed increased awareness of exclusionary practices and their willingness to change (e.g., Veil and Waymer, 2021), which would correspond with their predominantly liberal political views (McAndrew et al., 2020). Naturally, more research is needed to identify actors' actual motives.

Such changes, however, only occur step by step. Established actors are inclined to protect their positions, while many of them do not even recognise the link between structural problems and their own privileged backgrounds (Brook et al., 2020). Moreover, the autonomy of art remains a competing value worth defending. Weij (2021), for instance, showed sharp disagreements between curators regarding their assessment of political art vis-à-vis aesthetic valuations; a variety that can likely be extended to their views on moral criticism. It is this increased

ambivalence, this complex search for common ground between different stakeholders in the field, that makes this a sociologically highly fascinating development.

TO CONCLUDE

Artistic values that feel natural to us are in fact historically situated. As the ‘pure aesthetic’ in cultural taste and the related dogmas of the artistic field (autonomy of art, superiority of aesthetic over moral evaluations) once emerged, they can also be challenged by a competing paradigm and perhaps decline (Hanquinet, 2018). Such new values can become ingrained in the habitus, too, shape our valuations of individual art objects and eventually lead to symbolic capital (ibid.). I argue that progressive moral valuations are currently challenging the pure aesthetic (cf. Wolff, 2008: 137-141). This does not mean that ethics will replace aesthetics, as if returning to a pre-Romantic era, but rather that both types of judgements are increasingly combined into a more comprehensive valuation (Bishop, 2006; cf. Kennedy et al., 2019 on food choices).¹² Similarly, the ideal of the autonomy of art is being limited due to increased awareness of social responsibilities external to the artistic field.

As stated before, the two presented cases do not suffice as immediate proof for such a paradigm shift. Perhaps the dominant dogmas of the field of art are stronger and more sustainable than I suggest; they have often been challenged before. Two logics may coexist among different groups, as Hanquinet (2018) suggests. Not all criticism is accommodated, particularly when social media storms rage without participants properly informing themselves. However, there have been many more cases in the last decade that give reason to believe that something is changing in a more durable way. This regards not only highly publicised controversies but also moral evaluations by professional reviewers without immediate consequences or the move towards a more inclusive cultural sector without a preceding row.

However, sociological studies into this matter are scarce. I propose several lines of research in order to fully grasp to what degree, how and why these developments take place. Ideally, such studies have a longitudinal and a geographically comparative character. First, a structured content analysis of media coverage or social media posts can fully uncover the arguments and sentiments of such debates from different sides. A content analysis of newspaper reviews can reveal the development of ethical and aesthetic evaluations over time in different parts of the world (cf. Purhonen et al., 2019). A second line of possible research regards in-depth interviews with artists and gatekeepers with different positions in the artistic field on how they negotiate different viewpoints (cf. Weij, 2021) and how their opinions may have changed over time. Interviews with regular art consumers can complement these insights from a non-professional perspective (van den Haak et al., 2023). Third, recurring national and international surveys on cultural taste can include questions on different modes of valuations in order to determine the distribution of moral valuations over the population and potential changes over time.

Such research could substantiate the developments that I have suggested by means of the analysis of two recent controversial cases, in the publishing industry in the US and the art world in the Netherlands. The artists and writers who protested against racial stereotypes, cultural appropriation, misogynist art and the negligence of social effects are a (mostly) new generation storming into the artistic field, claiming their place and challenging dominant dogmas. They do not aim to ‘cancel’ these dogmas altogether but rather to adopt a more inclusive and comprehensive assessment of art. The future will tell when and to what extent such an inclusive vision will feel equally self-evident, as part of the artistic field’s habitus.

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¹² I follow Hanquinet (2018), though she proposed social values as the main challenger of the pure aesthetic. Furthermore, she combines aesthetics and ethics in a somewhat different way than I do, by arguing that aesthetic distinction is a moral position as such.

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