

Selling Out, Buying In

Brakhage, Warhol, and BAVC

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In many historical studies of media-based art, Stan Brakhage and Andy Warhol stand as exemplars of a binary relationship situated as a struggle between oppositional and conformist versions of the avant-garde. Often, this relationship is understood as the degree to which media artists retain “autonomy” over the production of their work. In the historiographical sketch that follows, Brakhage and Warhol set the terms for understanding the discourse which grounds the avant-garde goal of an autonomous art practice while providing an opening for a look at the ways in which this goal has moved from individuals to institutions, notably the Bay Area Video Coalition in San Francisco. While admittedly brief, this chapter seeks to attend to the particular effects of a metaphor of agency—autonomy—on specific forms of media practice and production.

Selling Out

The category “autonomy” does not permit the understanding of its referent as one that developed historically. The relative dissociation of the work of art from the praxis of life in bourgeois society thus becomes transformed into the (erroneous) idea that the work of art is totally independent of society. In the strict meaning of the term, “autonomy” is thus an ideological category that joins an element of truth (the apartness of art from the praxis of life) and an element of untruth (the hypostatization of this fact, which is the result of historical development as the “essence” of art).

(Bürger 1984, 46)

It is not hard to find artists—painters, writers, filmmakers—who proclaim that their work remains “autonomous” from the commercial demands of consumer society (look to film festivals and gallery openings for specific examples). And it is hard to refute that some forms of art, such as painting and

sculpture, retain a more or less “semi-autonomous” relationship to the social spheres in which they circulate (museums, galleries, and academia for the most part). It follows by drawing upon certain ideas in Hegel’s aesthetic, in particular his linking of a world historical moment to a given style of art, that some art practices are more in sync with the larger political and social discourses within a society during a specific historical period (Hegel 1997). These assumptions may appear self-evident, but they represent the habitual acceptance of ideas previously considered radical or controversial. In becoming accepted as common sense, these radical notions over time have been incorporated into the intellectual fabric of daily life.

“Selling out,” “giving in” to corporate culture, or even “dropping out,” for that matter, are all the linguistic residue generated by the once radical idea of an autonomous social sphere encompassing art practice. What theorist Peter Bürger recalls, in the quotation cited above, is that the concept of artistic autonomy is itself a historical entity and that it represents an idea developed by artists confronting the industrial production of art under capitalism. Thus each new industrial form of art takes a turn at center stage in Hegel’s world-historical moment: in the early twentieth century, cinema; at mid-century, television; now, in the early twenty-first century, the Internet. Each of these technological art forms sets the standard for influence and significance within contemporary visual culture. Not that the new forms have extinguished prior forms of art, but they have shunted them to the side, to a position observably distinct from the “praxis of life.”

Given the shift in popular influence from the easel to the cinema in the early twentieth century, it makes sense that some visual artists chose to experiment with film as a new material for art. By adhering to the romantic notion of the individual artist as singular creative genius, these early film artists—such as Hans Richter and Marcel Duchamp—deployed filmmaking as an extension of the plastic arts and refused the larger production models developed at the time by Hollywood and the various emerging world cinemas. Thus they supplied the film-as-art movement with its founding assumption that an artist can take industrial tools and fashion a non-industrial product. The fragmented nature of film editing, the plasticity of the film negative, and the dissolution of the image into multiple frames matched well with the shock tactics and the disruption of the essential unity of the work of art that defined the project of what Bürger calls the historical avant-gardes. This term “avant-garde,” associated in particular with Dada and Surrealism, took on greater significance in postwar America as a way to indicate clusters of radical artists working in advance of the general populace in matters aesthetic and, at times, political. More importantly, exploiting the term’s origins in military jargon, the avant-garde in art stood against the encroaching visual culture of commercial advert-

ising and Hollywood movies (what Theodor Adorno famously called the “culture industry”) (Wood 2002).

The notion of the avant-garde within painting and sculpture found a parallel development in the, at times, overlapping world of alternative film practice and culminated in a form of bourgeois individualism most fully realized by the film work of Stan Brakhage. Brakhage’s scratched painterly films of the late 1950s and early 1960s expressed the need for an autonomous outside, a transcendental space of possibility, beyond the stifling conformity that dominated art and cultural discourse of the period. Brakhage, by taking POV (point of view in film lingo) as the basis for the shot and by scoring and manipulating the physical material of the film, developed a practice that broke with the assumed photographic correspondence between representation and its subject, and thereby allowed what he saw as a purified expressivity to enter filmmaking. Although earlier filmmakers had used abstraction, Brakhage, following on from Jackson Pollock and the Abstract Expressionists, linked abstraction to the larger psycho-temporal features of human consciousness. He produced films as a form of myth-making by sticking tenaciously to his elemental fascination with film as the poetic expressive practice of an individual artist.

Of course, at the most basic level, Brakhage relied on the tools and materials of industrialized production to create his art films. Cameras and film stock, lenses and filters, all became necessary objects of consumption during the process of making his films. As 16 mm equipment and film stock grew in price (and following the theft of his camera in New York City), he eventually moved to working in Super 8. This smaller gauge consumer format allowed Brakhage to produce films at a lower cost and with more immediate results. He could shoot his film, have it developed, and then screen the actual reversal camera film positive without the need to use a lab to cut the negative or make a print. With this process, Brakhage assumed as autonomous a position one can have while still relying upon the industrial tools of filmmaking, but the results of this autonomy may also be seen as subjecting Brakhage and his work to a withering of influence.

Over time Brakhage’s films have been canonized within the narrowly institutional discourse of avant-garde film scholarship while having been for the most part forgotten by the mainstream academic and popular discourse of film culture. Bürger identifies the social position of avant-garde artists (not to be confused with the status of their artworks) by suggesting that the “aesthetic experience is the positive side of that process by which the social subsystem ‘art’ defines itself as a distinct sphere. Its negative side is the artist’s loss of any social function” (1984, 33). Beyond accruing cultural capital for academics and fellow avant-garde filmmakers, it is unclear what function Brakhage had within society (to say this is to make a sociological as opposed to an aesthetic

judgment). His handwritten signature—"By Brakhage"—on films such as *Dog Star Man* (1962–1964) seeks to signify the hand of the artist in fashioning an art object out of an inherently technological medium. But this mark of the romantic genius isolates the work and the artist from the sociality necessary for the production of art and culture using the industrial model. It is a refusal that comes with a price. It is harsh to say that Brakhage the artist is functionless (though *not* autonomous), but it follows from the value system generated by capital.

Buying In or Selling Out as Artistic Gesture

Even if the problem of where exactly to site the crucial rupture is set aside, to think of [Andy Warhol's] early films as categorically different from the late ones is thus possible only by disregarding the master thematics that continue through them: the mass mediation of all subjectivity, and the permeation of all artistic activity by the culture industries, a fact that has deterred neither the proponents of autonomous art from dismissing the late works nor the mass culture apologists the early ones.

(James 1996, 154)

The "crucial rupture" that film historian David E. James refers to in Andy Warhol's film work is the one separating Warhol's early films such as *Empire* (1963–1964) and *Sleep* (1963–1964), composed of static shots held for long durations, and the later films such as *The Chelsea Girls* (1966) and *Lonesome Cowboys* (1967), essentially homages to Hollywood genre films revolving around the cult of the micro-celebrity. Many Warhol scholars find one set of films to their taste and need to exclude the others in the terms laid out by James.

Contrary to Brakhage's practice as sole expressive force behind his work, Warhol assumed a duplicitous relationship with the very culture from which earlier artists had tried to remain autonomous. If the historical avant-gardes hoped to find the essence of art in its autonomy from the compromised social world of institutions, then Warhol seemed to counter with a non-essentialized position that situated his art practice in dialogue with mass culture, as critique and homage, thereby frustrating both autonomous and mass cultural readings of his work. He actively cultivated celebrity status for himself and for the performers associated with his art. He appropriated imagery from commercial advertising and Hollywood cinema as subjects for his paintings and silkscreens. Going further, in his later art and films he sought to mimic the production model of capitalism by instituting an art world production line in his studio which he christened "The Factory."

His early films had been grounded in formal approaches that confounded the conventions of avant-garde film practice as exemplified by Brakhage. Many of these formal tropes were later incorporated into the body of theory and practice surrounding structural film: long takes, static shots, and few signature effects that could be attributed to the artist (of course, Warhol's formal anti-style became identified as his signature style by critics referencing his early films). These early films were not necessarily more challenging for audiences than other avant-garde films at the time, but they provided an aesthetic position in opposition to the majority of these other films. By upsetting the conventions that had developed within the avant-garde itself, Warhol altered the discourse that was viable within the framework of an increasingly historically situated, and less politically potent, avant-garde. His explicit incorporation of the structures of commercial art production, including the publicity machine that envelopes Hollywood celebrities and his use of the burgeoning media culture as subject matter, implicated art as complicit with the power of capital: whether intentional on his part or not, this point is often debated within art critical circles.

As his early films gained success within the limited domain of art film production, he once again initiated a change in his art practice. He began to "produce" films that were conspicuously co-directed, at first, and then wholly directed by others in his Factory entourage, most often Paul Morrissey. However, by distancing himself from the actual hands-on work of art-making, by reducing his role to signing art after its completion by others, either directly as in paintings and silkscreens or indirectly as in credits for films and performances such as those by the rock group Velvet Underground, Warhol invoked earlier traditions within art production while assuming the role of producer as conceived by the Hollywood studio system. Thus, the Factory may be viewed as a 1960s version of the Renaissance guild system with those who frequented the Factory standing in for apprentices (the celebrities and groupies) and journeymen craftspeople (more accomplished artists such as Morrissey and Lou Reed).

Of course, Warhol's signing of works not directly produced by him may also be seen as a critique of artisanal forms of artistic technique and creative authorship: the basis for Brakhage's work. Whereas Brakhage's signature reaffirms the hand of the artist in producing a given film, Warhol's signature through productive absence is at once a thumbing of his nose at the institutionalization of art (in line with Bürger's reading of the historical avant-gardes) but also a marking of an object with the force of artistic signature. Warhol's work produced by the Factory does not hide the author so much as it confers a singular authority on his signature as artistic gesture. The technique of art is effaced—that signature style or brush stroke by which artistic careers are

made—to be replaced by the signature itself: sole repository of the role of the artist in a society of exchange value.

All of Warhol's later work may be seen as some version of this gesture of signature. Warhol seemed to be fully aware of the celebrity nature of his gestural act: his stated desire to be a "business artist," and his ads for Seagram's and Absolute Vodka function as riffs on celebrity not dissimilar to his silk-screens of the rich and famous (or his white shock wig for that matter). Thus *Andy Warhol's Dracula* (1974, Paul Morrissey) is a Warhol film by virtue of the signature embedded in the commercial nature of the work itself as much as it is a film by Morrissey. *Andy Warhol's Dracula* stands as an extension of the production models that Warhol had already initiated in the work of the Factory.

A Model for Selling Out

The institutional and nonprofit worlds have converged in unique ways in the field of independent video. The very reproducibility of videotape as well as its time-based properties placed it squarely outside of the commercial art world market . . . The notion of an art form intrinsically set outside of the traditional art market dovetailed easily with the anti-art-market movements of the 1960s. Here, many thought was a medium that simply could not be co-opted by the commercial art world.

(Sturken 1990, 111)

The introduction of the Sony Portapak in the late 1960s at once opened up the possibilities that eventually led to video art while simultaneously closing down other possibilities, in particular those that had come to define avant-garde film production. The conversion to one-half-inch video as the format for consumer and industrial use was not in response to the needs of artists, filmmakers, or even home movie enthusiasts but arose from an effort by corporations, such as Sony and RCA, to expand the market for event recording through easier-to-use (and more expensive to acquire) technology. The relatively rapid adoption of video ended any misplaced conviction that avant-garde film artists could retain a vestige of an autonomous art practice as the film stocks on which they depended were discontinued and the corresponding cameras became relics maintained by collectors.

Given this background, it is notable that the comments by communication scholar Marita Sturken come from a book co-published by the Bay Area Video Coalition (BAVC) (Hall and Fifer 1990). BAVC was one of a group of alternative media organizations that opened in San Francisco in the late 1970s. BAVC presents a particular case in that it was initiated by a coalition of video

artists and community-based media producers and was funded by a series of grants from the Rockefeller Foundation (Sturken 1987). By providing video production and post-production rentals at low cost to artists and community activists, BAVC created a space for production situated between the workaday world of industrial video and the increasingly cliquish world of public television (which had provided key support for early video art under the aegis of other Rockefeller initiatives such as The New Television Workshop at WGBH in Boston and the National Center for Experiments in Television at KQED in San Francisco).

At the outset, BAVC embodied the aesthetic radicalism and the equally radical politics that characterized the San Francisco media arts scene of the 1970s. Given this, BAVC seems to represent the goal of Bürger's historical avant-gardes in that the interpenetration of art and the praxis of life guided the process by which projects were selected to receive production support. Projects that seemed too commercial were simply turned away or charged fees that matched commercial facilities. Projects that reflected the underlying left politics or modernist aesthetics of the BAVC selection committee, regardless of the experience or technical abilities of the project's producer, would find increased access to equipment and funding. At least initially, under this selection process a considerable amount of video art came to fruition due to the clearly defined mandate to support alternative forms of media: a mandate that leads back to, in many instances, the critique of institutions favored by the historical avant-gardes.

As Brakhage and Warhol depended on relatively low-cost tools in order to produce their films, many video artists in the early 1970s also embraced a low-tech, do-it-yourself aesthetic. Shooting on tape, then leaving the tape unedited or minimally edited, these artists produced work that refused the conventions of network television. But just as Warhol had initiated a more complex and more ambivalent relationship with the glitzy lowbrow culture of Hollywood, many video artists moved in the early 1980s toward producing increasingly visually sophisticated work that came to depend on expensive high-end technology. Consequently production values were ratcheted up as using the latest in video post-production techniques, and special effects became the norm. Even a modest grant of \$10,000 from the American Film Institute (modest by Hollywood standards) could no longer cover the budgets needed by established video artists.

Video art became a practice dependent on institutional support of one kind or another. Universities and colleges, media arts organizations, and galleries and museums all functioned as intermediaries in the process of making work "that simply could not be co-opted by the commercial art world" as Sturken suggests was the thinking at the time (1990, 111). As the 1980s progressed,

video art outside of these institutions became difficult to produce. With the advent of MTV, there was a brief moment when artists with viable technical skills could support their more personal and political artworks by producing music videos on the side. Other artists simply stopped producing video and returned to painting or photography as conservative politicians attacked government grants for media art and systematically defunded them, resulting in the majority of public financial support for media-based art being discontinued altogether.

Within this transformed cultural and economic terrain, BAVC found it necessary to transform itself from an arts institution emphasizing the production of video art and community-based media into a regional training center for video production and new media technologies. Silicon Valley companies such as Apple Computer, Macromedia, and Sun Microsystems heavily funded and supported this transformation (Hochleutner 2001). BAVC continues to provide support for alternative media, but the actual daily activities engaged in at its facilities—training for jobs in industry—suggest that any form of social or cultural critique, by necessity, will be extremely compromised. As the move to video had shut down the possibilities available to film artists, the advent of new media and money flowing up the peninsula from Silicon Valley has shut down historically important media-dependent forms of radical politics and aesthetics.

Looking at Brakhage, Warhol, and BAVC, one sees several responses to the desire of the avant-garde for an autonomous art practice. As I have suggested throughout this chapter, each response actually represents a “semi-autonomous” practice in negotiation with the historically and politically contingent forces of industrial production. Brakhage sought to find autonomy by refusing the aesthetic demands of the culture industry. Warhol sought to endgame the culture industry by producing a critique through an aesthetic of excess consumption. And BAVC sought to create an institution that fostered autonomy (bringing with it the residual notions of the artist as individual expressive agent—Brakhage’s signature—and as collective entity—Warhol’s signature), but market forces and a withering of the dynamics of post-1968 politics eventually undermined the goals of its original charter (Blau 2004). As of now, BAVC’s signature is its brand as applied to the various areas of its website and to its training brochures.

Of course, what I outline here is the history of one phase of a metaphor that has sustained artists during modernity (and, for the most part equally, during the period that has been delimited as postmodernity). But how does autonomous art practice as a metaphor of agency—metaphor in the sense used by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson as a conceptual frame that structures action (2003)—transfer from individuals to institutions? One possible answer is that

the people who organize these institutions are themselves drawn to autonomy as a political and artistic goal. A second possibility is that the intertwining of artists and institutions within the historical avant-gardes has blurred the boundaries between agency as individual action and agency as collective action. As Warhol famously stated he wished to become a “business artist,” then perhaps as Warhol retained the whiff of the *au courant* artist while shilling for Seagram’s and Braniff, BAVC should be considered as advancing its original mandate by exploiting the culture and commerce of Silicon Valley corporations for the benefit of independent media producers.

While the gap between the history of the media-based avant-gardes and those of more mainstream media needs bridging (which involves crossing disciplinary boundaries), it is also important to look at the intellectual trajectories of ideas that bleed across “discourse networks.” As media theorist Friedrich Kittler suggests, one must look at “the *source* of these discourses, of the *channels* or the *receivers* of discourse in the form . . . of readers or consumers” (Armitage 2006, 19). In this instance, the channels for the discourse networks of the idea of an autonomous art practice are Brakhage, Warhol, and BAVC. After all these years (and following the decline of the historical avant-gardes), the notion of an autonomous form of art practice still plays as large at Sundance with its auteurs of independent cinema as it does on the Internet with its activist’s vision of “information wants to be free” (as a common slogan bandied about the web during its formative period proclaimed). This is not to say that the compromised position of art and media in relation to institutions is necessarily one that needs to be condemned as an a priori “bad” discourse. But it is important to state that simply to discount the possibility of at least a negotiated form of “semi-autonomous” art practice, whether applied to film, video, or new media, is to deny the possibility of a future praxis grounded in a politics that can imagine alternatives.

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