

Adrien Genty

Connaissance du masque

Opening Friday, September 12, 2025, 6–9 pm

September 13 – October 5, 2025

Adrien Genty works in a variety of media including sculpture, photography, video, and installation, informed by theatrical forms such as puppetry. Marionettes, glove puppets and automatons often appear in his practice, which is less concerned with animating objects in the manner of a demiurgic artist than with excavating the scripts that underlie the fetish character of the artwork through the exhibition apparatus.

With particular interest in stage props and scenic accessories, sometimes directly sourced from the workshop he shares with puppet makers, Genty's artworks incorporate a reflection on fabrication techniques and machinery, as well as on the conceptual and performative dimensions framing their presentation. His practice thus sustains a dialogue between a personal history marked by puppet theatre, particularly the tradition of « black light theater » in which puppeteers dressed in black vanish against a dark backdrop, and the notion of the autonomy of art, which he interrogates through his practice.

Connaissance du masque presents five works produced for the exhibition, each articulating the paradoxical status of art's autonomy. *Ma mère m'a donné vingt euros*, composed of a computer program simulating random movement, exposes the illusory distance that separates the artwork from its social conditions. The appearance of the leather moccasin is determined by a script that, in fact, leaves little room for chance.

By incorporating elements that recall art's dependence on the social relations constitutive of its autonomy, Adrien Genty ironizes art's claim to "autonomy." Yet by embedding this content, particularly the contribution of a coder, the artwork nonetheless generates the illusion of its independence, at once conscious of and critical toward its own fetish status that conceals its condition of dependence.

La frange du mousse plays as for her on the ambiguity of the notion of fetishism. Made of leather straps mounted on a plexiglass tube, this object resembles a flogger, evoking either an instrument of corporal punishment or sexual pleasure tied to the fixation of desire on a body part in a broadly psycho-sexual freudian register. Yet in Marxist terminology, fetishism has an entirely different meaning: it corresponds to the illusion of transparency produced by capitalism through the form of commodities, itself dependent on the form of value.

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When a product of labor emerges as a commodity, it acquires an exchange value that depends neither on its material properties nor its use value. Exchange value is a quantitative measure of a commodity's value in relation to others, dependent on the socially established average labor time required to produce it, an abstraction of all forms of labor into measurable quantities aimed at realizing surplus value through exchange.

Commodity fetishism corresponds to the opacity of social relations of exploitation and domination specific to the extraction of surplus value in capitalism, hidden behind the veil of exchange and the seemingly purely quantitative relations between commodities.

Already in the opening chapters of *Capital*, Marx described the commodity as a “hieroglyph,” and capitalism as a vast “phantasmagoria”¹, whose knowledge alone does not suffice to unravel its mechanisms. If fetishism is inherent to commodification, the massive ideological character of this illusion lies in the fact that the capitalist mode of production is based on commodity production—even if financialization of the economy complicates this claim. To dissolve the illusion is therefore to attack the mode of production itself.

Table rien consists of four steel legs topped with small magnetic dragons and a lacquered frame. Unlike Marx's wooden table, used to introduce the “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties”² of the commodity, Genty's table does not stand on its head. As hollow as it may be, can the use value of an artwork only appear upside down when it acquires an exchange value if, by definition, it possesses none?

According to Adorno, the principle that art has no use value underpins its critical potential while making it an “absolute commodity”, that is, a pure exchange value, though one that cannot be measured by the same metrics as abstract labor. Artistic labor is exceptional to the division of labor and its productivity criteria, yet it is nonetheless partially subsumed (integrated into value production through its circulation and sale). Art may provide examples of free, self-determined labor, but it is precisely because it depends on capitalist relations that it can negate them, on the condition of renouncing direct impact, which accounts for the impotence of its critique.

The paradoxical status of art arises from this “double character,” as both autonomous and social fact. It manifests in artworks through the internal contradiction between autonomous and dependent elements, incorporated only to distance themselves. This dialectical unity may, depending on context, allow art to appear autonomous in the critical sense, as if governed by its own laws.

For Peter Osborne—who traces the conceptual and theoretical foundations of Adorno's notion of autonomy back to Kant's philosophy of practical reason and aesthetics, particularly in dialogue with the Jena Romantics such as Schiller and Novalis, who transposed the self-reflexive structure of the subject into the artwork³—this notion “offers no more than an immanent critique of liberal capitalist

1 Marx, Karl, *Le Capital*, Livre I, Gallimard, Paris, 1963 [2022], *Le caractère fétiche de la marchandise et son secret*, p. 156

2 Ibid., p.153

3 Osborne, Peter, *Anywhere or Not at All*, Verso, London, 2013, pp. 38–46. The Jena Romanticism corresponds to a short period at the end of the eighteenth century. Interestingly, in relation to our discussion, the eighteenth century saw the spread across Europe of a fascination with automata and inventions that projected moving images, such as “magic lanterns” and other elements of “phantasmagoria,” notably inspired by philosophies that sought to assimilate vital and mechanical functions.

societies, through which figures the possibility of a free *individual* praxis.”⁴ In other words, “the artwork images the political freedom of the ideal liberal individual.”⁵

The production of the illusion of self-determination through the contradictory, self-reflexive structure of the artwork thus rests on its capacity to act like subjects, specifically bourgeois individual subjects. The work *Untitled* (where I appear hiding my face in my hands) perhaps reflects the enigmatic transformation of the object into a quasi-subject, only to highlight the inverse illusion: that the subject is not an object, and that its subjectivity is transparent to itself.

In her last book, Marina Vishmidt describes ideology critique as a double gesture of “diagnosing the systematic and form-dependent operation of structures through and ‘behind the backs’ of individual actors, while at the same time locating the seeming inevitability and immutability of these structures in social and historical practice.”⁶ The aim of ideology critique is thus to denaturalize the objective illusion produced by social structures and restore their historical contingency.

Does Adrien Genty’s work align with such critique? By playing with the polysemy of fetish, the ways of embodying and staging it in the exhibition space, of revealing or masking the scripts underlying the illusion of art’s autonomy, his practice tends, in any case, perhaps less toward fulfilling a form of autonomy in Rancière’s sense of the “aesthetic regime” than in Osborne’s sense of the “supra-aesthetic regime of truth.” In other words, it relies less on an aesthetic conception of art, through its material and sensory specificities, than on a generic one, through a distinct form of (non-)sense production under particular historical and social conditions.

Connaissance du masque reveals the generic character of the fetishism of art and its implicit incentive to produce discourse “freely” and “autonomously.” It allows the exhibition device to be glimpsed through a certain “will to knowledge”⁷, namely, as a biopolitical apparatus of control, where art, like sex, does not appear as a repressed, obscure domain whose secrets must be extorted, but rather as an “ideal point” rendered necessary by a dispositif of implantation, dissemination, and incorporation indispensable for the controlled insertion of bodies into the productive apparatus.

If the boundary between inside and outside, art and non-art, is fundamental to understanding the functioning of this apparatus, it seems to operate less by exclusion than by the inclusion of a multiplicity of materials, techniques, and practices—at least since the institutionalization of the so-called « historical » avant-gardes in the second half of the twentieth century—symptomatic of an autonomy all the more distributed and figured as it is impossible, if not rare and elusive.

From this perspective, Genty’s work performs a kind of institutional critique by pointing to the ideological and political function of cultural institutions as an essential mechanism of their power. He addresses the productivity of art’s autonomy through the power relation inscribed in the internal dialectical structure of the quasi-subject artwork, between its ability to generate the illusion of self-determination and the social and institutional conditions that incite it to do so. He stages the contradiction between the negation of established conceptions or artistic norms enacted by the absolute fetish called “artwork” and the institution’s capacity to integrate this negation into its own

4 Osborne, Peter, *The Postconceptual Condition*, Verso, London, 2018, p.71

5 Ibid.

6 Vishmidt, Marina, *Speculation as a mode of production*, Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2019, p. 14

7 Foucault, Michel, *Histoire de la sexualité, La volonté de savoir*, Gallimard, Paris, 1976

functioning. In other words, he manipulates as much as he allows himself to be manipulated by the relations of power and domination at play within the “perverse” framework of the exhibition.

Under the conditions of financialized economy, the elision of the boundaries between productive and reproductive spheres, and the development of entrepreneurialism, however critical it may be, art’s autonomy is, for Marina Vishmidt, no more than an “immanent refusal within heteronomy, and no longer a counter-power to which power (heteronomy) is partly immanent, as it is in Adorno’s account”⁸ and perhaps still in Osborne’s.

Beyond the irony of art’s autonomy, *Connaissance du masque*, and Genty’s work more broadly, suggests perhaps an irony of the irony of fetish. That is, it does not so much ironize art’s autonomy as the artwork’s critical capacity to incorporate the heteronomy of its social conditions in order to generate the conscious illusion of its self-determination. Not that it has become impossible to generate a surplus of negativity in this way, understood as Adorno’s modernist paradigm, but that this surplus is converted into positivity within the broader structure of value extraction. In other words, the point is not that the kind of individuality to which art aspires no longer offers an alternative to abstract labor, but rather that it increasingly imposes itself as such through the expansion of logics of flexibility, improvisation, disruption, under the paradigm of “creativity.”

Jean Bourgois

8 Vishmidt, Marina, *ibid.*, p. 94