The concept of autonomy has been a resurgent theme amongst radical social movements over the last few decades. Beginning with resistance to manifold forms of exploitation and oppression, autonomy is the practice by which radical social movements subvert them and construct concrete democratic alternatives. The first issue of Affinities is dedicated to the spaces created when the concept of autonomy becomes practice.

The notion of autonomy has guided experiments in social organization that are wondrously diverse in what they resist, the forms they take, and in their outcomes. This collection is composed of voices arising from struggles within and against homophobia, the environmental devastation wrought by car-culture, IMF- and State-induced poverty, the commodification of culture, the hetero-normativity of corporate media, labour precarity, patriarchy, racism, and still other forms of social marginalization and exploitation. While not exhaustive, the struggles discussed here therefore cover a broad range of movements organizing at different nodes, in different spaces.

A key quality these contributors bring to our attention is the varying forms that emerge from the creation of autonomous spaces. From Italy, activists from the centri sociali occupati e autogestiti (the occupied and self-organized social centres, or csoa) movement speak of the occupation of urban areas, of the attempt to set up social hubs that allow communities to explore ways of meeting their own needs, outside of the circuits of the state and corporate forms. Brought together in a “virtual roundtable,” Argentinean workers speak from the network of worker-recovered enterprises, illustrating how labour does not need capital to run a factory. We receive a valuable first-hand account of two spaces of sexual autonomy, the Queeruption event and the Okupa Queer squat in Barcelona, and a dispatch from within North American urban cycling cultures describes the creation of antagonistic and livable alternatives to the suicidal endgame of car culture. Two urban activists reflect on their time in the Zapatista caracoles, arguably one of the largest autonomous spaces in existence, where entire generations teach each other the lessons of democracy, self-sufficiency, and solidarity. An analysis of slash fiction speaks of the autonomous zones already present within our converged and concentrated mediatic landscape, reminding us that independent media are as much about creating and sustaining subversive cultures as they are about reporting on the struggles those cultures create.

All of the pieces in this first issue of Affinities, then, are voices emerging from the daily struggles to create spaces that are ‘other than’ those of constituted power, the voices of autonomy. While disparate, these struggles are not necessarily disconnected however. As a delegate’s piece on the fourth Latin American Conference of Popular Autonomous Organizations (held earlier this year in
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Montevideo) shows, autonomous experiences can reach out and connect across struggles, cultures, and continents. What these struggles have and produce in common is not only the manner in which their self-definition aims to resist the practices of domination, but real experiments in social relationships that create alternatives to those practices. As Hollon and Lopez suggest, autonomy "is a project rooted in both community and rebellion, where community-based resistance redefines the terms on which relationship building occurs." Autonomy, then, is not merely a practice of refusal, but a real production of alternatives.

The way in which these concrete alternatives are defined is a recurring theme for our contributors. Carlsson’s piece tells us of outlaw cyclists whose DIY approach eschews both car-culture and the recent and persistent niche marketing to cyclists and other outdoor enthusiasts. Similarly, for B. Vanelslander the Okupa Queer squat in Barcelona was as much about resisting the “peseta rosa, or gay consumerism, and the neo-liberal appropriation of sexual identity” as it was about fighting homophobia. This relationship between autonomous movements and more established left-wing politics (be it discourses of consumer sovereignty, established trade unionism, state reform movements, or others) is a fraught yet defining one, always present, always bringing with it a series of difficult ethical questions surrounding autonomy, solidarity, and responsibility.

There is a danger, for example, of conflating the goal of creating a safe, anti-oppressive space with the search for an impossible purity. If respect for difference is a defining moment for movements creating autonomous spaces, most of the voices in this collection acknowledge that relationships with the spaces outside one’s own are a perennial challenge. As Steve Wright’s translations of work by social centre activists show, social centres can be ripped apart by discussions over how to relate to the people who attend cultural events but are not otherwise involved in the protection or organization of the space. Moreover, these spaces are not idyllic islands free of oppression or contestation. Social centres can become no better than affordable versions of nightclubs, circulating up-and-coming cultural forms for general consumption. Queer squats can become the setting for forms of bi- and transphobia. Worker cooperatives can morph into scaled-down replicas of the hierarchical relationships enacted within multinational corporations. The membrane separating each of these instances from what they refuse to identify as is in a continual process of constitution and degeneration, a perpetually present part of the ethical and organizational challenges confronted by the subjects creating these autonomous spaces.

The act of bringing attention to and reflecting upon the autonomous spaces created through these struggles is at once an ethical and strategic move for politically committed scholars, theoretically committed activists, and anybody in between. Ethical because it resists a fascination with established, or constituted, forms of power in favour of emphasizing the moments in which that power is ruptured and anti-oppressive practices enacted. Strategic because it is only through inquiry into the real alternatives created during such struggles that we
become aware of our potential and can therefore protect and multiply such spaces.

Despite their problems, these spaces of autonomy are precious reminders of alternate ways to live a life, of the very real moments where resistance to constituted power generates subversion and new democracies. While dramatically different from each other, each also carries lessons for the others. Hollon and Lopez’s article asks the question of how practices from one autonomous space can be imported into another setting, demonstrating the manner in which forms of struggle tend to circulate from one space to another. B. Vanelslander’s piece reflects on the merits of permanence versus temporariness in the creation of autonomous spaces. Rambukkana considers the role of alternative cultural spaces within movements fighting to escape oppression. Finally, all autonomous spaces must be protected, an effort which, as Ciccarelli makes clear in his interview, often involves massive expenditures of time and resources. Furthermore, we need to be wary of the difference in privilege between those who may play at creating autonomous spaces and those for whom their creation arises out of naked necessity, a need to do or die. The existence of this latter continuum raises questions (largely unaddressed in these essays, and therefore requiring further inquiry and discussion) of the mutual obligations of solidarity binding such spaces, moments, and practices.

Rather than hoping to achieve an unlikely synthesis, the best way to confront the questions brought up here is to listen to these voices. They are the best guides to the composition of the struggles they emerge out of, to their successes and failures, joys and sorrows, inspirations and fears. By listening to the voices of autonomy we accomplish a double step that is also amongst the goals of this journal: to reflect on actions and act on reflections in the creation of spaces that show us another way.