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Edited by Connell Vaughan and Iris Vidmar Jovanović

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The ‘End of Art’ and Art’s Modernity

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ABSTRACT. G.W.F Hegel’s ‘end of art’ thesis, as it is commonly called, is often thought to be the most major deterrent to attempts to assimilate modern and contemporary art into the Hegelian system or to understand modern and contemporary art through the lens of Hegel’s aesthetics. This paper dispels such a view and asserts that the Hegelian ‘end of art,’ does not herald a death of art or even an end to art’s developmental history. Instead, it puts forward the original thesis that such a supposition has arisen, at least in part, from the erroneous conflation between the Hegelian ‘end of art’ and the dissolution of the romantic form of art. It argues that the most prominent interpretation of Hegel’s ‘end of art’ as the end of art’s time serving its ‘highest vocation’ ought to overtly locate this phenomenon as occurring much earlier with the dissolution of the classical form of art. This reading has the advantage of construing art as free to progress beyond this ‘highest telos’ and, as such, it is far more conducive to the integration of developments in modern and contemporary art.

1. Introduction

It is a great misfortune that Hegel’s aesthetic theory is commonly seen in Anglophone philosophical circles as bearing no applicability to modern art, or worse, is seen as completely implausible, as a result of one of its most perplexing and poorly understood aspects – the so-called ‘end of art’ thesis.

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The Hegelian 'end of art' thesis arises from the notorious assertion in Hegel's *Lectures on Fine Art* that art 'considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past.'² Outside of Hegelian scholarship, and sometimes within it, this infamous statement is largely taken to mean that Hegel is announcing that a literal 'death' of art has already occurred and that no significant works of art will henceforth be created.³ This assumption seems not only outrageous or radical to most contemporary students but also clearly incorrect and almost laughably naive; the sheer volume of art since the nineteenth century is held up as overwhelming evidence against such a claim.⁴ Consequently, much of the contemporary reception of Hegel's aesthetic theory does not look far beyond this widely-held interpretation; it seems fruitless to delve into a philosophy of art that meets an immediate refutation in the existence of a richly diverse and influential modern art tradition.⁵ With this acceptance, it seems only natural to suppose that Hegel's philosophy is poorly positioned for any constructive engagement with the art of modernity.⁶

A less extreme reading of this aspect of Hegel's aesthetics is adopted

² *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 11.

³ William I. Fowkes, *A Hegelian Account of Contemporary Art* (Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1981), ix.

⁴ Carl Rapp, "Hegel's Concept of the Dissolution of Art." In *Hegel and Aesthetics*, edited by William Maker (Albany: State University of New York, 200), 13.

⁵ Karsten Harries, "Hegel on the Future of Art," *The Review of Metaphysics* 27, no. 4 (1974), 678.

⁶ *Ibid.*

by the clear majority of commentators, but it must nonetheless be admitted that a caricature of Hegel's 'end of art' seems to persist within the consciousness of the English-speaking world.⁷ It is possible to attribute the endurance of this radical interpretation to the fact that, until recently, Hegel's lectures on aesthetics have been largely inaccessible in English or to the various inconsistencies or alterations found in Hotho's transcripts of these lectures.⁸ However, texts show that the idea of the 'end of art' was both present and controversial amongst Hegel's own students and the presence of such a doctrine in the *Lectures* is impossible to ignore or dismiss in its entirety.⁹ Thus, I uphold that some kind of explanation for the 'end of art' (mis)interpretation and its presence in popular understanding, is necessary, or at least beneficial, for a successful defence of a more modest reading.

It does indeed seem strange that so much has been made of the 'end of art' thesis when the most often quoted piece of evidence for such an interpretation of Hegel's philosophy is nothing more than a passing sentence. Furthermore, this quote is not even a statement that art as a whole has come to an end, but only that it is art in the phase of its 'highest vocation' that is now a thing of the past. If this singular declaration were the only indication that Hegel held such a view, then it would be quite frankly

⁷ Fowkes, *A Hegelian Account of Contemporary Art*, ix.

⁸ David James, *Art, Myth and Society in Hegel's Aesthetics* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009), 72.

⁹ *Ibid.*

absurd that this 'end of art' thesis has come to be the idea most widely associated with his aesthetic philosophy. However, there are indeed other reasons for thinking that the production or development of art must draw to an inevitable close as part of the Hegelian aesthetic system; Hegel completes Part I of the 'Lectures on Aesthetics' by describing the end or 'dissolution' of the romantic form of art – the final *Kunstformen* in his triadic scheme. Furthermore, some have argued that the unfolding dialectical structure of the Hegelian system necessitates that art does come to an end as religion and then philosophy take over the mantle of Spirit.¹⁰ It is my conjecture that despite there being no good reason to think that these two 'ends' of art are one and the same, the commonness of the 'end of art' thesis has arisen, at least partially, from the mistaken conflation between the assertion that art, in its highest vocation, has come to an end, with the dissolution of the final form of art. We will see that even in the abundance of literature that dispels any extreme interpretation of the 'end of art' thesis – and correctly assesses the meanings and limitations of these two types of endings in Hegel's writing – there is rarely if ever a satisfactory distinction drawn between these two endings. In fact, this conflation is implicit in the commentary of some of the most prominent and esteemed academics in the field and a common outcome is the supposition that Hegel had claimed the end of the romantic form of art as early as his lectures on aesthetics in the

¹⁰ Dieter Henrich in Benjamin Rutter, *Hegel on the Modern Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 10.

early nineteenth century.¹¹

I concur with ample secondary literature that holds the ostensible 'end of art' to be nothing other than the demotion of art from the place it once held as the apex of human culture. However, I put forward the notion that this does not occur with the dissolution of romantic art, which is normally associated with the 'end of art', and assert that such a conflation is a mistake which has resulted in the existence and persistence of the view that art for Hegel had already come to some kind of death or completion of its development in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Instead, I propose an innovative, but I believe accurate, interpretation of this 'end' of art as occurring not with the closure of the romantic form of art, but with the closure of the classical form of art. I then defend this position from the allegation that the continuation of art's production or development past this point is redundant. I achieve this through reference to the preservation that is inherent within Hegelian dialectical logic.

I will then address the professed dissolution of the romantic form of art and argue that because the 'end of art in its highest vocation' has already occurred with the transition from the classical to the romantic form of art, there is no reason to suppose that *romantic* art is a 'thing of the past' or that a vocation-centred 'end of art' heralds a conclusion of art's development. Nonetheless, the declared dissolution of the third and final form of art does

¹¹ Stephen Houlgate, "Hegel, Danto, and the 'end of art'." In *The Impact of Idealism: The Legacy of Post-Kantian German Thought* Volume III, edited by Christoph Jamme and Ian Cooper (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 266.

on its own strongly suggest the end of art's developmental history, even if this is seen as something entirely different to the end of art *in its highest vocation*. This certainly appears to pose a problem for the integration of modern and contemporary art into Hegel's aesthetic theory if this dissolution is historically located prior to the emergence of these artistic movements. However, many subsequent philosophers, most notably Arthur Danto, hold that there are good reasons for associating modern art with a Hegelian-style ending of artistic development and it is reasonably clear that the end that they have in mind concerns or includes the dissolution of the romantic form of art. This dissolution is equated with a completion of artistic development that they see as tantamount to a radical break in art's historical progression and, what is more, they believe that this radical break can be perceived in modern art. On this view, modern and contemporary art can be given a place within Hegel's aesthetic philosophy, but only as synonymous with the end of romantic art.

I will then assess the major problems that this popular view encounters; the contest that any future artistic developments would present to this formulation and the objection that there is in fact no fundamental discontinuity or change in modern art that warrants the claim that it enforces an end of progression. To overcome these issues whilst retaining the insights and benefits of the common equivocation between art's 'end' and its modernity, I argue that although a particular limitation of art is indeed revealed through contemporary conceptual and postmodern art, and this can

be seen as the completion of a particular conceptual development, this does not indicate an end to art's overall development, nor is there any significant break from the romantic form of art so as to justify the postulation that this work is somehow outside of the romantic category. In other words, the dissolution of romantic art that is foreshadowed or gestured towards in instances of modern and contemporary art is more a case of describing a particular limitation of art than it is a historical ending of either art or its romantic form. Thus, it can be said that there are two 'ends' of art, so to speak, that are described in the *Lectures on Fine Art*: art's end as its highest vocation, and art's end as a limit that it cannot ever surpass. Ultimately, it will be shown that neither of these 'ends' prevent modern and contemporary art's incorporation into Hegel's aesthetic theory.

2. The End of Art in Its Highest Vocation

There are surprisingly few promoters of the 'death' of art interpretation of Hegel's 'end of art'.¹² But, if the Hegelian 'end of art' is not to be understood as the completion of its production, then it may be asked precisely what is meant by the 'pastness' of art in the *Lectures on Fine Art*. The most prominent interpretation states that the so-called 'end of art' provides insights into its future after Hegel, but without being forced to hypothesise, in the manner of some commentators such as Arthur Danto and

¹² Houlgate, "Hegel, Danto, and the 'end of art'," 264.

Carl Rapp, that the contemporary situation is the pinnacle and endpoint of art's progression.¹³ This popular reading proposes that the idea that art is a thing of the past indicates only that it no longer serves the same function for humankind that it once did. In other words, art in the past fulfilled some ultimate role, or bore some higher significance, that it is no longer able to realise and it is only in this sense that it has come to an end. The 'end of art' is not a cessation of artistic activity or even necessarily the end of its historical development, but simply the fact that art has come to an end of its time as an apex of human culture, self-consciousness, and creation. This reading corroborates with Hegel's statements in the *Lectures on Fine Art* and with certain aspects of his aesthetic system as a whole; Hegel writes that it is only art '*in its highest vocation*' that is a thing of the past, and the structure of Absolute Spirit suggests that art eventually passes the mantle of Spirit's expression, in its most complete form, over to religion and philosophy.

Robert Pippin does not uphold that there must be an end to art's historical development within the Hegelian system, and so it is only natural for him to take the view that the 'end of art' is indicative only of a decline in its importance to humanity.¹⁴ He connects this decline with art's aim of depicting beauty and the decrease in beauty's philosophical significance in

¹³ Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 122.

¹⁴ Robert B. Pippin, *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), 96-7.

modernity where beauty is no longer viewed as an accurate or complete embodiment of Spirit.¹⁵ A similar view is expressed by Karsten Harries, as well as by Benjamin Rutter, whom holds it to be 'quite certain' that Hegel bears witness to a diminishment of art's 'significance for human self-understanding.'¹⁶ Stephen Houlgate also asserts that, for Hegel, art can 'no longer fulfil its *own* highest vocation;' that is, it is no longer the 'highest mode in which truth finds expression.'¹⁷ Whether the highest vocation of art is seen as the depiction of beauty, truth, or self-understanding (and certainly all three are connected for Hegel), the assessment that art's 'pastness' refers to the passing up of this vocation, and an associated decline in its significance, is echoed throughout the secondary literature.

It appears that this understanding of the so-called 'end of art' avoids the problems that are faced by the interpretation of it as a cessation of artistic production or the completion of its historical development. Of course, the idea that art no longer holds the meaning for humanity that it once did may be challenged and, pragmatically, it may be judged that a valuable theory of modern and contemporary art will elucidate its importance for humanity rather than highlight a decline in importance. Nonetheless, this theory does not face the kind of substantial empirical repudiation that the claim that art will cease to evolve will potentially face with the advent of future artistic development. However, there is good

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Rutter, *Hegel on the Modern Arts*, 6.

¹⁷ Houlgate, "Hegel, Danto, and the 'end of art'," 268.

reason to believe that the solution to this predicament is not as simple as it seems; the notion of art's waning significance does, at first glance, seem to be intimately connected to the completion of its progression. This is the case if art's realisation of its highest vocation is equated with the completion of its development, as it is for Danto in the self-definition or self-disclosure of art in modernity.¹⁸ It does seem natural to suppose that art has begun to wane in significance as a result of the fact that it has completed its historical development and thus no longer serves its highest purpose, having passed this purpose over to religion or philosophy.

Nevertheless, as it has been noted by Noel Carroll, 'the continuation of a linear, developmental history of art, and such a narrative logically requires only that art have a goal, not that the goal be the allegedly highest one.'¹⁹ So, in other words, art can have achieved its highest goal and then continue to develop or progress past this so long as it strives for some other, lesser goal. In the Hegelian framework, this highest goal of art is to present Spirit in physical form – a goal that is achieved within classical art – but once Spirit is revealed to possess an interiority beyond the physical, then it can continue to strive to present this ineffability of Spirit. Consequently, we ought to think of the end of art's historical development as something entirely separate from the achievement of its highest vocation and, what is more, the decline in art's significance once it no longer serves this aim does

¹⁸ Noël Carroll, "The End of Art?" *History and Theory* 37, no.4 (1998), 27.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

not entail that it has come to the completion of its development or progression.

It is mostly uncontentious that, within the Hegelian system, art of the classical form fulfilled a role that art is no longer able to fulfil. This is because it was, at the time, 'the highest mode in which truth finds expression.'²⁰ Classical art made accessible an ultimate truth by presenting Spirit, as it was most comprehensively conceived at the time, embodied in the sensible through an 'individualised and determinate unification.'²¹ It is thus in this central stage, and not in the final romantic stage, that art achieves most adequately its highest *telos* as a 'vehicle of the Absolute.'²² In this way, art of the classical form was the zenith of human culture and self-knowledge in its time and, for this reason, classical art can be considered the 'organic and organising centre' of Hegel's aesthetic system.²³ Of course, it may be disputed that this is the highest vocation of art; Danto understands art's defining purpose to be a 'purely cognitive one of discovering what art truly is' and this only comes to fruition in the unfolding of modernism.²⁴ However, within Hegel's system, any alternative

²⁰ Houlgate, "Hegel, Danto, and the 'end of art'," 268.

²¹ Martin Donougho, "Art and History: Hegel on the End, the Beginning, and the Future of Art." In *Hegel and the Arts*, edited by Stephen Houlgate (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 189; William Maker, Introduction in *Hegel and Aesthetics*, edited by William Maker (Albany: State University of New York, 2000), 6.

²² Maker, *Hegel and Aesthetics*, 6.

²³ Eva Guelen, *The End of Art: Readings in a Rumour after Hegel*, trans. James McFarland (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 30.

²⁴ J.M. Bernstein, "Freedom from Nature? Post-Hegelian Reflections on the End(s) of Art." In *Hegel and the Arts*, edited by Stephen Houlgate (Illinois: Northwestern

aim of art must be considered secondary to the 'task of presenting the Idea to immediate perception.'²⁵ Though Hegel does allow the possibility that even after the achievement of the classical formation 'art will always rise higher and come to perfection' this does not mean that it will do a better job of achieving this ultimate task.²⁶

The reason why art is incapable of accomplishing its highest vocation after the dissolution of the classical form is that humanity's understanding of Spirit has since evolved to become incompatible with its perfect embodiment in sensible form. As it is realised that there is an interiority or subjectivity essential to Spirit that cannot be expressed in this way, art must sacrifice the determinate unity of form and content found in classical art if it is to continue to present Spirit to the best of its ability.²⁷ If post-classical art can continue to present or allude to the Idea then it may be asked why this is not to be considered the continued achievement of its highest *telos*. There are two distinct but related answers to this question. Firstly, it must be emphasised that art's task is not just to present the Idea, but to present it to immediate perception. Classical art achieves this through the Ideal of beauty that is the perfect harmony of form and content; post-classical art, however, must portray spirit as inimical to this kind of physical manifestation and point beyond itself to a hidden, interior, divinity - this is why Hegel

University Press, 2007)," 224.

²⁵ *Hegel's Aesthetics*, trans. T.M. Knox, 72.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 509–511.

considers romantic art to be the 'self-transcendence of art.'²⁸ Secondly, with the revelation of spirit's interiority comes the demotion of art from its position as the most complete expression of human culture; it is no longer 'the ultimate form in which self-reflection is mediated.'²⁹ As Stephen Bunguy notes, this does not necessarily mean that post-classical art is any worse than classical art, but only that society no longer attaches the same degree of value to it.³⁰ In Hegel's own words 'the form of art has ceased to be the supreme need of Spirit'³¹ and so it can no longer provide for us the same kind of gratification or contentment that it provided for the ancient Greeks.³²

Art is no longer the ultimate expression of the Absolute because alternative mediums have been taken up as more appropriate vehicles for this role. With the inward turn of Spirit comes the disclosure that the Idea is better understood through the 'image-thinking' of religion and the purely abstract thought of philosophy than through the sensuous medium of art. The status-quo interpretation of the 'end of art' as the completion of the romantic form of art suggests that it is only with the dissolution of the romantic form that art must pass its position as the apex of Spirit over to religion and then philosophy; indeed, this handover is often equated with the

²⁸ Ibid., 80.

²⁹ Stephen Bunguy, *Beauty and Truth: A Study of Hegel's Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 66.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ *Hegel's Aesthetics*, trans. T.M. Knox, 103.

³² Houlgate, "Hegel, Danto, and the 'end of art'," 268.

'end of art' or considered to be its direct effect. However, along with my proposal that the 'end of art' should more truthfully be considered to occur with the dissolution of the classical form, I suggest that religion takes up the mantle as the summit of society with the completion of the classical form of art. This entails that by the time of the romantic form of art, religion was already in full effect as the apex of society and it follows that this is the reason why romantic art 'begins as religious art.'³³ This formulation is supported by the interpretation of art's 'end' as a decline in its significance because it makes sense that such a decline would occur with the emergence of a new, more accurate vehicle of ultimate truth. Moreover, it is my conjecture that Pippin's 'epochal change' in the history of art is not the emergence of an entirely new form of art in modernity, but rather a new phase of the romantic form of art. This new phase of modern romantic art is characterised by secularity and intellectual reflection as religion is revealed as an inadequate source of truth and philosophy comes into effect as the summit of human knowledge and Spirit's self-disclosure.

Fundamentally, the so-called Hegelian 'end of art' occurs not with the dissolution of the romantic form of art, as secondary literature until now has assumed, but centuries earlier with the dissolution of the classical form of art. With this distinction clearly laid out, it is easy to recognise an assumption that exists within the literature on the Hegelian end of art thesis.

³³ Terry Pinkard, "Symbolic, Classical, and Romantic Art." In *Hegel and the Arts*, edited by Stephen Houlgate (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 19.

This assumption is essentially a conflation between the notion that art no longer serves its highest vocation (and so is, in this mode, a thing of the past) with the dissolution of the romantic form of art. It is perhaps easy to understand why such a conflation is made; both aspects of Hegel's aesthetics gesture towards an endpoint, and it is presumed that art can only have the one end. The so-called 'end of art' is explicitly associated with the dissolution of the romantic form of art by both Rapp³⁴ and Houlgate³⁵ among others, and certainly this equivalence is justifiable if the end of art is seen as the completion of its history or the dissolution of the romantic form of art is associated with a decline in significance. It has already been shown, however, that the most charitable reading of the 'end of art' thesis does not concern the completion of historical development and, more crucially, there is very good reason to think that the decline in art's significance had occurred long before the dissolution of the romantic form of art or the advent of modern art. This reason is grounded in the fact that, for Hegel, the highest purpose of art is achieved not in modernity as it is for Danto, but in the classical sculpture of the ancient Greeks. If the decline in art's significance for humanity is a direct result of the passing up of its highest vocation, then it follows that this decline should be properly seen as beginning as soon as this highest vocation is lost or given up. In other words, the 'pastness' of art is no new phenomenon, nor was it a recent fact

³⁴ Rapp, "Hegel's Concept of the Dissolution of Art," 14.

³⁵ Houlgate, "Hegel, Danto, and the 'end of art'," 266.

of Hegel's day, but a truth that has been in effect since art resigned from the role that Hegel supposed it held in ancient Greece.

To defend this position persuasively, there are several issues that must be addressed. First and foremost, the continuation of art's production and development beyond this vocation, and into the romantic form of art, requires explanation given that it no longer has the teleological thrust of this highest aim to drive it forward. Indeed, a central issue in the literature on Hegel's aesthetics and the 'end of art' thesis concerns the continuation of art's production once it is no longer considered an adequate expression of Spirit in its most truthful form. If the production of art is no longer motivated by Spirit's drive towards self-disclosure, the argument proclaims, then it is unclear why it would continue past this point. This view is put forward most notably by Dieter Henrich who contends that modern art is necessarily redundant because it can only reiterate propositions that are expressed with more clarity in philosophy.³⁶ In other words, the end of art in its highest vocation bears 'the implication that art has no more role to play in the representation of truth to humanity.'³⁷ It thus unclear why art's forfeit to religion and then philosophy should not result in the cessation of its production after all. This objection is particularly problematic for the thesis that art's 'end' occurs with the completion of the classical form because it

³⁶ Rutter, *Hegel on the Modern Arts*, 10.

³⁷ Brian K. Etter, "Hegel's Aesthetics and the Possibility of Art Criticism." In *Hegel and Aesthetics*, edited by William Maker (Albany: State University of New York, 2000), 40.

affirms that if this is the case, the entirety of the romantic form of art should not have occurred. Fortunately, Stephen Houlgate presents a convincing solution to this problem though I assert that his explanation offers only part of the story and that the continuation of art past its highest vocation can be more completely explained through reference to the nature of the dialectical structure that underpins Hegel's philosophical system.

As both Houlgate and Benjamin Rutter have disputed, the fact that art no longer meets the highest need of Spirit does not entail that it cannot meet *any* need of Spirit.³⁸ It is the case that the materiality intrinsic to art will necessarily distort, or will never fully embody, the true nature of Spirit; for this reason it is no longer taken to be the most complete representation of truth and it does not satisfy, as it once did, the deepest religious needs of humanity. Nonetheless, Houlgate argues, human beings continue to be physically embodied beings with inexorable aesthetic sensibilities that demand satisfaction.³⁹ Because of this we continue to require an image of Spirit, or of what it means to be 'truly free and human,' that has a sensuous aesthetic element even though such images have been demoted below other, more accurate, non-sensuous representations in religion and philosophy.⁴⁰ In Houlgate's words, 'we are *sensuous, imaginative* beings who require a sensuous, imaginative vision,' therefore a merely abstract, conceptual

³⁸ Rutter, *Hegel on the Modern Arts*, 9.

³⁹ Stephen Houlgate, "Introduction: An Overview of Hegel's Aesthetics," in *Hegel and the Arts* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), xxiii.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*; Julia Peters, *Hegel on Beauty* (Routledge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Philosophy, 2014), 131.

understanding will not suffice on its own or an essential dimension of self-awareness will be missing.⁴¹ This assertion is echoed by Terry Pinkard who holds that although art after the classical period can no longer fulfil us on its own, 'it remains crucial and irreplaceable in human experience.'⁴²

This argument is convincing in regard to the continuation of art's manufacture, but it does not completely overcome the damaging allegation of art's triviality after the classical period. Regardless of whether artistic practice persists or not, it is difficult to see how it can be meaningful or necessary in any way if, as Henrich suggests, it merely reiterates propositional content that is more accurately expressed in religion or philosophy.⁴³ However, this does make the assumption that aesthetic intuition can offer little more than 'a more or less blurred approximation of conceptual thought.'⁴⁴ Rutter takes this to rest on a failure on Henrich's part to recognise the dialectical relationship between artistic content and its embodiment in artistic form.⁴⁵ Even more fundamental than this though, I take Henrich's main mistake to be a failure to apply the basic principles of preservation inherent in Hegelian dialectics to his aesthetic system as a whole. As William I. Fowkes points out, it is not the case that each moment of Hegel's system is obliterated as Spirit moves forward in a relentless progression, but rather that each moment is conserved within the next even

⁴¹ Houlgate, "Introduction: An Overview of Hegel's Aesthetics," xxiii.

⁴² Pinkard, "Symbolic, Classical, and Romantic Art," 20.

⁴³ Rutter, *Hegel on the Modern Arts*, 10.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

as it is surpassed.⁴⁶ Each stage of the dialectical process reveals an 'aspect of being' and Spirit is 'not reducible to its present state' but must be thought of as a comprehensive, systematic whole that incorporates all the stages through which it has passed.⁴⁷

Therefore, the sensuous embodiment that characterises art may no longer be the highest stage or the most adequate comprehension of Absolute Spirit, but it would still have an essential place as one assimilated component of Absolute Spirit. Though it may not be possible to *fully* express the higher aspects of Spirit in sensuous form, these aspects cannot exist, and Spirit as a whole is incomplete, without the incorporation of art's core insight – the unity of the sensuous and spiritual – along with the cancellation or contradiction of this revelation. Art is therefore preserved within religion and philosophy, but at the same time it maintains its defining individuality so as not to be 'lost' within these subsequent stages. It can be said, as will later be explicated, that art is in this way 'in service' to religion and later philosophy. Thus, Absolute Spirit is not best expressed in abstract philosophy alone but in the holistic compound of art, religion, and philosophy, and there is no good reason to suppose that art becomes redundant after the classical period.

⁴⁶ Fowkes, *A Hegelian Account of Contemporary Art*, 84.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

3. The 'End of Art' Thesis as Prophetic of Modern Art

One final issue that must be addressed in the discussion of the Hegelian 'end of art' is the fact that the final section of the first volume of Hegel's *Lectures on Fine Art* does indeed describe the dissolution of the romantic form of art. It has thus far been shown that art 'in its highest vocation' has been a 'thing of the past' since the dissolution of the classical form of art, and that this has no bearing on the continuation of art's development past this point. Nonetheless, the declaration of romantic art's dissolution is as much a motive for the interpretation that art is over for Hegel as this earlier statement of its 'pastness.' Moreover, this is the case regardless of whether the dissolution of romantic art is seen as something entirely separate from the 'end of art *in its highest vocation*' or not. This is because the romantic form of art is the third and final category of art in Hegel's triadic scheme, and so it is not in any way evident that the history of art is imagined to progress past the point of its conclusion. Furthermore, Hegel lectures as though the dissolution of the romantic form is something that is already upon his early nineteenth-century audience and so an uncharitable reading does suggest that the entire history of modern art should not have happened if Hegel was right. Hegel does indeed express concern over the future of artistic creativity following the loss of a universal religious content for art

that occurs in the later stages of romantic art;⁴⁸ art can no longer exemplify the 'spirit of the times,' because, as Pinkard holds, 'spirit has become too fragmented for any aesthetic presentation to work as presenting the 'truth' to us.'⁴⁹ Some, such as Pinkard, maintain that this does not imply any real 'end of art' while others such as Rutter and Stephen Bunguy think that Hegel's account of the dissolution of romantic art does seem to presuppose such an ending.⁵⁰ What exactly such an ending would entail requires further examination, but it is clear that the dissolution of romantic art presents a further challenge to the integration of modern and contemporary art into Hegel's aesthetic system. This is the case even if it is understood to be an event distinct from the earlier demotion of art's status from its 'highest vocation.'

However, there are a great number of commentators who see the Hegelian 'end of art' not as excluding the artistic developments of the last two centuries, but rather as synonymous with or prophetic of these seemingly 'radical' changes in the world of art. In place of seeing the 'end of art' as incompatible with the advent of modern art, theories such as these view art's end as *affinitive* with art's modernity and see the 'end of art' thesis as shedding light on the state of the twentieth-century artworld.⁵¹ Views of this kind may at first seem at odds with my assertion that the so-

⁴⁸ Rutter, *Hegel on the Modern Arts*, 41.

⁴⁹ Pinkard, "Symbolic, Classical, and Romantic Art," 22.

⁵⁰ Rutter, *Hegel on the Modern Arts*, 50; Bunguy, *Beauty and Truth*, 81.

⁵¹ Bernstein, "Freedom from Nature? Post-Hegelian Reflections on the End(s) of Art," 216.

called 'end' of art occurred long before modernity with the close of the classical period. However, they typically refer not to any declarations of art's waning significance, but rather to the fractured or ruptured nature of late romantic art in Hegel's lectures. In other words, the dissolution of romantic art is the primary concern here, and any association with the end of art's highest calling is unnecessary and, in my view, confused. Therefore, accounts of this kind are not necessarily incompatible with the idea that this 'end' of art occurred with the close of the classical period so long as the dissolution of the romantic form of art is understood to be a different kind of ending than the end of art's time serving its highest vocation. Moreover, accounts of this kind can in fact provide support for the view that modern and contemporary art can be assimilated into Hegel's aesthetic system by arguing that the dissolution of romantic art, or the stages leading up to it, are descriptive or predictive of modern and contemporary art.

The most conspicuous examples of accounts of this kind include two of the twentieth century's most significant aesthetic theories: T.W. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* and Martin Heidegger's 'The Origin of the Work of Art', both of which draw deeply on the idea of the 'end of art' and locate their reflections on art within this Hegelian context.⁵² Adorno pluralises the supposedly Hegelian notion of a single end of art into multiple contradictory endings and any significant predominant 'ending' can only be understood as

⁵² Ibid.

'process' rather than as any discernible point or break in time.⁵³ This understanding of the 'end of art' as purely process has been seen as an attempt to dissolve it into negativity, though this approach has been criticised for failing to escape 'the danger of hypostasizing the end once more...' and so the success of its attempt to distinguish itself from 'a long tradition of employing the topos of the end of art' is disputed.⁵⁴ Regardless, Adorno's stance that that 'the very existence and pertinence of art' is called into question by modernism rests on the avant-garde's interrogation of the very idea of art.⁵⁵ Heidegger takes this view even further by advocating for an 'overcoming' of aesthetics. It is clear that, for Heidegger, such an overcoming does not constitute the end of manufacture of art-like objects but rather an escape from the dominant historical artistic paradigm.⁵⁶ In short, both Adorno and Heidegger promote the idea that the disintegration of an aesthetic attitude and conception of art can be seen not in there being *no more art*, but in the radical shift *within* the art of modernity.

The most enthusiastic assertion of this idea, however, comes from Arthur Danto, who sees the end of art as primarily the end of its developmental history rather than the cessation of its production. If it was Hegel who first proposed the 'pastness' of art, it was Arthur Danto who

⁵³ Eva Guelen, "Endgames: Reconstructing Adorno's 'End of Art.," *New German Critique*, no. 81 (2000), 157.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 158

⁵⁵ Krzysztof Ziarek, "The Avant Garde and the End of Art," *Filozofski vestnik* 35, no.2 (2014), 67.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

made such a proposal famous for twentieth-century readers of philosophical aesthetics. Though Danto formulates his own theory of the 'end of art,' it is in heavy debt to the aesthetic philosophy of Hegel, so much so that Danto has referred to himself as a 'born-again Hegelian.'⁵⁷ When Danto speaks of the 'end of art' he is not referring to a termination of artistic manufacture but to the completion of a developmental history that culminates in the self-consciousness of art.⁵⁸ In other words, Danto is suggesting that there is a particular narrative progression that characterises art history, through which art becomes conscious of its own processes, that this has come to its natural end in modern art, and that no art made after this time can be seen as contributing to this course of evolution.⁵⁹ The 'self-consciousness' or 'self-disclosure' of art as the end of its developmental history is an idea lifted directly from Hegel that Danto sees as played out in the self-reflective nature of twentieth-century pop art;⁶⁰ art has here reached the limits of its ability to define itself and must now pass the question of its own nature over to philosophy.⁶¹ Art produced after this period is post-historical in the sense that it has attained self-knowledge as best it can, passed this task on to philosophical thought, and is consequently freed from the directing force

⁵⁷ Houlgate, "Hegel, Danto, and the 'end of art,'" 264.

⁵⁸ Carroll, "The End of Art?" 18.

⁵⁹ Arthur C. Danto, "Narratives of the End of Art," *Grand Street* 8, no.3 (1989), 179.

⁶⁰ David Carrier, "Danto and his Critics: After the End of Art and Art History," *History and Theory* 37, no. 4 (1998), 8.

⁶¹ Carroll, "The End of Art?" 20.

that drives art towards this final goal.⁶² History gives way to freedom and the artist is now at liberty to experiment and create without the 'burden of self-definition.'⁶³ This coalesces well with both Hegel's own assertion that artists of the future may draw freely on the many styles of the past and with the current artistic climate in which anything is seen as possible.⁶⁴

Nonetheless, the implementation of Danto's 'end of art' theory within the Hegelian framework from which it originated meets immediate resistance in seemingly incompatible timelines; Danto's end of art occurs in the mid twentieth-century whereas, for Hegel, the dissolution of the romantic form seems to have already occurred at the time of his lectures in the early nineteenth century. It is possible to suppose that art had already reached the end of its developmental history by the time of Hegel's *Lectures*, but the rapid and revolutionary progress that occurred within fine art from the early nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century strongly challenges this suggestion and defenders of Hegel are left not much better off than if the 'end of art' is perceived as a literal death of art. However, this problem appears to be at least partially resolved if the revelation of self-consciousness in art, which heralds the end of art's historical development, is seen not as a singular point in history that has already past, but as an ongoing process which began in the eighteenth century and continues in the art of today.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Hegel in Harries, "Hegel on the Future of Art," 692.

Danto is not alone in this approach and, as will be explicated, many commentators do not interpret the dissolution of the romantic form as a doctrine of literal death. Many commentators who take this view see Hegel's 'end of art' thesis as in some way predictive of modernist and postmodernist art. In fact, Stephen Bunguy identifies the largest group of interpreters as those who 'read the doctrine that art is in some sense a thing of the past as a prediction about art's future, usually referring to the development of art since Hegel's death to support him.'⁶⁵ Carl Rapp for example, argues in his paper 'Hegel's Concept of the Dissolution of Art' that Hegel's description of the last 'end' stage of art is 'uncannily prophetic' of the developments in art that have occurred over the last two hundred years.⁶⁶ Contemporary art is representative of the dissolution of romantic art and this, he believes, is evident in the account of art at this stage as presenting its own 'self-transcendence.'⁶⁷ That contemporary art is at the final stage of art's development does not, however, mean that we should expect art making practices to die out in the near future; Rapp believes there is no reason to suppose that art will not continue to be created in its current state indefinitely.⁶⁸ On this view, Hegel's aesthetic philosophy can tell us much about the nature of modern and contemporary art, but we should not expect any further developments beyond the state of art as 'self-

⁶⁵ Bunguy, *Beauty and Truth*, 74.

⁶⁶ Rapp, "Hegel's Concept of the Dissolution of Art," 14.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

transcendence.'

Robert Pippin takes a similar view regarding contemporary art and the prophetic nature of the 'end of art' thesis, but he denies that this signals the end of art's historical development. Instead, Pippin asserts that in the 'end of art' thesis Hegel made an accurate forecast that some 'epochal change in the institution of art' was stirring, but that Hegel misjudged the nature of this change; Pippin sees the 'end of art' as presaging the emergence of a new form or style of post-romantic art rather than art's dissolution or the end of its progressive development.⁶⁹ Pippin acknowledges that this is a deviation from Hegel's own claims, but he upholds that such a view remains consistent with the basic principles of the Hegelian system.⁷⁰ Thus, for Pippin, it is not at all necessary to maintain that art has become, or ever will become, a 'thing of the past' in order to adopt a faithful Hegelian reading of contemporary art. On the contrary, Pippin's seminal book *After the Beautiful* puts forward the thesis that Hegel's historical approach is perhaps the best method for understanding recent, and potentially future, developments in the history of art.⁷¹ At first glance, it seems natural to prefer an interpretation such as Pippin's over those like Danto's and Rapp's that assert that the contemporary situation signals an end to some development within the history of art. This is because it is immune to the refutation that would ultimately be presented by

⁶⁹ Pippin, *After the Beautiful*, 65.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 133.

any future development within art. To assert that art has at this present stage reached the completion of its development seems akin to Charles H. Duell's infamous 1899 utterance that 'everything that can be invented has been invented'; that is, it seems only a matter of time before such an assessment is considered laughable. On these grounds, it is natural to prefer Pippin's formulation.

Against Pippin's model, however, I argue that it is too great a divergence from Hegel's scheme and that there are strong reasons for upholding that there can be no further Hegelian forms of art beyond the familiar triad. Instead, I confirm that the dissolution of the romantic form of art does herald a certain kind of developmental completion or fulfilment and argue that this formulation is not necessarily problematic for a more faithful adherence to Hegel's triadic system even if the future does yield certain kinds of artistic development. Of course, this can be the case only if the advent of the dissolution of romantic art is not seen as the complete or total end of art's developmental history; it has already been expounded that the nature of the dialectical structure that underpins Hegel's system guarantees the persistence of art's manufacture even as Spirit progresses forward to its realisation in religion and philosophy, so the crux of the matter here concerns the persistence of art's progressive development. It must then be asked, what exactly this 'dissolution' should rightly be seen as describing, if the dissolution of romantic art is not the end of art's overall development yet romantic art it is still to be considered the final form of art.

The dissolution of the romantic form of art simply signifies the completion of the development of the relationship between artistic form and Spirit as universal artistic content; the stage at which art reaches full conceptual maturity in recognition of its limitations. The section in the *Lectures* on the end of the romantic form of art describes this final stage as primarily a 'falling apart' of form and content. Romantic art has already sacrificed the perfect unity of form and content that was established in classical art, but at the 'end' of romantic art these two sides come apart completely; 'on the one hand, into the imitation of external objectivity in all its contingent shapes' and 'on the other hand... into the liberation of subjectivity.'⁷² In other words, the external and internal aspects of art become completely arbitrary in relation to one another and the artwork becomes mere sign.⁷³ Though this does seem to indicate a final stage in the development of romantic art, and indeed art in general, it cannot be considered a stage *within* art's development because once content and form have separated entirely then the object ceases to be art altogether. Instead, I suggest that the so-called 'dissolution' of romantic art is exposed through artworks that push as close as possible to this separation of form and content and, in doing so, expose this as a limitation of both the romantic form and art itself. Art will of course persist beyond the creation of these works, only now with an awareness of both the constraint caused by manifestation in

⁷² Hegel's *Aesthetics*, trans. T.M. Knox, 608.

⁷³ Bunguy, *Beauty and Truth*, 81.

physical form and the enduring connection between form and content as a defining factor of the concept of art. This is no 'end' of art, but merely a realisation of the limit of romantic art in its play with the contingency of external form in relation to the expression of subjectivity. In short, the dissolution of romantic art is the self-revelation of one of its own defining parameters.

I support the view that the dissolution of romantic art constitutes the completion of a certain significant evolution within art, but I argue that this does not prevent art from going on to develop throughout history in other respects. Not only is the production of art expected to continue beyond the point at which art reaches this reflexive awareness, just as it does in Danto's account, but it can be anticipated that art will continue to develop throughout history in terms of style, subject-matter, and other various artistic components. New movements and trends will emerge, new styles and techniques will be invented, and new mediums will appear with technological advancement. None of this is prevented by art's achievement of a conceptual self-awareness; all that has occurred is that a limit has been reached with regards to how far artistic form can be stretched or pushed away from content in the attempt to present Spirit in its most truthful form. This revelation may well occur at a time in history, and perhaps this is why Hegel speaks as though the art of his time was bearing witness to the dissolution of romantic art, but it is not the end of romantic art's historical

development.⁷⁴ Carl Rapp suggests that the dissolution of romantic art 'might well go on forever' but it would be more accurate to say that the continual disclosure and rediscovery of artistic limitation might well become an essential feature of romantic art as it progresses forward.⁷⁵ So long as there is some mediation between form and content, romantic art will continue in various manifestations.

4. Concluding Statement

Hegel's infamous statement that art ought to be considered a 'thing of the past' is best interpreted as indicating that the historical period in which art is the highest and most complete expression of Spirit has come to an end. It is evident that Hegel considers this historical period or 'golden age' of art to be the era in which the classical form of art was predominant and so, I have argued, the end of art in its highest vocation arises with the transition from classical to romantic art. This is in contrast with the popular assumption that the 'end of art' is synonymous with the dissolution of romantic art that I maintain has resulted from a mistaken conflation between this final dissolution and Hegel's declaration of art's pastness. Moreover, I have argued that neither does the dissolution of romantic art herald a cessation to the production of art, or even the romantic category, but should rather be

⁷⁴ Rapp, "Hegel's Concept of the Dissolution of Art," 15.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

viewed as the completion of the development between artistic form and content such that the connection between these two aspects is revealed to be necessary and can thus be considered both a limitation and defining feature of art. Consequently, the often misunderstood 'end of art' thesis is no reason to suppose that Hegel's aesthetic theory is irrelevant to art of the past two centuries as it can easily incorporate modern and contemporary art within the romantic category of art.

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