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Volume 9, 2017

Edited by Dan-Eugen Ratiu and Connell Vaughan

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# ***Embodied Meaning and Art as Sense-Making: A Critique of Beiser's Interpretation of the 'End of Art Thesis'***<sup>1</sup>

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ABSTRACT. The aim of this paper is to challenge Fred Beiser's interpretation of Hegel's meta-aesthetical position on the future of art. According to Beiser, Hegel's comments about the 'pastness' of art commit Hegel to viewing postromantic art as merely a form of individual self-expression. I both defend and extend to other territory Robert Pippin's interpretation of Hegel as a proto-modernist, where such modernism involves (i) his rejection of both classicism and Kantian aesthetics, and (ii) his espousal of what one may call *reflective aesthetics*. By 'reflective aesthetics', I mean an aesthetic framework which sees art as a form of *enquiry*, one whose aim is to not merely excite the imagination but to principally focus attention on social and cultural norms. The meta-aesthetical consequences of reflective aesthetics and their Hegelian heritage have both an interpretive and philosophic value: under my account, Beiser's reading of Hegel is challenged, and my interpretation of how Hegel envisaged the future of art offers a new and engaging way of understanding one of the most notorious claims in the philosophy of art, namely that art has ended.

## **1. Beiser on the End of Art Thesis**

Whenever 'Hegel' and 'aesthetics' are ever mentioned together in the same sentence, invariably one will refer to this so-called 'End of Art' thesis.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the editorial board of the *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* for kindly granting me permission to publish this paper here.

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<sup>3</sup> The reason for this is not simply due to the eye-catching qualities of a thesis which allegedly claims art is dead or irrelevant. It is also because unlike philosophers such as Hume, Kant, and Schiller, Hegel does not appear to devote *as much* attention to arguably the central topic of modern aesthetics, namely the nature of aesthetic judgement and an account of aesthetic experience. As Robert Pippin writes, "[t]his divergence from much modern aesthetic theory is largely due to the complexity of the concept of art itself as Hegel

Hegel is taken to have espoused this thesis in the following passage from his *Lectures on Aesthetics*:

In all these respects art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past. Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our *ideas* instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place. What is now aroused in us by works of art is not just immediate enjoyment but our judgement also, since we subject to our intellectual consideration (i) the content of art, and (ii) the work of art's means of presentation, and the appropriateness or inappropriateness of both to one another. The *philosophy* of art is therefore a greater need in our day than it was in days when art by itself as art yielded full satisfaction. Art invites us to intellectual consideration, and that not for the purpose of creating art again, but for knowing philosophically what art is. (*Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, 1: 11)

To some, what Hegel had written effectively amounted to a Shelley-esque elegy<sup>4</sup> for the death of art.<sup>5</sup> The onset of market capitalism, and growing secularisation,<sup>6</sup> which were symptomatic of the modern age, meant that art “ceased to have the central importance ... that it once had in the classical

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invokes it. For Hegel's treatment is famously historical; the account of the nature of art is narrative rather than analytic”. (Pippin 2008, pp. 394-5)

<sup>4</sup> I am referring to the following verse from Shelley's *Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats*:

“I weep for Adonais—he is dead!  
 Oh, weep for Adonais! though our tears  
 Thaw not the frost which binds so dear a head!  
 And thou, sad Hour, selected from all years  
 To mourn our loss, rouse thy obscure compeers,  
 And teach them thine own sorrow, say: "With me  
 Died Adonais; till the Future dares  
 Forget the Past, his fate and fame shall be  
 An echo and a light unto eternity!”

<sup>5</sup> See Croce (1978); Hofstadter (1974); and Rapp (2000).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the following from Hegel: “...the important thing is to get a sure footing in the prose of life, to make it absolutely valid in itself independently of religious associations, and to let it develop in unrestricted freedom”. (*Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, 1: 598)

and medieval eras”.<sup>7</sup> Modern man was a truly fallen creature and art had no place in this world full of alienation.<sup>8</sup> To others, Hegel’s meta-aesthetical views are simply an embarrassment given how much post-Hegelian art has been produced.

However, it is far from clear how *either* a defender *or* critic of Hegel can legitimately take this passage to amount to an *End of Art* argument.<sup>9</sup> To quote Fred Beiser on this subject, “Hegel himself does not use the phrase ‘the death of art’, which has so often been ascribed to him. Furthermore, he does not even talk about ‘the end of art’”.<sup>10</sup> A similar view is held by Robert Wicks, who writes: “... it cannot be Hegel’s view that artistic production will totally cease at some point within the progressive development of human history. Nor can it be Hegel’s view that, as we presently stand, art will never again serve to express the deepest interests of humanity”.<sup>11</sup> So, the issue is *not* whether Hegel is right to think art is dead / art has come to an end, but rather the following: what does Hegel mean by claiming art “considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past” (*ein Vergangenes*)?

According to Beiser, we should understand Hegel as claiming “[w]hile art will indeed continue, it will do so in a greatly reduced role: it will be nothing more than a form of individual self-expression”.<sup>12</sup> In other words, Hegel is not committed at all to any kind of End of Art thesis, but he *is* committed to no longer regarding art as maintaining any kind of serious or especially valuable status. One way of understanding Beiser’s position is to claim that because modern consciousness expresses itself predominantly through ingenuity in the natural sciences, medical disciplines, and the rapid

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<sup>7</sup> Beiser 2005, p. 299.

<sup>8</sup> This is one way of interpreting what Hegel writes here: “The beautiful days of Greek art, like the golden age of the later Middle Ages, are gone”. (*Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, 1: 10)

<sup>9</sup> The following philosophers argue that Hegel did certainly not mean that art was dead/obsolete, but rather that art was less well equipped to grasping the Absolute: Bosanquet (1919-20); Carter (1980); Danto (1984); Desmond (1986); D’ Hondt (1972); Etter (2000); and Müller (1946).

<sup>10</sup> Beiser 2005, p. 299.

<sup>11</sup> Wicks 1993, p. 370.

<sup>12</sup> Beiser 2005, p. 300.

rise of developments in technology, art in the *modern* era is no longer representative of expressing human *Geistigkeit*. As Robert Pippin writes, “[w]e have invested our hopes in science, technology, medicine, market capitalism, and, to some lingering extent, in religion, but certainly not in art”.<sup>13</sup> Given that the modern age and the corresponding normative standards of modern consciousness hardly seem conducive to find a place for art as a source of profound value for humanity, art must be relegated to the private sphere, wherein neither production nor appreciation of artwork has any substantive significance.

It is important to note that Beiser’s understanding of Hegel’s position does not simply rest on the claim that since modern culture is more secular, Hegel thought art had no future, “because its glory lay in the past, and its past was unrecoverable”.<sup>14</sup> Rather, Beiser’s interpretation of Hegel’s meta-aesthetical views is motivated by how he reads the (in)famous passage from the *Lectures* I quoted earlier: for Beiser, it is not so much that modern culture is rationalistic that is the source for art’s ‘obsolescence’, “but the effect such rationalism has had on the artist”.<sup>15</sup> The *Bildung* of the modern era is geared to *Reflexionskultur* as opposed to either worshipping the divine or, as Stephen Houlgate writes, exhibiting “magnificently the subtle beauties and delights of everyday modern life”;<sup>16</sup> by consequence, art is now conceived in such a way that it predominantly appeals to our *judgement*. As Beiser himself extrapolates:

Since rationalism demands that the individual always think critically and independently, it alienates him or her from the community. Rather than identifying with its customs, laws and religion, the modern individual constantly questions them, accepting and rejecting them strictly according to whether they satisfy the demands of his or her own conscience and reason. The happy harmony between the

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<sup>13</sup> Pippin 2014, p. 36.

<sup>14</sup> Beiser 2005, p. 303; cf.: “We may well hope that art will always rise higher and come to perfection, but the form of art has ceased to be the supreme need of the spirit”. (*Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, 1: 103)

<sup>15</sup> Beiser 2005, p. 304.

<sup>16</sup> Houlgate, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hegel-aesthetics/>

individual and society, which was the pre-condition for art in the classical age, has been destroyed in modern society ... While the content of classical art was given to the artist by the culture and religion of his people, the modern artist must create his or her content, so that it has only an individual significance ... The result was that art had lost its subject matter - the fundamental values and beliefs of a culture – and so ceased to address its fundamental needs and aspirations. Art had now degenerated into little more than self-expression, and it assumed as many different forms as there are individuals to express themselves. If, however, art were only self-expression, then it had ceased to play a role in culture or history. To be sure, art was not dead, and it would continue as long as artists continued to express themselves. But the crucial question is whether art is still important, whether it had any significance beyond individual self-expression. And here Hegel's answer was a decisive 'No'.<sup>17</sup>

On this matter, Beiser can legitimately appeal to Hegel's reflections on the growing subjectivity in works of modern humour:

So with us Jean Paul [Richter] , e.g., is a favourite humourist, and yet he is astonishing, beyond everyone else, precisely in the baroque mustering of things objectively furthest removed from one another and in the most confused disorderly jumbling of topics related only in his own subjective imagination. The story, the subject-matter and course of events in his novels, is what is of the least interest. The main thing remains the hither and thither course of the humour which uses every topic only to emphasise the subjective wit of the author. In thus drawing together and concatenating material raked up from the four corners of the earth and every sphere of reality, humour turns back, as it were, to symbolism where meaning and shape likewise lie apart from one another, except that now it is the mere subjective activity of the poet which commands material and meaning alike and strings them together in an order alien to them. (*Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, 1: 601)

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<sup>17</sup> Beiser 2005, pp. 304-5.

As I understand it, the substantive issue turns on whether Beiser is right to think modernism is incompatible with art having substantive cultural value. In what follows, I shall argue that Beiser is mistaken, and that while Hegel did in fact think *a particular conception of art* is incompatible with modern consciousness, it does not follow that art can only then be a form of individual self-expression. On the contrary, because Hegel appears to inaugurate a new aesthetic *framework*, art retains an important place in society and culture as a result of art having to fundamentally transform itself in the advent of modern *Geist*.

## 2. Hegel and the Modernist Aesthetic Framework

To begin, it would be helpful to consider the following passage from the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which articulates one of the fundamental differences between ancient and modern life:

Nowadays the task before us consists not so much in purifying the individual of the sensuously immediate and in making him into a thinking substance which has itself been subjected to thought; it consists to an even greater degree in doing the very opposite. It consists in actualising and spiritually animating the universal by means of the sublation of fixed and determinate thoughts. (*Phenomenology of Spirit*: §33, 29)

What Hegel means here is that the directive of modern consciousness is not to realise self-consciousness by means of escaping the empirical world and removing one's corporeal shackles in an effort to achieve autonomy. Rather, we achieve freedom by seeing how thought and the forms of intelligibility are realised in the world itself. On the metaphysical side of things, this is performed by consciousness grasping the identity of thought with being, by dialectically articulating the categories of universality, particularly, and individuality;<sup>18</sup> on the epistemological side, this is done through recognising

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<sup>18</sup> See Stern (2007); and Giladi (2014).

the inseparability of concept and intuition in experience;<sup>19</sup> on the socio-political front, freedom is actualised by how the state and social institutions are structured in a way that facilitate symmetrical recognitive relations;<sup>20</sup> and on the aesthetic front, forms of intelligibility are revealed in the *work* of art itself, what Arthur Danto calls “embodied meaning”.<sup>21</sup> This position required of Hegel a rejection of rationalist, classicist, perfectionist, empiricist, Kantian, and Schillerian aesthetics. The reason for this seismic shift in aesthetics, where Hegel appears to debunk traditional aesthetic frameworks almost *in toto* in favour of seeing art as a fundamentally *intellectual* enterprise,<sup>22</sup> is due to the challenges modern culture poses for art.<sup>23</sup> As Hegel himself puts it:

The spirit of our world today, or more particularly, of our religion and the development of our reason, appears as beyond the stage at which art is the supreme mode of our knowledge of the Absolute. The peculiar nature of artistic production and of works of art no longer fills our highest need. We have got beyond venerating works of art as divine and worshiping them. The impression they make is of a more reflective kind, and what they arouse in us needs a higher touchstone and a different test. Thought and reflection have spread their wings above fine arts. (*Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, 1: 10)

To quote Allen Speight, “... the pervasive culture of modern reflexivity raises new questions about what the artist does”,<sup>24</sup> where it is precisely the new culture of criticism – what Hegel calls *Reflexionskultur* – that inaugurates a shift in both how the *artist themselves* understands the function of artwork, and how the *audience* of the artwork understand the function of artist and artwork. What aesthetic experience *now* consists of is

<sup>19</sup> See Sedgwick (1997); and Stern (1999).

<sup>20</sup> See Neuhouser (2000).

<sup>21</sup> See Danto (1994).

<sup>22</sup> Another way of phrasing this is to conceive of Hegel as prescient of the modernist movement, cf. Clark (1999).

<sup>23</sup> See the following works: Bungay (2007); Houlgate (1997, 2013); Rush (1998); Harries (1974).

<sup>24</sup> Speight 2008, p. 388.

no longer pure sensuous enjoyment *or* free play of imagination under an indeterminate *telos*; rather, this form of experience is now fundamentally reflective and the artist conveys powerful *social* meaning through aesthetic content.<sup>25</sup> One could call this *Reflective Aesthetics: Art* – now as a species of enquiry – involves *thinking* about art, the practice of art, and its social relevance at the most basic level. Crucially, such thinking reveals that aesthetic norms are fundamentally fallible and reflexive, in that aesthetic value is not fixed and determined by any mind-independent stuff that is eternal and immutable. Rather, such value is determined socially through a complex process of constant re-assessment and re-evaluation of normative standards in art.<sup>26</sup> As Benjamin Rutter writes, “[t]he insight that it is of the nature of modern art to prompt in its audience the question not only of the work’s meaning but of its very possibility as art is one of Hegel’s most powerful and distinctive”.<sup>27</sup> In this way, one conception of art is ‘dead’ and a thing of the past, but another is very much alive in the present.

For Pippin, the artist who perhaps best exemplifies Hegel’s vision of art-as-a-species-of-criticism is Manet.<sup>28</sup> This is because Pippin takes Manet as an outstanding example of an artist who is directly appealing to our *judgement* in flouting certain aesthetic and social norms in his work, especially his *The Luncheon on the Grass* and *Olympia*.<sup>29</sup> Manet does not appear to be predominantly interested in overwhelming his audiences with opulent and luxurious *beauty* – let alone classical beauty;<sup>30</sup> rather he appears to be doing something radical and explicitly intellectual.<sup>31</sup> As Pippin writes:

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<sup>25</sup> In this way, art is conceived of having an intellectual function but the way it performs this intellectual function is crucially different to other forms of enquiry such as mathematics and philosophy.

<sup>26</sup> I wish to note here that the emphasis on intersubjective evaluation of aesthetic norms is not a commitment to any kind of institutionalism.

<sup>27</sup> Rutter 2010, p. 20.

<sup>28</sup> See Pippin (2014) for a detailed discussion of Hegel and Manet.

<sup>29</sup> Adorno notes that Manet’s work heralds the “emergence of radical modern art, [an] opposition to traditional rules of pictorial composition”. (Adorno 1984, p. 291)

<sup>30</sup> Of course, this is not to say that there is nothing beautiful at all about *The Luncheon on the Grass* and *Olympia*.

<sup>31</sup> I should stress here that I am in no way a historian of art or an art critic. However, I do think – like many other philosophers – that there is substantive philosophical content in certain works of art.

Normal perceptual apprehension and representational understanding are not so much intensified ... as rather in some way interrupted and challenged, for reasons that were clear to almost no one at the time. The challenge is strikingly clear in the startling looks of the two women ... looks that all at once destroy the convention of pictorial illusionism [and] ... seem to address the beholder (of the painting, not the scene) with a confrontational challenge (as if to ask, “Just what is it you are looking for?”) ... suggesting questions about the psychology of meaningful beholding and the status of very social conventions assumed in understanding the point of easel paintings.<sup>32</sup>

Focusing on *Olympia* specifically, one immediately notices that Olympia herself is directly looking at the audience. It is almost as if the traditional roles have been reversed: the subject of the painting is in fact the beholder and that *we* are treated by Olympia as the intentional object.<sup>33</sup> Olympia is looking at us unabashedly,<sup>34</sup> and that sense of being observed by her in a way which *almost appears to have disdain* for us is disconcerting.<sup>35</sup> It is disconcerting, because what Manet achieves in this painting is developing a disturbing sense of *intimacy* between us and Olympia, by flouting the traditional relation of subject-onlooker, to the point where aesthetic subject and onlooker ascribe to one another characteristics of subjectivity – we think ‘Why is she looking so dismissively at us?’ and it seems Olympia is thinking ‘And? What do you want?’. However, what adds further disconcerting thoughts to Manet’s audience is how his painting offers this

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<sup>32</sup> Pippin 2014, p. 29.

<sup>33</sup> See Pile (2004).

<sup>34</sup> Michael Fried calls this ‘facingness’, cf. Fried (1996). However, what makes Manet’s works so revolutionary and different from works such as *The Mona Lisa* is the specific way of understanding the painting’s address to the beholder and the dialectical relationship between aesthetic object and onlooker, cf. Fried 2010, p. 108ff.

<sup>35</sup> I take my interpretation of Olympia’s physiognomy to be slightly different to Pippin’s interpretation, for Pippin takes Olympia to have a “vacant or bemused look” (Pippin 2014, p. 48). As I see it, Olympia is not so much vacant but *indifferent* to the point of even appearing disdainful of her onlookers. Pippin, however, notes that unlike Titian’s Venus in *Venus d’ Urbino*, the look from Olympia is “something like cognitive or musical dissonance” (Pippin 2014, p. 48), and it is clear that such ‘dissonance’ adds to the disconcerting atmosphere.

form of intimacy with a *prostitute*: Olympia's phlegmatic and unloving look could be a gaze at a prospective *client*, and the scene we are witnessing is her preparation for us. But even if we are not prospective clients who have walked into her boudoir, our bourgeois sensibilities are taken aback at how we are "complicit with the practice"<sup>36</sup> of prostitution, whether we like it or not.<sup>37</sup> As T. J. Clark writes, "Olympia ... looks out at the viewer in a way which obliges him to imagine a whole fabric of sociality in which this look might make sense to him and include him – a fabric of offers, places, payments, particular powers, and status which is still open to negotiation".<sup>38</sup> In this way, the goal of romantic art – to realise intimacy (*Innigkeit*) – is achieved, but hardly in the same way paintings of Madonna and Child do so, for example. When mutual recognition is realised in the 'self-in-other' dynamic of love, *whom* we recognise and *who* we are to the people that recognise us is uplifting and fundamentally positive. But in the case of Manet's *Olympia*, Olympia and the audience recognise one another as agents of a seedy moral and economic model – what brings us close to Olympia is nothing uplifting, and that seems to go some way to explaining her almost disdainful look at the onlooker: we are all equally part of this culture of commodification and fetishism, and the aim of Manet's masterpiece is invite us to self-critically reflect on our social values and commitments.<sup>39</sup>

The Clark-Fried-Pippin interpretation of Manet's work sits nicely with Hegel's position on the nature and function of artwork itself, as Hegel writes himself: "it [artwork] is essentially a question, an address to the responsive

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<sup>36</sup> Pippin 2014, p. 75.

<sup>37</sup> The most compelling explanation for why exactly the bourgeois aficionados of the Salon were so appalled by *Olympia* is not that the work exhibits anti-classicism, but rather because what Manet had done was explicitly detail the hypocrisy of bourgeois culture. As such, it comes to no surprise why Baudelaire wrote to Manet: "Vous n'êtes que le premier dans la decrepitude de votre art" – letter to Manet, 11<sup>th</sup> May 1865, cf. Baudelaire (1973).

<sup>38</sup> Clark 1999, p. 133.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. "Prostitution is a sensitive subject for the bourgeois society because sexuality and money are mixed in it. There are obstacles in the way of representing either, and when the two intersect there is an uneasy feeling that something in the nature of capitalism is at stake, or at least not properly hidden". (Clark 1999, p. 102)

breast, a call to the mind and the spirit”. (*Lectures on Aesthetics*, 1: 71) Because the function of art now is to principally arouse our *judgement*, the artist and the audience both appear to play the game of giving and asking for *reasons*, where each attempt at making normative claims and proposing new ways of thinking “can never be settled by any fact of the matter, can always remain open, and contentious”.<sup>40</sup> The recognition of fallibility also means that the artist does not see *the medium of art* now as dogmatic or didactic. Rather, it seems that works like *Olympia* are invitations for the audience of the artwork to be sensitive to reasons and how such intelligibility is realised in the artwork itself. Like Pippin, this is what I take Hegel’s point to be in this passage from his *Lectures*:

So, conversely, art makes every one of its productions into a thousand-eyed Argus, whereby the inner soul and spirit is seen at every point. And it is not only the bodily form, the look of the eyes, the countenance and posture, but also actions and events, speech and tone of voice, and the series of their course through all conditions of appearance that art has everywhere to make into an eye, in which the free soul is revealed in its true infinity. (*Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, 1: 154-55)

Here, Hegel seems to remarkably anticipate the Peircean notion of “the whole conception of the object”<sup>41</sup> by emphasising just how *much* we must attend to in aesthetic experience.<sup>42</sup> Everything about the artwork, ranging from the *Mise-en-scène* to the bodily actions of the person(s) depicted, has intentional significance for us, principally because of the *effects* aesthetic *content* and aesthetic *form* have on the audience. It is because one must attend to a plurality of things embodied by the artwork itself that aesthetic response is “an interpretive accomplishment of sorts, one that begins in some interrogative, not merely receptive or affective or even contemplative,

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<sup>40</sup> Pippin 2014, p. 49.

<sup>41</sup> See Peirce (1931-1958).

<sup>42</sup> There is an interesting comparison to be made here between Hegel and Arendt on this subject. As Arendt writes: “[Artworks] are tangibly present, to shine and to be seen, to sound and to be heard, to speak and to be read” (1958, p. 168).

relation to the object”.<sup>43</sup> As a result, it hardly appears to be the case that art is now merely a form of individual self-expression: *contra* Beiser, it seems the artist here is *not* alienated from their community, for what Manet is *doing* by construing artwork as a form of intelligibility<sup>44</sup> is precisely aiming to connect individual artistry with the mores and values of the *Zeitgeist* and *Volkgeist*, by getting audiences to *think* about social and cultural concepts in a critical manner.

However, in response to my defence of the Clark-Fried-Pippin interpretation of Manet and Pippin’s proto-modernist reading of Hegel, Beiser can appeal to the following passages in Hegel’s *Lectures*, to support the idea that the onset of modern artistic practice is really nothing more than an exercise in individual self-expression, a celebration of personal liberty from certain norms:

Herewith we have arrived at the end of romantic art, at the standpoint of most recent times, the peculiarity of which we may find in the fact that the artist’s subjective skill surmounts his material and its production because he is no longer dominated by the given conditions of a range of content and form already inherently determined in advance, but retains entirely within his own power and choice both the subject-matter and the way of presenting it. (*Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, 1: 602)

In our day, in the case of almost all peoples, criticism, the cultivation of reflection, and, in our German case, freedom of thought have mastered the artists too, and have made them, so to say, a *tabula rasa* in respect of the material and the form of their productions, after the necessary particular stages of the romantic art-form have been traversed. Bondage to a particular subject-matter and a mode of portrayal suitable for this material alone are for the artists today something past, and art therefore has become a free instrument which the artist can wield in proportion to his subjective skill in relation to any material of whatever kind. The artist thus stands above specific consecrated forms and configurations and moves freely on his own

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<sup>43</sup> Pippin 2014, p. 49.

<sup>44</sup> To use Arendt’s expression, artwork as “thought-things” (1978, p. 62).

account ... Therefore the artist's attitude to his topic is on the whole much the same as the dramatist's who brings on the scene and delineates different characters who are strange to him. (*Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, 1: 605)

For Hegel, the gradual development and eventual ascendancy of *Reflexionskultur* provides the conditions for the artist to be self-legislating, to the extent that the artist can freely choose their content and freely choose their way of depicting and expressing the relevant content. As Terry Pinkard writes:

If, however, absolutely any worldly matter can be the subject of art, if what is important in making it a work of art is that it convey some sense of the fully formed individual subjectivity at work it, then it might seem as if fully *modern art* can no longer even get close to the "Ideal." ... In focusing on his own skill and on what he sees at work, the artist portrays a conception of the normative order at work in modern life, namely, that we are all implicitly self-orienting, that we situate ourselves in terms no longer of a "substantially shared" social space, but of a social space that is inherently fragmented along the lines of modern individuality.<sup>45</sup>

What is interesting, though, is how Beiser (and Pinkard) takes *this* feature of modern aesthetic practice to mean that, for Hegel, modern artwork has merely *individual* significance. But, for Hegel, does artistic autonomy result in aesthetic work being simply self-expression? And, for Hegel, does the rise of autonomy necessarily result in the *fragmentation* of individual and community? I contend that the answer to both these questions is 'No'. To see why, I would like to consider Duchamp's *Fountain*. I have chosen arguably Duchamp's most (in)famous readymade, given how it is a modern work which initially *looks* as having purely individual significance, but in fact has significant cultural import as a paradigm of art as sense-making,<sup>46</sup> to use a turn of phrase from Adrian Moore.

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<sup>45</sup> Pinkard 2000, p. 601.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Moore (2012).

*Fountain* is an example of a ‘readymade’, an ordinary manufactured object designated by the artist as a work of art. However, while the development of the readymade *prima facie* appears to lend weight to the idea that all the artist is now doing is merely indulging in their own individual self-expression, thereby denigrating the value of artwork to only individual significance, I think there is more compelling reason to view the development of the readymade in terms of inaugurating a *staunchly anti-institutionalist and more democratic intersubjective aesthetic framework*.<sup>47</sup> the artist and the audience both appear to play the game of giving and asking for *reasons*, to the extent that the artist and audience regard one another as *peers* in a conversation about *second-order enquiry*. What makes *Fountain* so provocative is *not* that the kind of aesthetic experience one has when viewing the urinal is potentially disconcerting or even particularly unpleasant, but rather is the way in which encountering the work thrusts us into the space of reasons so much so that the audience become *active participants* in debates concerning the norms of aesthetic practice rather than *merely voyeurs* taking in aesthetic content: one immediately starts to wonder what the work is trying to make us attentive to.<sup>48</sup> In other words, *Fountain* is an instance of Hegel’s notion that artwork now is ‘essentially a question’. This appears to *extend* Pippin’s argument that Hegel was remarkably prescient in referring to modern artwork as being a ‘thousand-eyed Argus’, where *all* features of the artwork are of cognitive significance

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<sup>47</sup> Cf: “The creation and submission of *Fountain* can thus be seen as in part as an experiment by Duchamp to ... [test] the commitment of the new American Society to freedom of expression and its tolerance of new conceptions of art.” – <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-fountain-t07573/text-summary>

<sup>48</sup> For example, one of the most enigmatic and curious aspects of *Fountain* is the signature ‘R. Mutt’. When asked whether ‘R. Mutt’ was a pun on *Armut*, Duchamp was quoted as explaining:

“Mutt comes from Mott Works, the name of a large sanitary equipment manufacturer. But Mott was too close so I altered it to Mutt, after the daily cartoon strip “Mutt and Jeff” which appeared at the time, and with which everyone was familiar. Thus, from the start, there was an interplay of Mutt: a fat little funny man, and Jeff: a tall thin man... I wanted any old name. And I added Richard [French slang for moneybags]. That’s not a bad name for a *pissotière*. Get it? The opposite of poverty. But not even that much, just R.MUTT.” (Camfield 1989, p. 23.)

to the audience, to other territory: artworks that are *not* depictions of nudes.

However, in response to my interpretation of Duchamp's *Fountain*, one might think such a readymade would fail to be genuine artwork on *Hegelian grounds*. There seems to be reason to suppose that Hegel would regard Duchamp as visual art's version of Jean Paul Richter, if we recall the passage from Hegel's *Lectures* in which he is caustically critical of modern satirical humour:

So with us Jean Paul, e.g., is a favourite humourist, and yet he is astonishing, beyond everyone else, precisely in the baroque mustering of things objectively furthest removed from one another and in the most confused disorderly jumbling of topics related only in his own subjective imagination. The story, the subject-matter and course of events in his novels, is what is of the least interest. The main thing remains the hither and thither course of the humour which uses every topic only to emphasise the subjective wit of the author. In thus drawing together and concatenating material raked up from the four corners of the earth and every sphere of reality, humour turns back, as it were, to symbolism where meaning and shape likewise lie apart from one another, except that now it is the mere subjective activity of the poet which commands material and meaning alike and strings them together in an order alien to them.

From a Hegelian perspective, the problem with Duchamp's readymade is that, as with Richter's works, it hardly appears to provide us with the resources to *feel at home in the world*.<sup>49</sup> As a work of irony and satirical critique, *Fountain* expresses Duchamp's fundamental *detachment* from the community and illustrates his eagerness to stand back and criticise. If anything, then, *Fountain* appears to *confirm* Beiser's interpretation of Hegel: for Hegel, modern aesthetic practice means that modern artwork has merely individual significance.

However, I think the appeal to Hegel here is misplaced: my

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<sup>49</sup> To quote Hegel here: "art does not need any longer to represent only what is absolutely at home at one of its specific stages, but everything in which man as such is capable of being at home" (*Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, 1: 607).

objection to the claim that Duchamp's readymade hardly appears to provide us with the resources to feel at home in the world is that the way in which the critic of Duchamp articulates at-homeness is rather *un-Hegelian*. The *Hegelian* concept of at-homeness in the world consists in making a non-anthropocentric order rationally intelligible to human mindedness and our cognitive endeavours of critically understanding our world. The kind of rationality we exhibit when we develop our cultural agency is one which recognises the need to *cope* with the variety of unpleasant and harmful things in the world. Crucially, though, *pace* the critic of Duchamp, this does not mean that human mindedness adopts a jocund Panglossian attitude. On the contrary, it means that we are compelled to find genuinely meaningful reasons to conceive of the world as *rationally intelligible*, not because the intelligible structure of the world illustrates that we can know everything about the world if we exercise our conceptual capacities in the best possible way, but because our critical rationality enables us to think *and* feel that we can make sense of things by continuously playing the game of giving and asking for reasons. Such a practice, to use Richard Rorty's expression, widens the 'conversations' between enquirers thereby enabling ideas to improve by undergoing "further assessment, challenge, defence, and correction".<sup>50</sup>

Crucially, by virtue of being a form of intelligibility in late modernity, art has become a *communally reflective practice*, where artwork functions to stimulate continuous dialogue as part of the effort of *Geist* to realise autonomy.<sup>51</sup> *Fountain* is an instance of individual artistic creativity and ingenuity through its obvious rejection of various norms and has *cultural* significance partly *because* Duchamp creates his own content: crucially, and this is where I think Beiser makes a mistake, for Hegel, the

<sup>50</sup> Brandom 1994, p. 647.

<sup>51</sup> This way of understanding art from a Hegelian perspective has similarities to what Gehlen construes as *Kommentarbedürftigkeit* and *Bilddrationalität*. As Arnfinn Bø-Rygg writes: "Gehlen sees the history of painting as 'reflective art'. With modern painting of the early twentieth century ... 'readable' significance disappeared from the picture itself and was replaced with a necessary linked commentary ... The role of the commentary is to answer the audience's foremost question of the artwork: what does it mean? Modern self-reflective art seems to require the aesthetic discourse as an integral part of itself". (Bø-Rygg 2004, p. 39) Cf. Gehlen (1960).

impetus of the postromantic and modern aesthetic movement to break with tradition and create its own content does *not* mean that individual and community are thereby alienated from one another. Rather, on the Hegelian account, it means that individual and community must be conceived of in a *dialectical* relation: the interruption of dogmatic slumbers by means of fostering *discourse* on normative commitments is a necessary feature of the actualisation of reason in the world, helping us feel ‘at home in the world’. Such actualisation necessarily requires the *initial* hostility between individual and community and the *movement from hostility to reconciliation*.

However, in response, someone may claim that I have neglected aspects of Beiser’s interpretation of Hegel’s meta-aesthetical position which in fact appear to *give credence* to what I have been arguing Hegel is proposing:

Hegel calls it *Reflexionskultur*, where ‘reflection’ means our power of critical and abstract thinking. Such a culture is not conducive to art, he explains, because art addresses our sensibility, but we want to express truth in abstract form, in terms of laws, rules and maxims ... The whole of modern culture is more appropriate to aesthetics, to thinking about art rather than artistic production itself.<sup>52</sup>

The problem, though, with this possible reply to my account is that (i) Beiser’s notion of *Reflexionskultur* seems to commit Hegel to regarding rational activity *exclusively* in terms of the specific kind of inferential patterns definitive of *analytical* thinking, namely the kind of thinking symptomatic of *Verstand*. However, central to Hegelianism is a committed opposition to treating the nomothetic qualities of the Laplacian model of rationality which *Verstand* instantiates most explicitly as exhaustive of critical thinking. This is because Hegel places significant emphasis on the *dialectical* function of *Vernunft*, which does *not* conceive of discursive thinking in abstract formal terms, as “a detached critical reason”.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Beiser 2005, p. 304.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 306.

Distinguishing understanding and reason is not just necessary for the purposes of overcoming the debilitating dualisms brought by thinking *exclusively* from the perspective of the understanding, it is also necessary for seeing why aesthetic experience cannot be adequately made sense of if understood in a purely formal or algorithmical way. For Hegel, this is partly what is so significant about the intellectual aspect of postromantic art, how the cognitive dimensions of aesthetic representation are meant to appeal to sensibility *and* judgement. In this way, there is a significant difference between my account and Beiser's, because when Beiser writes "[w]hat the modern individual ultimately needed was an explanation, a reason, not an allegory, a novel or a play",<sup>54</sup> he appears to claim that works of art do not exhibit any kind of inferential or normative properties. However, in contrast to Beiser's interpretation of Hegel and modernity, I have argued that art is one of our practices which perform the function of rational criticism and reflection.

(ii) Beiser's notion of *Reflexionskultur* appears to claim that there is a strict distinction between *thinking about art* and *artistic production itself*, seemingly to the extent that to think about art is not part of artistic production. However, I do not think there is any compelling reason to think such a distinction is plausible, since the relationship between modernity and art on Hegel's picture is conceived in terms of explicating the ways in which forms of intelligibility are revealed in the *work* of art itself. In other words, according to Hegel, the modern era brings about second-order reflecting on the medium of art as being a necessary feature of artwork itself.

A potential critic may well concede that aspects of Beiser's interpretation do not give credence to my particular reading of Hegel's vision of postromantic art. However, the most trenchant objection to what I have argued may be expressed in the following way: art-as-beautiful told the subject of a possible reconciliation of subject and object. With the onset of modernity, one asks where this intimation goes now. According to Hegel's social philosophy, the answer is to be found in the mediation of social actors and play of recognition. But, what makes art distinctive *and different to*

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 306.

*philosophy* is its concern with beauty, where it is *exactly that* which has been lost by art, as art is *now* conceptual. As such, it is not much of an issue as to whether art now has a social role any more, *or* just an individual one. In other words, even if I am right to reject Beiser's claim that Hegel believes postromantic art is merely a vehicle for individual self-expression, the idea of *reflective aesthetics* really does seem to mean art is a thing of the past, since "[a]rt invites us to intellectual consideration, and that not for the purpose of creating art again, but for knowing philosophically what art is" (*Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, 1: 11). So, while I may have successfully argued that art is about more than a vehicle for self-expression, whether that would satisfy aficionados of art as traditionally conceived is unclear.

Moreover, another question that could be addressed in such a manner concerns the conceptual work art does vis-à-vis the work of the Concept in philosophical reflection. What I have argued involves regarding art in modernity as providing some people who either lack the capacity for or appeal of *philosophical* treatments of the Concept with "sensible-affective",<sup>55</sup> *non-philosophical* ways of being sensitive to *normativity*. For example, there could very well be a multitude of people who can immediately cognitively relate to Duchamp's *Fountain* and its intellectual dimension but who cannot cognitively relate to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. However, if *this* is all that art does in the modern age, then how can one claim that art still has *geistig* relevance? Art as remedial philosophy would precisely constitute a reason for saying that art has reached an end or is *für uns ein Vergangenes*.

As I understand Hegel's meta-aesthetical position, art is the means through which the Concept is *expressed* visually and audibly. The Concept is expressed visually in the media of painting, architecture, sculpture, and subsequently photography and film; whilst the Concept is expressed audibly in music. In this way, art is a *living embodiment of concepts*. However, given the difference between art and philosophy in terms of how they respectively make sense of things, I think it would be incorrect to suppose that art and philosophy should be understood in terms of a *geistig* hierarchy.

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<sup>55</sup> Pippin 2014, p. 3.

This is because the way in which art makes sense of things is so *different* to the way in which philosophy makes sense of things: conceived in this way, one ought not to regard art and philosophy as rival forms of intelligibility competing with one another to best satisfy our desire for understanding our world. On the contrary, they should be seen as complementary reflective practices, practices which are jointly indispensable for adequately and holistically engaging with our environment. Not only that, part of what makes art *sui generis* and axiologically significant is how art enables Spirit to understand itself: philosophical reflection on our discursivity illuminates the particular kind of epistemic architecture we have for experiencing the world from our human perspective. However, what art does is express the *freedom* that is constitutive of *Geistigkeit* in terms of the multiplicity of created *works*; and, for Hegel, such expression is definitive of *beauty*. In true dialectical fashion, the onset of modernity and *Reflexionskultur* is a moment of the *Aufhebung* of art, because we have transitioned from *one* form of beauty to another. While art no longer satisfies our highest needs, because it has emerged from the shadows of our religious life, as Houlgate writes, “art in modernity continues to perform the significant function of giving visible and audible expression to our distinctively human freedom and to our understanding of ourselves in all our finite humanity”.<sup>56</sup> Understood in this way, one should see Hegel as claiming: ‘Art is dead. Long live art’.

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<sup>56</sup> <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hegel-aesthetics/>

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