

Hegel, Danto, and the Content of Art

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Inception

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Introduction

Occupying as it does the third-to-last stage of the full development of Spirit, we have some warrant to say that Hegel's account of art in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is a moment of dialectical significance [note: "occupying" is too far from "dialectical significance"; stylistically, we could keep this]. Structurally, one might say narratively, the development of art achieves the move of shuffling Spirit through moments where it apprehends itself as a series of objects, each of which is closer than the last to a properly philosophical and scientific Knowing where the content of its Notion is no longer located in an external object, but instead is brought inward. An orthodox interpretation of the account of art in the *Phenomenology* has it that at the end of the section as art segues into "the revealed religion," art is somehow "over" and consciousness must somehow go "beyond" art if it is to complete its project. Exactly what it means for art to be "over," however, is a matter of debate, and issues arise of what is left of art after it has been superseded. How this question is answered will depend heavily on whether one takes the *Phenomenology* to be literally historical—and thus to pronounce that the age where art serves a spiritual function will have to end or has already ended—or as an epistemological document, in which case there is room for some ambiguity as to what it means for art to come to an "end," if indeed its being overcome means that it must reach some kind of terminal point. For twentieth-century art critic, Arthur Danto, art arrived at a kind of

Hegelian “end” when it became fundamentally unclear what types of objects had ontological significance as works of art. Without any kind of visual or otherwise sensuous properties left to demarcate the artistic object from the banal one in twentieth-century art practices of pop or conceptual art, the significance of art moved away from the objects of art to the philosophy of art. Danto finds that these types of practices, which seemingly liquidate any kind of objective uniqueness of artworks and any aesthetic significance to the actual act of contemplating something exterior, represent a moment of development toward self-knowledge that preserves whatever was profound and true in art to begin with while bringing the procedure of art into the inwardness of pure thought—in other words, the philosophy of art engendered by contemporary art practices is something like the Hegelian science of philosophy.

Both Hegel’s and Danto’s views on the “end of art” have prompted certain questions about art of form and content, sensuousness and interpretation, and so forth, and most pressingly the question of what role, if any, art plays after it comes to an end. I find that Danto’s formulation is not viable because he is too selective with his examples of modern art: rather than highlighting some novel development in the “story of art,” his theory works best when it illuminates a certain reconstitution of conceptual, formal, and sensuous elements of art in general that are not new and will not by any indication cause art to end. Danto is perceptive in seeing developments in contemporary art along the lines of Hegel’s aesthetics, but I maintain that the resemblance is incidental: he certainly provides us with a framework where Hegel’s system can tell us about contemporary art and vice versa, but it is problematic. Following this, I argue that the nature of some contemporary art practices discloses something about the world which Hegel’s philosophy must come to grips with: that art can be truthful in a way that philosophy is unable to, and that the teleological shape of the *Phenomenology* cannot viably play out and fully contain the moment of art in its final destination.

Art in the Phenomenology

To begin, we must briefly consider the role that art plays in the *Phenomenology*. In terms of its structural location, the discussion of “Religion in the Form of Art” unfolds after the “artificer” of “Natural Religion” comes to a point of being able to express what is inner to himself through the outer and objective in a way that does justice to both the inner and outer, and leads into the “Revealed Religion” where Spirit grows dissatisfied with the exterior location of its own content in the objective work of art and in the deity. Art for Hegel is definitely a kind of religious practice, but specifically it is one which is able to go into greater depth than mere vague picture-thinking and cultivate strong incipient philosophical undertones for Spirit by revealing something of Spirit to itself—“the mystical is not concealment of a secret, or ignorance, but consists in the self knowing itself to be one with the divine Being, and that this, therefore, is revealed” (437). Art has the significance of putting in direct view of consciousness the content of religious experience as something intelligible rather than inscrutable or hermetic, a profoundly important moment insofar as the content of religious experience is in fact the exteriorized content of Spirit. Moreover, art is a moment where consciousness begins to see its own labour in the content of the religious object—gone is the veneration of “natural” divinity, and in its place is an experience of Spirit communing with an object in which it knows its own subjective creative content to be present. The power and necessity of art lies in the fact that the content of inner ethical Spirit and the outer world are present equally and simultaneously in the artwork. Earlier in the development, “[t]he religion of the ethical Spirit is, however, its elevation above its real world, the withdrawal from its truth into the pure knowledge of itself,” (425), a state of affairs that has left consciousness in a kind of tragedy wherein it has been driven into its own inner perfection but is alienated from the world; going forward through the moment of art, Spirit must shape the world so that it can see its ethical qualities in those things that it senses outside of itself rather than safeguarded inside its own thoughts and kept separate from the world—whence the achievements

of the Cult and the Epic, which put the content of the ethical Spirit before itself, as a formal object to be comprehended sensuously. However, for Hegel, it is “[r]ational *thinking* [which] frees the divine Being from its contingent shape” (451) [emphasis Hegel’s], and the program of the moment of art is not simply to reach a perfectly high and realized form of art, but to release thought altogether from the sensuously objective accidents of the artwork into a philosophical and scientific cognition of the world and of Spirit. The success or failure of this program will be obtained, then, and whether or not there is some facet of art which is left behind, unable to be brought forward into Absolute Knowing, the dialectical movement hinges on whether or not its ultimate stage contains the full truth of sensuous objectivity and picture-thinking.

Enter Danto

We shall turn now to Arthur Danto’s formulation of the “end of art,” which he envisions as a profoundly Hegelian moment. Quite succinctly, Danto writes that “the end of art consists in the coming to awareness of the true philosophical nature of art”; for him this occurred when art became more or less conceptual in nature to the point where “[t]o accept the art as art meant accepting the philosophy that enfranchised it, where the philosophy itself consisted in a kind of stipulative definition of the truth of art” (30). For Danto, the “end of art” is in no sense a point of art simply vanishing, or of the public becoming somehow severed or estranged from art: the truth content of art survives, but it does not survive in artworks. He has it that in the period following the liquidation of modernism, artistic practice turned to art-making procedures that produced artworks that could not be parsed out from mundane objects based on sensuous criteria (such as Warhol’s famous Brillo boxes, works of purely conceptual art, and so forth), and that which marked them as being “art” was located in the realm of thought and philosophy. “Whatever art is,” Danto writes, “it is no longer something primarily to be looked at” (16); thus, he gestures to an important point of his theory: whereas artworks of the past mainly *displayed* their aesthetic content, he finds that modern artworks require an act of interpretation, and that

their aesthetic content resides in some sense in the interpretation and in the work's capacity to provoke questioning of what art's nature really is. The mechanism involves "*creating art explicitly for the purpose of knowing philosophically what art is*" (31)[emphasis Danto's], which for Danto entails an art-making practice which discloses what is and has always been true of art in general in the realm of philosophy, and this is per a Hegelian suggestion—that as the interlocutors of contemporary "post-historical" artworks are prompted by their encounters to dwell on questions of what art "is," they are able to properly hold in mind the content which has unfolded through the history of art (such as icon painting, representational sculpture, abstract painting, and so on) as something abstracted into thought entirely. This, for Danto, marks the passage from art into philosophy, parallel to art's development into Revealed Religion and then philosophical science in the *Phenomenology*. Once again, we must find that the viability of Danto's thesis is dependent on whether or not he is right that art has truly passed into a point where its theoretical pronouncements about its own nature accord with the truth of the "history of art"—that there are not any functions or traits left of art that are too elusive to be grasped by the speculation that marks art's "post-history." If so, it will then remain to be ascertained whether these aspects are simply beyond the philosophy of art for the time being (i.e. because such philosophy has not yet reached a point where it can incorporate them); in which case, we might say that Danto's formulation is feasible but describes something that *will* happen rather than having happened already, or whether they elude philosophy because they are absolutely incommensurable with abstract thought. If the latter, then Hegel's account of art is in trouble as well.

The Content of Art

It will be worthwhile for us to consider now what it means for art to have a content that is sensuous. Of course, this must have something to do with the content being available to sensory experience, but I do not find that just saying that is enough. If we use painting as an exemplary

medium, we know that its content is *sensed visually*, but this does not address the issue of what the *content* of a painting is; we have to turn here to the idea that something in the interplay of visual elements such as shape and colour gives a painting some kind of symbolic meaning—the same could be said of music putting forward some kind of sentimental meaning through its participation in harmonic, rhythmic, and timbral rules. Exactly what the content of artworks is hard to pin down (if it were not, then theory and criticism of art would be bereft of things to talk about), but we can consider some possibilities. It may be the case that art expresses content that is not exclusive to it and can be put across by other means as well: this seems to be Hegel's position when he writes that "Spirit transcends art in order to gain a higher representation of itself, viz. to be not merely the *substance* born of the self, but to be, in its representation as object, *this self*, not only to give birth to itself from its Notion, but to have its very Notion for its shape, so that the Notion and the work of art produced know each other as one and the same," (426) [emphasis Hegel's]. This accords well with the overall movement of the dialectic throughout the entire *Phenomenology*: the content of consciousness has appeared in forms as diverse as phrenology, the family unit, and the "beautiful soul" of ethical contemplation, and has been transfigured there, so it is in this same sense that it appears as art. In other words, whatever meaning is expressed by a painting or a piece of music has not really "added" anything to the meaning expressed by Observing Reason, for example: instead, the content is reconfigured so that something closer to self-conscious Spirit is intelligible rather than hidden for consciousness, and this meaning can as well be expressed non-aesthetically in philosophical language; the crucial ramification here is that philosophical language's expressive powers must lay a claim to *absolutely everything* expressed by art, every dimension and every subtle valence. Contrasting with this view, we have Jason Gaiger's thesis that artworks "explore a dimension of human experience that can only inadequately or haltingly be expressed in any other medium," (116). If Gaiger is correct here, we might think about the aforementioned symbolic and sentimental meanings: these might be

considered as affective responses which are entirely unique to artistic practice precisely because there are no prosaic or analytical means to translate them into language, philosophical or otherwise. The success of Hegel's and of Danto's account depends then on there not being any such purely artistic content that cannot be transfigured into philosophical, theoretical, or scientific language without being depreciated.

If it is indeed of theoretical importance to determine whether art has content that is qualitatively unphilosophical, then it will be useful to iron out what Hegel supposes content looks like in the form of art. He writes about a "pathos" that consists in "the Being of the risen Sun, but a Being which has now 'set' within itself, and has its 'setting' or going-down, i.e. self-consciousness—and hence existence and actuality—within itself" (436). This "pathos" is an important part of the account of art that the *Phenomenology* gives, but it must be distinguished from the way the word is sometimes used if it can help illuminate what Hegel is trying to say. He introduces "pathos" at the point where the artistic practice of the religious Cult begins to shift towards that of the Epic, and this is basically how it should be understood. "Pathos" is recognized as a kind of divine force that underlies the Epic, but it is no mere matter of some esoteric power: it prompts an aesthetic satisfaction in Spirit because Spirit recognizes that the Divinity has "set" within itself (i.e., the divine force has moved from the outer to the inner for Spirit), and it is able to identify itself with the Epic artwork in this sense. "In the Bacchic enthusiasm [associated with the mystical Cult practices and perhaps with nature worship] it is the self that is beside itself," Hegel writes, "but in corporeal beauty it is spiritual essence" (439). In artistic beauty, the work begins to take a kind of legible form that displays a profound truth of Spirit to itself that exceeds the inebriated and formless exaltation wherein the experience of the divine is just as strong but directed at objects which are vanishing. The content of art could be said to be consummated at the point where "[t]he self-consciousness of the hero must step forth from his mask and present itself as knowing itself to be the fate both of the gods of the chorus and of the absolute powers

themselves, and as being no longer separated from the chorus, from the universal consciousness” (Hegel 450). This is how we should see the “pathos” in Hegel’s conception of art—as something which is restless because it has yet to complete itself through its arrangement into a self-consciousness of freedom, of the ethical, and of the divine within Spirit itself. Accordingly, the burden on a thesis such as that of Gaiger is to show that there is more to “pathos” than Hegel thinks that there is, to show that the restlessness is something that cannot be appropriated in philosophical language.

For Gaiger, following Hegel, “[a] work of art is something made and sensuous that is addressed to the senses; at the same time, however, it elicits a form of cognitive and emotional response quite distinct from that of other material objects” (112). Where Gaiger diverges from Hegel is in his view that the significance of sensuous qualities does not diminish as art’s “history” moves forward: Gaiger develops his argument through an assessment of works of contemporary art by sculptors Rachel Whiteread and Doris Salcedo and finds that, despite the works under investigation being formally austere to the point that Hegel himself might not even recognize them as artworks, they do not put forth aesthetic meaning that is completely separate from perceptual experience, nor do they depend on questions about the very nature of art as Danto thinks “post-historical” art does. For Gaiger, in other words, despite being formally radical in a certain sense, these works do not “go beyond” art of the past any more than avant-garde artists of other eras, like Van Gogh or Pollock, in the sense of rupturing from artistic art into philosophical art. Gaiger considers Whitehead’s work to possess an “affective dimension” which is “emphasized by the character of the different materials she employs” (114), an important point moving forward. We might say of more traditional artworks like representational paintings that they are just as much a matter of the conceptual and the material intermingling; if more contemporary works by Whitehead pare down the level of complexity and mimetic detail from works by painters like da Vinci or Vermeer, they still undeniably derive at least some of their powers from their material constitution. Gaiger

points out that both Whiteread and Salcedo work with “human” elements—their work encompasses references to domestic spaces and objects, and strands of human hair, respectively (114-116)—and so, we can make an obvious connection to Hegel’s aesthetics insofar as the art object connects consciousness to something of itself through aesthetic experience, but there is a divergence from Hegel’s account because these works are so remote from language and speech and seem to burrow away from philosophical language rather than draw near to it (as Hegel finds that epic poems do, for instance). It can be puzzling to try and work out exactly what the content of artworks such as these are since they seem to defy the formulations put forth by Hegel and by Danto, but I think it is necessary to investigate the matter further, and to consider the relation that this content bears to art’s “history.”

Language and Art’s Content

Near the beginning of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel goes over the problem of the words “this,” “here,” and “now”: they seem invariably to slip from determinate content drawn from sense-certainty as they try to pin it down, and their meanings end up being a sort of conspicuous absence of any stable content—put another way, “it is just not possible for us ever to say, or express in words, a sensuous being that we *mean*” (Hegel 60) [emphasis Hegel’s]. Frederic Jameson writes that “while language cannot be trusted to convey any adequate or positive account of the Notion, or of truth and reality—whence the tortured sentences and figures through which Hegel is forced to attempt such accounts—it can much more pertinently be used as an index of error or contradiction,” and that language “is more revealing for what it cannot say than it is for what it does manage to say” in the *Phenomenology* (Jameson 35). Even at the very beginning of the *Phenomenology*, the problem of language and sense-certainty already gestures towards the entire development of Spirit incipiently, because already the seemingly obvious relationship between language use and the content of sense-certainty is thrown not only into suspicion but also into a kind of satire of absolute negativity. Jameson notes that the form of this problem

recurs throughout the *Phenomenology*, rendering empiricism absurd and introducing a powerfully ironic negativity to the desire of the lord in the lordship-bondage dialectic (41), and this should give us a hint at how the moment of art plays out for Hegel. For Hegel, the significance of art is transitory insofar as it only really has a use for Spirit as long as it plays out the still-obscure content of Spirit to itself in such a way that it can be grasped *negatively*—we could very well see this as being like a psychoanalytic reading of fantasy in art. The special importance that art has lies in the fact that it can deliver ideas to the point of conceptual understanding without really stating them positively. Art cannot continue functioning in a significant way after it has served its purpose because the negatively instructive function of its content should have given rise to a conceptual understanding that includes the nature of art and the mystery of art's negativity; and so, all it can offer will be a positive sensuous particularity that is about as truthful as the postulations of Observing Reason. But yet, as we have seen, “post-historical” artworks *can* offer a content that is significant even while refusing to go along with the development towards Absolute Knowing that the “historical” art is supposed to have assisted in.

Here I would like to offer an alternate explanation for how language sets up the territory in which “post-historical” art practices, which seem to be in contradiction to Danto's and Hegel's position, can be accounted for. Going back to the early point about language in the *Phenomenology*, we find consciousness in a contradictory situation where it occupies a precarious space in which it has no secure connection to “the world” of sensuous experience. For Hegel, this brings about a kind of profound irony that acts as a dialectical engine, but I find that it just as much throws consciousness into a feeling of profound *vulnerability*. Hegel's dialectical trajectory has this vulnerability giving rise to forms of despair and angst that contain the seeds for further development and ultimate resolution, but I contest the notion that these feelings are resolved entirely even in a state of properly philosophical and scientific cognition. Art, specifically, addresses consciousness sensuously, but it is a form of address mediated by the vulnerability set out from the outset of the

Phenomenology and the discussion of language. The “affective dimension,” which Gaiger finds in works by Whiteread and Salcedo, and which I find in works by Ustvolskaya, is not merely a matter of some type of positive appeal to one’s emotions: it is a trait that exploits the vulnerability that consciousness experiences in the face of sensuous experience itself. It does this by foregrounding details that are incongruent to a properly spiritual conception of art—in this sense, we can differentiate “historical” non-conceptual art and “post-historical” non-conceptual art, insofar as the latter must account for the epistemic conditions in which it is made, conditions where the Ideas of “historical” art have been subsumed by a philosophical understanding of art. These art practices virally attack the self-satisfied consciousness that believes it has in its grasp the entire truth of the Divine in art as a conceptual truth by forcing an encounter of the non-conceptual kind in manifesting to consciousness details—shapes, gestures, and so on—that reveal to consciousness the profound vulnerability that remains for it; even after it believes itself to have successfully enacted the rupture from the aesthetic experience of truth to the philosophical.

An End Without an End

With the state of things being that art appears to have a content that does not suffer an “end,” we can return to the question of what role art plays after its “end.” This may sound like something of a non-sequitur, but I find it would be highly ungenerous to suggest that Hegel’s and Danto’s narratives offer us nothing in the way of a valid account of the moment of art; I think by asking this question we can think through what remains true in their accounts and what needs to be amended. Patrícia Esquivel has it that those moments where some conceptual understanding of art is gained that reorients the way art is practiced “must be interpreted as diagnoses of a change in our conceptions of art and not as a genuine end of art” (217), in which she includes Danto’s “end of art.” For her, Danto’s position in particular is a matter of envisioning that a shift in the way art is made and discussed as is a kind of terminal point where the “history” of art is closed off, a view

which she calls “pure speculation” and suggests cannot be applied so early after art has supposedly ended (219). I am inclined to agree with her here—Danto’s theory was certainly premature—and more than that, I think that in “jumping the gun” Danto formulates a theory which, for all its pretensions to eclecticism, assumes too narrow a path for art, and he is not really able to see what the development of art in his own historical moment “really” means. I agree with Lee B. Brown when he states that “Danto’s conclusion should be not that art is dead but that the developmental concept of it is a myth” (312), by which he means that the perceptible “developments” in art are merely a function of contingent and arbitrary factors. Brown is skeptical of Danto’s insistence on the overcoming of mimetic criteria as a dialectical engine, because he sees it as arbitrary and un-Hegelian (311), and I believe he is correct about this. Indeed, it seems quite reasonable to argue that the rise of photography and then motion pictures is a serious factor in visual art’s “historical” movement through abstract painting and conceptual art and so forth. As such, even after art has “ended” (at least, art as it has historically functioned) remains vital as a confrontation with the epistemic conditions of its age: in an eminently “rational” epoch, art can provide experiences that do not so much go “against” the spirit of the times, as it may operate on a different register of thought and affect, exposing contradictions in the dominant mode of thinking (so, mimetic technologies as the case may be).

Esquivel finds that in Hegel’s account of art, artworks’ “form may become autonomous and simply decorative” (217), and this is the crux of what is problematic in Hegel’s thinking about art: it seems to want art to remain in some sense, more so as a dead letter of sorts, a source of some kind of formalistic satisfaction but not something dialectically significant after its moment has expired and its truth has lapsed into philosophical Knowing. Out of the failure of Danto’s theory, I think we can develop Brown’s idea that art is not fundamentally developmental: to see art as something that is in no sense trans- or a-historical, and to view art practices as historically conditioning the way that Spirit is developed through collective knowledge. We may even concede that

conceptual knowledge is gained through engagement with art in a way that resembles Hegel's and Danto's formulation, but we must be careful not to denigrate the uniquely artistic content that emerges from the details of artworks, something that is not linguistic, or scientific. Where Danto finds that contemporary art practices strongly bear out a Hegelian thesis about an "end of art," I suggest that what he sees is a kind of illusory and premature end that will never really be an end—we might think of a series of numbers where each member of the sequence is halved, where the number that remains might appear negligible, but it will never really die away—and the content of art will always be to some degree or another something outside the scope of philosophical knowing. Though it may teach or inform philosophy, or be "demystified" by it to some degree, it is very difficult to envision art's dialectical significance ever being something past when we see how, even in an age that seems very "post-art," art still resonates with the Divine in important and timely ways.

As long as we are considering art, we must consider *actual works and practices of art* in our discourse—otherwise we will be left with a theory that is hollow, formal, and without a referent—in other words, pointless. Hegel could not be accused of a pointless theory of art—the *Phenomenology* offers an account that astutely brings works contemporary to its writing into a story of art's unfolding—but we have a certain chronological advantage over him in that we can see what has become of art in the centuries after he described its supposed end. And from our vantage, time has not really borne out his view; art is not only still practiced, it is still practiced in a way that has aesthetic significance, if not necessarily a sense of teleology or progress. But what Hegelian theories, like Arthur Danto's, show is not so much that the teleological and progressive phase of art has finished as that it *never was*, and art's unfolding is a phenomenon that can qualitatively resist the Hegelian formulation of it. What ramifications this has for Hegel's entire project, I will not comment on, but we must surely feel at least some nervousness when we consider the feasibility of a state of Absolute Knowing that has preserved all that is truthful or Divine in the moments

which have fallen away prior to it in light of the presence of aesthetic truth and Divinity in artworks that seem to be beyond philosophical cognition. If Hegel's project is to be repaired, I find that what is significant in works by contemporary artists will have to be explained conceptually without leaving anything of them behind in a rush to process them into Ideas—something I do not think can be done, insofar as I see an innate aesthetic significance to the detail and the vulnerability it exposes through sensuous aesthetic experience. As such, I must find that an investigation of actual artworks shows that Hegel's program of moving the truth of aesthetic experience entirely away from the sensuous cannot find success.

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