

The Metaphysical Discipline of Aesthetics: Martin Heidegger on The End of Art

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In the afterword he writes to “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Martin Heidegger raises the question of whether art is slowly dying.[1] The question echoes Hegel’s proclamation of the end of art, announced in Berlin more than a century earlier. To understand how Heidegger would respond to this question, and what story about art he would tell in order to determine whether art is still alive or not, is of great importance for assessing Heidegger’s thinking about art. This is because “The Origin of the Work of Art” appears to present a definition or theory of great art: great art is a way truth happens to a people, and it harbors the ongoing “ontological strife” between earth and world. If Heidegger does think that art is dying, this could be taken as an argument for interpreting the art-essay’s description of art and its essence to be describing something of the past – a description that fits art in the world of the ancient Greeks, the medieval Christians, and perhaps even the early modern European bourgeoisie, but which does not attempt to address the art of Heidegger’s own time. Hence art as making truth happen would be history, and Heidegger’s essay primarily a nostalgic reflection on a lost artworld, similar to Hegel’s description of classical art. However, Heidegger’s story of the life and death of art has to be different from Hegel’s. In the three decades following the completion of the art-essay in 1936, Heidegger makes several additions to his text. In the “Zusatz” of 1956 Heidegger stresses that an answer to the riddle “that art is” is not given in the original essay and this statement seems to take some of the force out of the definition of the artwork presented therein. I want to claim that Heidegger’s reworkings of the art-essay point to a hesitation in Heidegger’s understanding of art, and that this hesitation is brought out by his reflections on the end of art.[2] I will outline the beginning of an interpretation of what the question of the end of art, and a possible answer to it, might mean for Heidegger. To get there, I will first sketch Hegel’s original thesis of the end of art, and then ask how we can make sense of this thesis in light of the artworld of today, primarily drawing on the work of Arthur Danto.

In the 1820s, Hegel gave his popular lectures on aesthetics, in which he famously announced the end of art.[3] This announcement can only be made sense of in light of Hegel's conception of history. History is to be understood as the development of spirit, or human intellectual activity as a whole, which is at any time trying to find a way to express itself. At a certain stage of human history, art is the most important form of expression for spirit. Art provides a sensuous representation of spirit, allowing consciousness to experience itself as external idea. By the 19th century however, this role is no longer available to art because art cannot express the abstract thought that characterizes the spirit of high modernity. By the time Hegel is giving his lectures, religion has freed itself from its dependence on its physical representation in artworks, and in fact even religion has been surpassed as the highest mode of self-reflection for Spirit: religion is replaced by science, that is Hegel's own philosophy – a logic which does not need a synthesis with something material or representational outside of itself. In the future, people will find their spirit expressed in this science, and art – from the perspective of the grand narrative of spirit – is passé. Hegel does not deny that artworks will continue to be made, but their role will be far less important: they will be objects of pleasure and entertainment, and perhaps a source of reflection for the individual; however, “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...”[4]

It seems likely that Heidegger would agree with Hegel that the architecture and sculpture of the Greeks can be understood as a physical embodiment of their spirit, or to use Heidegger's language, that these artworks made truth happen for their people, in the sense that they were events which opened up a world, by being a standard around which all elements of Greek life could be ordered. The descriptions of the Greek world in Heidegger's art-essay seem on the surface almost to reiterate a Hegelian interpretation: Greek architecture, sculpture, tragedy and religious rite can all be said to form a concrete expression of Greek consciousness which allows the Greek to be and to know who they are. However, Heidegger does not ascribe to a narrative of spiritual progress, which makes him understand both the history of art and the history of philosophy in ways that are importantly different from Hegel's narrative of these disciplines. Heidegger often represents the history of philosophy as a history of decline; he describes his own thinking as a new beginning; and he describes thinking as an activity that is never complete or transparent to itself in the way absolute knowing would be for Hegel. For Heidegger, Hegel is part of the end of the mistaken history of Western metaphysics, not of the successful aspiration of thought towards absolute knowledge. Heidegger lives in a post-Hegelian world, in which a system like Hegel's can be nothing but an object of mourning. From this perspective, it is clear that the meaning of something like Hegel's claim of the end of art must be reinterpreted and reassessed, since the grand narrative in which it was a natural consequence has disintegrated.

There are two issues that demand consideration when we want to reassess the end of art thesis from a Heideggerian point of view: (1) the artworks that have been made since Hegel's pronouncement are very different from those Hegel was familiar with, in ways that are philosophically important; (2) the disillusionment with philosophy and science that characterizes the modernist period, and the deconstruction of Western metaphysics

that is decisive for Heidegger's project in particular, suggests that a similar announcement – that is the end of philosophy as Hegel knew it – should also be considered. Since it is precisely philosophy – in the shape of Hegel's aesthetics – that declares art to be dead in the first place, a new conception of philosophy will necessarily influence the relationship between art and philosophy.

Arthur Danto considers both these issues in his reinterpretation of the end of art-thesis. To summarize, Danto points to several important features of the art of the last half century: this art very often has its own definition as topic; it is post-historical; it is not necessarily discernible from other objects that are not art; and most importantly, this art cannot be understood without theory – that is without historical knowledge and philosophical reflection – and so it can be said to make Hegel's point, albeit in a slightly different way. That is, art is over, because art has become inseparable from philosophy.

Danto claims that art ends more than a century after Hegel's own death and Danto is himself witness to this event when Andy Warhol in 1964 exhibits his *Brillo box* in Stable Gallery in New York.[5] For Danto, the striking point about art that Warhol's work makes is that "... if you were going to find out what art was, you had to turn from experience to thought. You had, in brief, to turn to philosophy." [6] We can separate three stages in the story Danto tells to explain why art comes to an end at this time. The first stage is the long period of the grand narrative of art – the narrative that informs art history as a history of progress. Danto argues that this history is structured around the notion of mimesis or representation. This grand narrative starts to break down with the event of modernism, which forms the second stage. This is because the original narrative can no longer account for the developments in art as progress (for example painting can not be said to make progress with respect to representation). Modernism is from then on characterized by a multitude of manifestos and definitions of what art really is. [7] Amongst these movements, the most famous and influential in the United States is Abstract Expressionism, praised by Clement Greeberg for its ability to let painting be only about itself – its flatness, abstractness, and square framed-ness makes painting its motif, and nothing else. Hence it is more pure, more true to itself, and freed from the mimetic restraint once and for all. In this sense, the history of art can be seen to follow Hegel's prediction about history in general: art reaches self-consciousness, and hence freedom.

But like Hegel's story, all the modernist stories about art are wrong about what is to come. Even Abstract Expressionism is replaced, but instead of a new defining style, it is replaced by the complete pluralism of contemporary art. So whereas a Hegelian history might predict endless modernism as the post-historical era of art (Robert Pippin suggests such a position), Danto claims it is in fact the pluralism replacing modernism that is post-historical – our contemporary art is art "after the end of art" (the third stage). What Warhol's *Brillo box* makes so clear for Danto is that there is no perceptual distinguishing criterion for art any longer, neither the traditional representational criteria nor style can pick out an art object from other things. But the extreme freedom that is introduced with Warhol's work also means than now, more than ever, since art history cannot help us

figure art out, art is a philosophical problem. For Danto it is precisely indiscernability, the fact that any thing can be art, that opens up for and indeed necessitates a philosophical reflection on art.

Where Hegel and Danto meet in their understanding of the end of art is in their contention that art no longer is developing in a specific direction, guided by a specific standard, be it expression of spirit or visual imitation of the world's look. Also, they both agree that art no longer expresses something universal or something shared by a community. Where they differ is in their understanding of art *after* the end of art; this is uninteresting to Hegel, whereas for Danto this art is terribly interesting and what informs his professional life as an art critic and a philosopher. What separates the two thinkers historically is the event of modernism, and this of course also shapes their historical thinking. But how shall we then place Heidegger's understanding of the end of art? Heidegger writes on art in the age of modernism, and many of the artists he is interested in (although not in the art-essay) are modernists like Klee, Cezanne, Celan and Trakl. With this in mind, I want to turn to the couple of pages of explicit remarks that Heidegger has on the end of art.

First I want to look in some detail at *how* Heidegger asks the question of the end of art. Heidegger's phrasing of the question specifically ties it to aesthetics and the notion of lived experience [*Erlebnis*]. Aesthetics is for Heidegger a "specific way to consider art and the artist."^[8] This means that aesthetics is a branch of philosophy that has to do with perception of only two groups of things: art, including the things that are artworks, and artists, the people who create these things. This "outsourcing" of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline of its own also has a history. It has not always been the case that art has been contemplated separately and in a manner distinct from contemplation on other things or activities, Heidegger contends. Aesthetics approaches the work of art as an object of sensuous comprehension – as in the Greek '*aisthesis*' – and then as philosophical theory of perception changes through history so does the understanding of the object of aesthetics.^[9] "Today," Heidegger writes, "people call this comprehension lived experience [*Erlebnis*]."^[10] This means that the aesthetics of Heidegger's time is oriented towards the concept of lived experience. This orientation is not formed as a response to artworks, according to Heidegger, but is rather a result of a more general attitude towards beings passed down to aesthetics from metaphysics. More specifically, this emphasis on lived experience stems from the so-called *Lebensphilosophie* popular in Germany in the first half of the 20th century, which Heidegger sees as a counterpart to the dominance of technological thinking in philosophy and the sciences at large.^[11]

"But perhaps the lived experience is the element in which art dies" Heidegger proposes. How can this be? Heidegger claims the aesthetic attitude of the day is to approach art as if it were an "Erlebniserreger," meaning that artworks are viewed as entities that can produce exhilarating experiences for the individual.^[12] In other words, Heidegger seems to think that entertainment has become the paradigm for approaching art. Claiming that the focus on lived experience is the source of death might seem paradoxical, but for Heidegger, the manner in which we approach art appears to be decisive for the diagnosis. It is our attitude towards art, in either creation or appreciation, that is presented as the

possible cause of death. It is not features of art or artworks themselves that lead to the decline. This “diagnosis” has two main consequences: first, it shows that Heidegger understands the context of art production and appreciation, that is, aesthetics, as decisive for the role art can play and for the way art can be understood and interpreted; second, it leaves open the possibility that art could thrive in a different element, a different context. [13]

Trying to locate Heidegger in relation to Hegel might further bring out the sense of Heidegger’s position. After raising the question of the death of art, Heidegger quotes Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics: “For us, art counts no longer as the highest mode in which truth fashions an existence for itself”; “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 spirit”; “In all these respects, art considered in its highest vocation is and remains for us a thing of the past.”[14] Heidegger then says the verdict about Hegel’s claim cannot yet be made. That a large number of artworks and schools of art have come into being since Hegel gave his last lecture on the topic in 1829 is no challenge to Hegel’s theory. Art can still be quite inessential and unnecessary for “decisive truth to happen for our historical Dasein,” Heidegger writes, expressing Hegel’s thesis in terms of the vocabulary from Heidegger’s own art-essay. Hence art’s mere existence does not falsify Hegel’s point.[15] The decision about Hegel’s claim cannot be made by pointing to or by investigating contemporary artworks, but rather the decision can only be made when a judgment is made about the tradition of metaphysics. In other words, for Heidegger, the possible end of art is dependent on the status of another question, the question of being. The reason for the importance of metaphysics for the question about the end of art is that behind Hegel’s claim stands Western thinking since the Greeks. This thinking “corresponds to a truth of beings that has already happened,” according to Heidegger.[16] In other words, aesthetics is determined by the way being is understood in the history of Western philosophy, and not by art.

To sum up, this is what I think is the important point emerging from the close reading of the few pages that make up Heidegger’s direct commentary on the end of art thesis: for Heidegger, the status of art, the question of the end of art, as well as the questioning of experience as the element of art, show themselves to be questions produced by aesthetics, and hence questions which acquire their meaning through the context of aesthetics. In the lectures on Nietzsche and the will to power as art, Heidegger writes: “In the historical moment when aesthetics reaches its greatest possible height, breadth, and rigor of form [grösstmögliche Höhe, Weite und Strenge der Ausbildung] great art is at an end.”[17] The completion of aesthetics, which happens with Hegel, is the proclamation of the end of art. For Heidegger, this is a symptom of a deeper philosophical problem. Aesthetics is part and parcel with the history of Western metaphysics, and because of that, the question of art as formulated here – is art any longer an important way truth is revealed to a historical people? – becomes a question of philosophy. Because aesthetics is an expression of metaphysics, Hegel’s claim remains valid until we have found a new way to think about what it is to be. Until a new thinking has been established, we live in the shadow of Western metaphysics. This means that Heidegger thinks that the discipline of aesthetics cannot free itself from or really oppose Hegel’s thesis; rather it is this discipline that

appears to be confirming Hegel's thesis in the present. Just as metaphysics on Heidegger's account is blind to being, aesthetics is blind to art, and rather predetermines artworks through the specific aesthetic stance with which it meets the artwork.

The end of art is not a necessity for Heidegger in the same way it is for Hegel. For Hegel, there is no room for art as a vital conveyor of truth at this point in history. The dialectical movement of history "forces" art to become irrelevant at a certain point. But Heidegger's understanding of the end of art thesis is formed on the basis of a different characterization of art, and a different understanding of the relation between truth and art. For Heidegger, the relationship between art and truth is not one of subordination. Art is not just a vehicle for expressing truth; art is a way truth *happens*, and this happening is not dependent on some dialectical progress.[18] So even if Heidegger does describe Hegel's understanding of art as similar to his own, it is clear that both the question about the end of art, and the background that would provide an answer to the question, are quite different in the two thinkers. For Heidegger, the end of art becomes an occasion for philosophy to reflect on itself. What we then realize is that philosophy is the cause of art's lack of importance, but also that philosophy indirectly can liberate art. A new thinking can release art from the dominance of metaphysical systems, and in this way free art from the philosophical constraints of aesthetics.

The consequence of Heidegger's understanding of the end of art is hence quite puzzling, if not paradoxical: it seems as if Heidegger, in the context of a philosophical treatment of art, has recommended that art should free itself from philosophy. This paradox has two possible solutions. One solution is to see Heidegger's "theory" in the art-essay as having a twofold aim: to describe a past artworld and to offer a critique of philosophical aesthetics leading up to Heidegger's own time. This solution does not commit one to understanding Heidegger as offering any philosophy of art for our time at all. The second solution is to understand Heidegger's "theory" of the art-essay as presenting, or perhaps just hinting, at a post-metaphysical philosophical treatment of art. This second solution will only be possible I believe, if one modifies some of the claims of the art-essay, as Heidegger himself attempts to do through his later commentary. This is because the "theory" of art that Heidegger presents in his original version of the art-essay does not grant art sufficient freedom. For that it is too close to a Hegelian aesthetics and seems too indebted to the aesthetic tradition from which Heidegger wants to distance himself. Heidegger's reassessment of his own text shows that he recognizes that if art is to regain importance after the end of art, philosophy has to treat it in a different manner. Whether Heidegger himself offers examples of such a different way of treating art is a question I leave for further study.[19]

Notes:

1 Martin Heidegger, "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes", in *GA 5, Holzwege, 7th ed.*, Frankfurt a.M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 1994, p. 66. Hereafter I will refer to this text as the art-essay for brevity's sake. Heidegger gave lectures under the title "Vom Ursprungs des Kunstwerks" in Freiburg in November 1935, in Zürich in January of the following year and then in Frankfurt at the end of 1936. The lecture presented in 1935 is believed to be

equal to the written second version, which circulated in France as an unauthorised copy of Heidegger's manuscript, and was finally published in 1987. The third written version was finished by Heidegger in 1936, and is the one printed in *Holzwege*. However, the text we read today has undergone some changes – the “Nachwort” is added later than 1936, but before the 1950 publication, the “Zusatz” was added by Heidegger in 1956, and with the 1960 Reclam-edition of the essay Heidegger edits several passages. All references will be to the seventh edition of *Holzwege*, which is identical to volume 5 of the *Gesamtausgabe*. This version also includes Heidegger's own marginal comments to the text, which he wrote into his own copy of the 1960 Reclam-edition. The first version of the essay on art was only published in the *Heidegger Studien* in 1989, and is the transcription of a handwritten manuscript believed to date from 1934.

2. The hesitation can be made sense of by considering both the art-essay's inadequacy when it comes to addressing contemporary art, as well as the conflicts created when the art-essay is held up against the development of Heidegger's later thought.

3. Cf. Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert, *Einführung in Hegels Ästhetik*, (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2005). Gethmann-Siefert here gives an overview of the available source material and the rather extensive editorial work that lies behind the text(s) that we today read as Hegel's aesthetics. Since Hegel never wrote a manuscript for publication (which he expressed interest in doing), and also never finished reworking or adding to his aesthetics in his life time, Gethmann-Siefert suggests thinking of the aesthetics as a “work in progress” (Gethmann-Siefert 2005, 18). The text published after Hegel's death gives a false impression of a closed, thoroughly worked through system where there is no place for revision, which she suggests might be the result of Hegel's publishers and editor wanting to “secure” Hegel's complete philosophy for posterity. According to Gethmann-Siefert, Hotho admits that the systematicity of the work has its source in his editing process, not in Hegel's own presentation of the material.

4. Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art, 2 vol.*, tr. T.M.Knox, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 11.

5. Note that Danto does change his view somewhat, cf. Arthur Danto: *After the End of Art*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, p. xv: “I had in the course of ten years of reflection arrived at a very different view of what the end of art meant than I had when that concept first possessed me”. I will not go into this development here, but I try to present Danto in a way that reflects his latest writings.

6. Danto, *After the End of Art*, p.13.

7. In aesthetics we witness a parallel response to this development in the several theories understanding art as expression; these theories attempt to provide a new criterion for a new narrative that can incorporate this new art. Cf. Fry, Bell, Croce, Collingwood.

8. Martin Heidegger, “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes”, 67

9. For this history, see Martin Heidegger, “Der Wille zur Macht als Kunst” in Martin Heidegger: *Nietzsche I*, 6 th ed., Stuttgart: Neske, 1998.

10. ref

11. Heidegger gives a more extensive treatment of *Erlebnis* and its relation to *Machenschaft* in Martin Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, *Gesamtausgabe Band 65*, 2 nd ed., Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1994.

12. Martin Heidegger, “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes”, 55.

13. It is interesting to note Heidegger’s own remark on his question about the death of art. In his copy of the Reclam-edition of the text, he comments on the statement about lived experience as the element in which art dies, specifying: “This sentence does not mean that art has come to an end in all respects. That would only be the case if experience remains the only element for art” (Martin Heidegger, “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes” , 67). Again, it is the context – a certain aesthetic attitude towards art – that is threatening to end art.

14. Martin Heidegger, “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes”, 68; Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, vol.1, pp. 11, 103.

15. Martin Heidegger, “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes”, 68.

16. Martin Heidegger, “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes”, 68

17. Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*, 83.

18. This means that the truth of art is not to be separated from the art that makes it happen, and also that art is not a stage in the history of the unfolding of truth that can and will be surpassed. This makes it possible to interpret Heidegger’s end of art thesis as philosophically less authoritarian than Hegel’s thesis.

19. I believe there are resources in Heidegger for trying to outline a philosophical treatment of art that is less indebted to aesthetics. These occur in his later reflections on painting, on sculpture and on poetry from the 1950s and 60s.

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