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Duchamp after Hegel: Exorcizing the End of Art

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Introduction

What exactly is “the end of art,” as Hegel understood it, and as it is understood now? The *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1823, 1826, and 1828-9)¹ develop a concept of art’s dissolution (*Auflösung*) (usually called the “end of art”) which is elusive and contradictory, but which nevertheless persists as one of the paradigmatic themes of today’s aesthetics and philosophy of art.² Although the “end of art” is much discussed with great interest, and although it’s a central theme for some of our leading philosophers and critics, the precise meaning of the expression remains unclear. One result is that despite numerous existing treatments of art’s dissolution, and despite its continued relevance for aesthetics and art criticism, there has as yet been no adequate application of Hegel’s aesthetics to contemporary art. Hegel’s several statements to the effect that “considered in its highest vocation, art is and remains for us a thing of the past” (*Lectures on Fine Art*: 11) are variously interpreted and remain deeply perplexing. Perhaps the “end of art” is so resilient partly because of its equivocal, protean nature:

The end of art could develop its remarkably durable effectiveness...because already in Hegel it is so densely surrounded by contradictions and inconsistencies that no consensus has yet been reached on whether there even *is* a Hegelian end of art.³

Clearly, the theme is ambiguous, equivocal, both within Hegel’s own writings and in terms of our contemporary treatments. For even if it really was Hegel’s own theme in some sense, he nevertheless understood “the end of art” in a way very different from how it is understood now. Why, especially if almost no one actually accepts Hegel’s philosophy *in toto*, do his *Lectures on Fine Art* continue to have such a strong influence on contemporary theory? The concept of “the end of art” is consistently invoked by critics and philosophers in order to address contemporary works produced more than a

¹ G. W. F. Hegel *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol. I Trans. T. M. Knox Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998 p. vi (cited hereafter as Hegel: 1828-9/1998).

² See, for current examples, David Carrier, “Warhol, Danto and the End of Art History” in *Art US* No. 26 (Fall, 2008) pp. 92-97 and Roger Kimball, “The End of Art” in *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* (Summer, 2008) No. 184 pp. 27-31

³ Eva Geulen *The End of Art: Readings in a Rumor After Hegel* Trans. James Mc. Farland (California: Stanford University Press, 2006) p. 8

century after Hegel's lectures were delivered, and is used in the interpretation of works and developments that Hegel himself could never have foreseen, by people who are not Hegelians. How and why is this happening, and with what results?

One reason for the lack of clarity and the resulting conflict of interpretation is simply that Hegel's concept of art's dissolution has never been adequately located within the larger contexts of his system; in fact, his aesthetics is closely tied to his work in logic, his philosophy of religion and his theory of history. The problem is that the systematic location of the *Lectures on Fine Art*, and therefore of art's dissolution, has not been fully explicated. The lack of a more holistic approach to the theme of art's dissolution has, in turn, led to inaccurate accounts of that thesis, or at least resulted in creative misinterpretations. That in turn has blocked the development of a genuinely Hegelian treatment of contemporary art. Therefore, in order to find out what Hegel's philosophy of art means to us today, we have to gain an understanding of how it fits into his philosophy as a part of a system. As it appears in the *Lectures* of the early 1820's, the theme of art's dissolution in particular is extraordinarily nuanced, both in its internal structure and through its profound connections to related themes in Hegel's other writings. The concept has to be clarified by means of a close reading of the relevant passages, and by a wider systematic reading of how Hegel's aesthetics is related to his work in epistemology, his historical account of the development of philosophy, and his philosophy of history and religion: "any claim that philosophy displaces art must be understood in the context of Hegel's entire philosophical system, and concentration simply on the *Aesthetics* is not sufficient for this purpose...art is produced within a larger hierarchical framework embracing law, the state, religion, and philosophy."⁴ It's only through a holistic and integrative reading of the relevant texts that Hegel's philosophy of art becomes clear, and only on the basis of a more detailed and more systematic reading of art's dissolution will it become possible to apply it to the art of the present.⁵

⁴. Brian K. Etter *Between Transcendence and Historicism: The Ethical Nature of the Arts in Hegelian Aesthetics* (Buffalo, New York: SUNY, 2006) p. 71

⁵. For good examples of systematic approaches to Hegel's *Aesthetics*, see Cornelia A. Tsakiridou, "Darstellung: Reflections on Art, Logic, and System in Hegel" *The Owl of Minerva* Vol. 23, No. 1 (Fall 1991) pp. 15-28; Gustav E. Mueller, "The Function of Aesthetics in Hegel's Philosophy" in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 5,

A firm grasp of what Hegel really meant by the dissolution of art would, in fact, be a very strong interpretive tool in the contemporary art world. Of course, the test case for an understanding of Hegel's relevance to contemporary art is Marcel Duchamp, because Duchamp is by common consent the *ursprung* of the contemporary.⁶ In addition, Duchamp's own philosophy of art intersects with Hegel's in a way that reveals much about art's dissolution. In a way that argues strongly for the continuing relevance of the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel's philosophy of art illuminates Duchamp's anti-art, and Duchamp's work in turn illuminates Hegel's aesthetics. Duchamp's interest in Pyrrhonian philosophy invites an investigation of skepticism as it appears in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. Furthermore, Duchamp's reading of Max Stirner's *The Ego and its Own* allows us to develop a Hegelian criticism of Duchamp's work.

A Hegelian understanding of satire and irony, which are the specific forms taken by the dissolution of Classical art and Christian art, will allow us to grasp historically the meaning of the peculiar narcissism, hermeticism and emptiness that afflict the contemporary artworld as a replaying of art's previous dissolutions. From a Hegelian perspective, Duchamp's place in the development of the contemporary involves a synthesis of the satiric and ironic modes of art's previous moments of dissolution. That reading reworks the theme of art's dissolution into an analytic tool, and saves the concept of "the end of art" from being a mere slogan, one that's charged with nostalgia and despair, but of ambiguous value as a term of art-historical and aesthetic understanding. However, once we address art in terms a systematic reading of Hegel's *Lectures*, we'll finally begin to understand the potential for applying Hegel's concept of the dissolution to the contemporary artworld. A Hegelian understanding of irony and satire will allow us to grasp historically, as a replaying of the moment of art's dissolution, the advent of

No. 1. (September 1946), pp. 49-53; Richard Taft, "Art and Philosophy in the Early Development of Hegel's System" in *The Owl Of Minerva* Vol.18, No. 2 (Spring 1987) pp. 145-162

⁶. For example, Kimball complains: "Almost everything championed as innovative in contemporary art is essentially a tired repetition of gestures inaugurated by the likes of Marcel Duchamp" (Kimball, 2008:27). The conservative position in art writing, for lack of a better word, generally frowns on contemporary art as lacking in aesthetic, moral, and spiritual value, but agrees with advocates of the contemporary on the central importance of Duchamp; "the post-1945 artists of Pop Art, Happenings, Op Art, Fluxus, Conceptual Art...all felt that Duchamp belonged to them, that he was their 'prototype.'" Rudolf E. Kuenzli's introduction to *Marcel Duchamp, Artist of the Century* Eds. Kuenzli and Francis M. Naumann (Massachusetts; MIT, 1991) p. 1 Therefore Duchamp is blamed for contemporary artists who uncreatively follow in his footsteps, while the importance of Duchamp in his context is entirely missed.

Marcel Duchamp. For better or for worse, it is in large part Duchamp's synthesis of the satirical and ironic dissolutions of art that define contemporary art. The revised Hegelian approach that emerges is not merely critical of the contemporary, however, but is also equipped to understand and appreciate it, prepared to retain its most valuable possibilities, and thereby able to remain hopeful about what lies beyond.

First, the larger argument must be framed by some preparatory remarks about the special challenges to interpretation presented by the *Lectures on Fine Art*. For one thing, the Knox translation of Hegel's lecture notes requires special hermeneutic caution, not least because the text consists of edited lectures and is therefore filtered through the perceptions and concerns of the note takers and the editor. The key interpretation of Hegel's philosophy of art within the English-speaking world, then, bears a particularly complex and vexing relationship to the thought of Hegel. We must also explain the importance of referring to the dissolution of art rather than the "end of art," a simple but vital correction to the numerous misinterpretations of the *Lectures* that circulate throughout the secondary literature. Finally, in preparation for the main argument, we will develop a way of reading Hegel's philosophy of art within the context of his whole system. All of this is necessary in order to revise the way that the "end of art" thesis is currently located within *Lectures on Fine Art*.

Our explication of Hegel's *Lectures* will first address the dissolution of art through Hegel's conceptions of Roman satire and Romantic irony. Next Roman satire and Romantic irony will be viewed through Hegel's conception of the relationships between art and religion, systematically connecting art's dissolution to the roles of Roman and Christian religion in the development of Spirit. Finally, I'll argue that we can, via Roman satire and Romantic irony, apply the theme of art's dissolution to the work of Marcel Duchamp, which enables us to produce a truly Hegelian reading of Contemporary art. The conclusion will argue that Duchamp's work represents a synthesis of Roman satire and Romantic irony, thereby constituting yet another occurrence of art's dissolution. In developing that argument I'll offer some criticisms of contemporary art and art writing.

I. Preparatory remarks

1. That the Knox translation of Hegel's lecture notes requires special hermeneutic caution

It should be well noted at the outset that the interpretive problems associated with the *Lectures* are very complex, so much so that we simply cannot be sure about the precise relationship between the Knox translation and Hegel's own thought. Besides the difficulties common to any translation of a complex philosophical text, the text consists of edited lectures rather than a treatise, and therefore reflects the process of Hegel's thought working itself out rather than a finished, polished facet of Hegel's system, and filtered through the perceptions and concerns of the note takers and the editor. "We know from Hegel's correspondences that although he hoped to publish a work on the philosophy of art he was not yet ready to do so. Gethmann-Siefert has urged that we should see his aesthetics as 'a work in progress,' subject to continual rewriting over the different lecture series" (Gaiger, 2006:162). Furthermore, Knox rendering is based on a heavily edited edition of Hegel's lecture notes:

Heinrich Gustav Hotho (1802–1873) published the three-volume *Ästhetik* (1835) four years after the death of Hegel. From archive research it has become clear that in the 'compilation' of his Hegelian *Ästhetik* Hotho employed mainly his own lectures of 1823. This has led to the view that Hotho's 1823 lectures taken all together actually constitute Hegelian aesthetics. [Weiss] article seeks to challenge this notion. Hegel gave four series of lectures on aesthetics in Berlin in 1820/21, 1823, 1826, and 1828/29. Since he never wrote his own work on aesthetics, one might consider the edition of four series of lectures to be the 'real' Hegelian *Ästhetik*.⁷

Over the course of the lectures, Hegel's approach to the philosophy of art varied, so that in the material from 1818-20, for example, "the content is and structure... is closely connected to the systematic position allocated to art in the Encyclopedia of 1817... [there,] Hegel lectured on art and religion together, treating them separately for

⁷ János Weiss, "Auf den Spuren der richtigen Hegelschen Ästhetik" (abstract) from Knihovna Akademie věd Česká republika <http://dlib.lib.cas.cz/2745/> (accessed 10/15/08)

the first time in Berlin [1920-1]" (Gaiger, 2006:161). Hotho had access to these notes, as well as his own notes from 1823, 1826, and 1828-9, but the lecture notes are themselves all much shorter, more tentative, and more exploratory than Hotho's volumes would indicate, suggesting again that Hegel was still working out his philosophical aesthetics when he died. Therefore any accurate interpretation of Hotho's volumes-or Knox' translation of them-must include an interpretation of the difference between Hegel's own lecture notes, the student transcripts that provided access to the last three courses, Hotho's own way of integrating and handling these materials, and the development of Hegel's philosophy of art as reflected during a particular lecture series. The differences between the source materials and Hotho's three volumes, then, pose the hermeneutic challenges of reinterpreting not only Hegel's own philosophy of art, but also the distortions caused by the influence of those volumes (through Knox' translation) on philosophical aesthetics in the English speaking world. Any attempt to deploy Hegel's aesthetics in today's debates must either meet those challenges or risk confusing the issues further; for by not considering the differences between Hegel's own work and what amounts to Hotho's strong reinterpretation, we misinterpret not only the content of Hegel's philosophy of art, but also its place within the wider contexts of his thought. For art was not yet completely assimilated into the system: "Hotho's monumental edition of the *Lectures on Aesthetics* not only obscures these differences by amalgamating the various series into a single, systematic work, it also gives the mistaken impression that Hegel's thought on the subject had reached definitive form" (Gaiger, 2006:162). Hegel himself may bear some of the responsibility for some of the apparent "contradictions and inconsistencies" that challenge our interpretation of the *Lectures*:

Here again, the reason that Hegel's meaning has so often been misunderstood lies in the presentation of his philosophy, which indeed is often unclear and sometimes careless-as if Hegel, in the onrush of thoughts and the tremendous output of a relatively short life, had no time to polish his work with care. This is also true of the *Lectures*, which in their present form were not written by Hegel but were edited on the basis of students' lecture notes.⁸

⁸. Robert S. Hartman, introduction to G. W. F. Hegel *Reason in History: a General Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1982) p. xiv.

The differences between Hegel's own writing and Hotho's volumes is immediately relevant to the interpretation of the "end of art" thesis in particular: "Conspicuously absent [from the lecture notes themselves] are the strongly normative pronouncements on the success or failure of individual artworks from the standpoint of the system, which have rightly troubled later readers, as well as the forced 'dialectical transitions' from one art form to another" (Gaiger, 2006:162). Within the text of Knox' translation, the transitional points between any two stages of art's development, as periods of dissolution, represent periods during which artworks do not attain to the level of true "works-of-art." The structure of the narrative as it stands thereby integrates negative normative pronouncements on particular artworks, those of the Roman satirists and the Romantic ironists, with dialectical transition by locating those works during period of dissolution. We see that the "end of art" reading of the *Lectures on Fine Art* may well stem from overlooking the complexity of the available materials, thereby in turn oversimplifying their relationship to other aspects of Hegel's philosophy. Given the extreme hermeneutic complexity of properly interpreting Knox' translation of the *Lectures*, then, it's initially not a matter of immediately interpreting and applying Hegel's philosophy of art, but rather of first reconstructing it.

What we have in Knox' volumes is definitely Hegelian, but it's not clear to what extent they are, strictly speaking, Hegel's own, nor will it be until the rest of the untranslated work on aesthetics has been considered and systematically compared to the materiel in those volumes. Without accessing the materials which are still only available in German, then, the best we can do is to integrate the translated *Lectures on Fine Art* as tightly and rigorously as possible with Hegel's other writings, thereby integrating his aesthetics with the rest of the system. In addition, the inability to fix and determine the real relationship between Knox's translation and Hegel's aesthetic philosophy itself will in no way impair an historical treatment of how that translation has been received in the English-speaking world. In fact just such a treatment will yield indispensable clues to correcting the misinterpretations of Hegel that impede contemporary aesthetics and art criticism.

2. That we should refer to dissolutions of art rather than the “end of art.”

One interesting possibility, then, one which is not only allowed by the particular history of the text as we have it but also supported by the translated material itself, is that there is not quite an “end of art thesis” in the *Aesthetics* at all, a point that’s been widely and effectively argued.⁹ In the context of the reception of the *Lectures on Fine Art* within the English-speaking world, however, Danto’s influential “end of art” thesis, which is based on an idiosyncratic interpretation of the *Lectures*, has come to great prominence despite a variety of incisive criticisms. But to the extent that Hegel’s philosophy of art represents one of the principle options of contemporary theory, the hermeneutic task of re-reading Hegel’s aesthetics has become urgently necessary for the sake of philosophical aesthetics generally. In addition, the “end of art” thesis has sometimes been associated with one more dramatically labeled as “the death of art.” In the English-speaking world, that association turns out to be an error based on a mistranslation, albeit one that ties Hegel’s *Aesthetics* to related themes in continental philosophy. Thus it is that the “death/end of art” is addressed in treatments of Nietzsche, Benjamin, Adorno, and Heidegger,¹⁰ each of whom would have read the *Lectures* in the original German. But the reception of these thinkers by Anglo-American continental philosophy, because of the initial mistranslation of the key passages in Hegel, *has* been directly affected by the hermeneutic problem of translation. As a result, the dissolution of art has sometimes been wrongly understood as the “death of art:”

This understanding of Hegel was based mainly on a mistranslation of key terms in Hegel’s aesthetics in an English translation done in the 1920s by the English scholar

⁹. Curtis L. Carter, “A Re-Examination of the ‘Death of Art’ Interpretation of Hegel’s Aesthetics” in *Art and Logic in Hegel’s Philosophy* Eds. Warren E. Steinkraus and Kenneth I. Schmitz (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1980) pp. 83-100.

¹⁰. See Stefan Dornuf, “The End of History and the End of Art: Vicissitudes of a Concept from Hegel to Adorno” in *Hegels Ästhetik II: Die Kunst der Politik-Die Politik der Kunst, Zweiter Teil* Eds. Andreas Arndt, Karol Bal, and Henning Ottmann (Hegel-Jahrbuch 2000) pp. 269-; Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield, “The Question Lacking at the End of Art: Danto and Heidegger” in *Philosophy Today* Vol. 49 No. 5 (2005) pp. 153-160; Andreas Arndt, Ed. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000) pp. 269-274; Anselm Jappe and Donald Nicholson-Smith “*Sic Transit Gloria Artis*: ‘The End of Art’ for Theodor Adorno and Guy Debord” in *SubStance* Vol. 28, No. 3 1999, pp. 102-128; David Roberts “Art and Myth: Adorno and Heidegger” in *Thesis Eleven* Vol. 58, No. 1 (1999) pp. 19-34; Ingrid Scheibler, “Effective History and the End of Art: from Nietzsche to Danto” in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* Vol. 25, No. 1 (1999) pp. 1-28; Stephen D. Snyder, “Hegel, Nietzsche, and Danto on the End of Art: A Critique of the End of Art” Ph.D. dissertation, St. Louis University 2006

Osmatson. The English translation by Sir T. M. Knox, of Hegel's *Lectures in Aesthetics* in 1975 served to correct such misleading translations and supports the view that Hegel's did not portend the death of art. Based on a careful investigation of Hegel's texts relating to this problem...I concluded that, despite complex and sometimes misleading statements, Hegel did not intend the end of art in the sense that this idea was popularly understood. By taking certain isolated statements out of context it would be possible to argue that Hegel did intend the death of art, for example, when he or his editors cite passages that seem to say that Hegel believed that art had come to an end in his time or that its purpose as a means of revealing the truth had been supplanted by religion and philosophy. But, as Sir Malcolm Knox pointed out, Hegel also "said that art would continue its task for thousands of years..."¹¹

For purposes of explication we need not refute the concepts of the "end of art" or even the "death of art." Our initial task is just to show that those concepts have only a tenuous, ambiguous, and controversial relationship to Hegel's aesthetic philosophy. For even thinkers who avoid conflating the "death of art" with the "end of art," such as Danto, and who accept instead the latter thesis, misconstrue the theory as it appears in Hegel's texts. We should not ignore the ambivalence within Hegel's text; there *can* be no decisive, final reading, because the *Lectures* represent the process of Hegel's aesthetic philosophy being worked out rather than a final and definitive position. Therefore when Danto characterizes Hegel's view on the end of art as "unequivocal," he obscures both the complex issue of rightly interpreting the relevant statements in the *Lectures on Fine Art* and the deep ambivalence of Hegel's own sense of the matter.¹² The point is just that the "end of art" reading is neither the only approach nor the strongest to the text as we have it. But in order to develop a stronger reading of art's dissolution, it's necessary to get a comprehensive view of where Hegel's philosophy of fine art stands within the wider context of his whole system. Because Hegel is a systematic and holistic thinker, and because of the complexity of how to read Hotho's selections, it is reasonable to use Hegel's other writings as an interpretive key to the *Lectures on Fine Art*. For example,

¹¹. Curtis L. Carter, "Hegel and Danto on the End of Art" (February 16, 2008) accessed 9/10/08 <http://www.aesthetics.com.cn/s40c1139.aspx> See also Sir Malcolm Knox, "The Puzzle of Hegel's Aesthetic," in Steinkraus and Schmitz, 1980:8; See also Sir Malcolm Knox, *Hegel's Lectures on Aesthetics* (Oxford, Oxford, England, 1975), pp. 11, 103

¹². Arthur Danto, "The End of Art" in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* Columbia University Press, 1986 p. 83

the question of how art's dissolution is related to the wider context of Hegel's philosophy of history will naturally arise. A comprehensive view of Hegel's aesthetics will require that we address other aspects of his philosophy.

Much clarity can be achieved by simply addressing the translation of the fundamental terms in the passages most relevant to the "end of art." First we should firmly grasp why the "end of art," as it appears in the *Lectures on Fine Art*, should instead be referred to as the "the dissolution (*Auflösung*) of art." By translating *Auflösung* as "end," we not only misconstrue Hegel as suggesting that art somehow stops at a certain point in history, but we also conceal from ourselves the term's relationship to the wider contexts of Hegel's other writings. For example, "a faulty translation of the phrase "*Kunst selbst sich aufhebt*," into the English "Art commits an act of suicide" may have contributed to the death of art interpretation of Hegel's aesthetics, especially among English speaking readers" (Carter, 2008).¹³ Carter suggests that that translation is misleading, and proposes that the term "dissolve" is substituted (Carter, 1978:94). Knox renders the phrase "*Kunst selbst sich aufhebt*") as "art annuls itself" (*Lectures on Fine Art*: 529), but it could also be translated as "art *sublates* itself." An important term associated with *Auflösung* is *aufheben*, usually rendered "to sublimate" in English, and found in the key phrase "*die Kunst selbst sich aufhebt*". This simple problem of translation, then, leads us to one of several important differences between "the dissolution of art" and the "end of art" and begins to indicate the special place of art in terms of Hegel's system of thought. Before explicating the complex idea of dialectical sublation, however, we should first get a sense of what Hegel thinks is the purpose of art, for on one reading, it is precisely the attainment of that purpose that results in art's dissolution. But, what, for Hegel, is the purpose of art?

¹³. "The German text is as follows: 'Dadurch erhalten wir als Endpunkt des Romantischen überhaupt die Zufälligkeit des Äusseren wie des Inneren und ein Auseinanderfallen dieser Seiten, durch welches die Kunst selbst sich aufhebt und die Norwendigkeit für das Bewusstsein zieht....' (Carter, 2008).

3. The function of art

What human need is fulfilled by the creation and enjoyment of artworks? Hegel's question, "what is man's need to produce works of art?" (*Lectures on Fine Art*: 30) is an inaugural question in the history of aesthetics. It represents an anthropological approach to the human activity of art-making in a way that locates it firmly within 19th century thought; "the question arises of what interest or end man sets before himself when he produces such subject matter in the form of works of art" (*Lectures on Fine Art*: 41). For Hegel, art is the sensuous expression of the inner Spirit of humanity at a given historical moment; "the spirit is meant to be affected by [art] and finds some satisfaction in it" (*Lectures on Fine Art*: 35). The artwork is a mode of communication, a mode of self-knowledge and self-recognition at the same time; it externalizes what is within us as human beings. Hegel observes that "art seems to proceed from a higher impulse and to satisfy higher needs—at times the highest and absolute needs since it is bound up with the most universal views of life and the religious interests of whole epochs and peoples" (*Lectures on Fine Art*: 30). Therefore, the creation and enjoyment of artworks is designed to fulfill relatively high spiritual needs, like those of self-expression, self-recognition, and communication with and recognition by others; and this assumes that the work of art emerges from within a relationship of mutual recognition. This immediately recalls the image of the slave whose labor stamps the natural world with the shape of human work, and whose self-recognition depends upon his confrontation and reconciliation of the other, and whose developing relationship with the other is mediated by his ability to re-create nature by putting a human aspect on it. But since it is a deliberate human communication, the work of art reflects the freedom of subjectivity of the artist, inflected by the artist's time and culture. The work of art, then, is the stamp of the human spirit on the world, the visible mark of the human being as free subject:

The universal need for art... is man's rational need to lift the inner and outer world into his spiritual consciousness as an object in which he recognizes again his own self. The need for this spiritual freedom he satisfies, on the one hand, within by making what is within him explicit to himself, but correspondingly, by giving outward reality to this

explicit self, and thus in this duplication of himself by bringing what is in him into sight and knowledge for himself self and others (*Lectures on Fine Art*: 31-2).

Like the self-consciousness that can exist only when it exists for another, the artwork has a double structure. Hegel calls this feature of self-consciousness “its unity in its duplication,”¹⁴ and it is this fracture that sets the demand for recognition in motion. In the artwork, self-consciousness comes to be embodied in physical reality, and therefore “it has come out of itself. . .it has lost itself, for it finds itself as another being” (*Phenomenology*: 111). This mirroring or doubling structure is also the dynamic at the heart of the human being’s need for art, because the artwork is a form of objective spirit. The artwork, like self-consciousness or Spirit itself, represents an alteration of the natural world through human work and thereby raises the nature in which the work is embedded to a higher level. Through her artistic labor, the human being leaves the visible mark of deliberate, self-consciousness activity, that is, freedom, on the natural world, and thereby recognizes herself in it:

Things in nature are only immediate and single, while man as spirit duplicates himself, in that (i) he *is* as things in nature are, but (ii) he is just as much *for* himself; he sees himself, represents himself to himself, thinks, and only on the strength of this active placing himself before himself is he is spirit (*Lectures on Fine Art*: 31).

Therefore there is a rational need to overcome the contradictions between the inner and the outer world, between the sensuous and the spiritual, between the self and the other which reaches a particular kind of solution in the artwork. Like the artwork itself, the human beings’ need for art is itself between spirit and flesh, for it is a “rational need,” and therefore a powerful and articulate expression of the very same need that drives Hegel’s entire system. When art finds itself unable to fulfill that need, it is superseded by religion, just as religion is in turn superseded by philosophy. But what exactly does Hegel mean by “superseded”?

¹⁴ G. W. F. *Hegel Phenomenology of Spirit* A. V. Miller, trans. (N.Y. and London: Oxford University Press, 1977) p. 111

4. Dialectical sublation

The dissolution of art is fundamentally related to concept of dialectical sublation, which is “one of the most important notions in all of Hegel” (Carter, 1980:94), for art has, in fact, been sublated. It is specifically in the irony of the Romantic period that art is supposed to have “come to an end” (in the sense indicated by Danto, for example); it has been cancelled and at the same time preserved, acting as the catalyst in the resolution of contradictory elements (reason and sensuality), and dissolving in the progress of that reaction. Hence the connection between *Auflösung* is *aufheben*. Hegel takes full advantage of the equivocal term *Auflösung*: *literally, it means “to raise up something; however, as a philosophical notion it can mean ‘cancel’, ‘dissolve’, or ‘preserve’, or all three at once!”* (Carter, 1980:94). Inwood says that the word “has three main senses: (1) ‘to raise, to hold, lift up’ (2) ‘to annul, abolish, destroy, cancel, suspend’ (3) ‘to keep, save, preserve’...Hegel regularly uses all three senses at once.”¹⁵ Similarly, Etter comments on “the difficulty of the German term *aufheben*, which may mean ‘to raise’, ‘to preserve’, or ‘to annul’-a profoundly plural ambiguity that Hegel exploits as the central explanatory term of his dialectical sense of history” (Etter, 2006:69). Its worth quoting Hegel’s *Logic* at length to get a sense of exactly what he intends by the term, and to understand its central importance:

To sublata, and the *sublated* (that which exists ideally as a moment), constitutes one of the most important notions in philosophy. It is a fundamental determination that repeatedly occurs throughout the whole of philosophy, the meaning of which is to be clearly grasped and especially distinguished from *nothing*. What is sublated is not thereby reduced to nothing. Nothing is *immediate*; what is sublated, on the other hand, is the result of *mediation*; it is a non-being that has its origin in a being. It still has, therefore, *in itself* the *determinateness from which it originates*. “*To sublata*” has a twofold meaning in the [German] language: on the one hand it means to preserve, to maintain, and equally it also means to cause to cease, to put an end to. Even “to preserve” includes a negative element, namely, that something is removed from its immediacy and so from an existence that is open to external influences, in order to

¹⁵. Michael Inwood *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1999) p. 283

preserve it. Thus what is sublated is at the same time preserved; it has only lost its immediacy but is not on that account annihilated.¹⁶

The dissolution of art, then, is not a kind of annihilation, as is suggested by the term “end of art.” Art never becomes nothing. Dissolutions are rather transitional periods between larger-scale events in art historical development. As moments of sublation, art’s dissolutions each mediate between two periods, the one replacing the other because of historical forces and according to a dialectical pattern. Thus there are in fact three periods of dissolution, not just one: the first forms the transition from the Symbolic stage to the Classical, the second forms the transition from the Classical to the Romantic period, and the third dissolution takes place during Hegel’s own lifetime at the end of Romanticism. In that case, for example, during the dissolution of Romantic art, the artwork is “removed from its immediacy” in the abstract forms of art criticism, art history, and philosophical aesthetics. The contradictions imbedded in a particular stage of art, then, contribute to its transformation into a later form, so that the stages of art history partly result from limitations inherent in any given artform as a mode of human self-recognition. But the earlier artform is not thereby reduced to nothing; something of it is preserved even after a moment of dissolution has served its transitional purpose. For example, Romantic art repeats the “separation of shape and meaning” (Hegel, 1828-9/1988:512) that had characterized Ancient art that, for Hegel, is really pre-art.

Classical sculpture attained the height of artistic achievement in its “complete unification of spiritual and sensuous existence as the correspondence of the two” (Hegel, 1828-9/1988:512). In fact, the cleavage in Romantic art between shape and meaning, between the actual and the real is the “ground” of the Romantic dissolution; but then, it was also a key to the dissolution of Ancient art and the advent of the Classical style. Therefore here is no “end of art,” but rather a cycle of moments stages or moments in the history of art punctuated by periods of decadence. Art develops through cycles of dissolution over the larger course of historical time, with each moment of dissolution functioning as a transition between the principle stages of art history. Hegel argues that

¹⁶ G. W. F. Hegel *Science of Logic* A.V. Miller, trans. (London and New York: George Allen and Unwin Ltd. And Humanities Press, 1969) pp. 106-7

during the Symbolic and Romantic periods, art is not-yet able, or no-longer able, to fulfill the crucial functions of self-recognition and reconciliation of inner and outer that Hegel describes. Works continue to be produced, but, for complex reasons that will be addressed, they are not genuine artworks. At these moments of decadence, genuine artworks are not possible.

One of the great benefits of the model of recurring dissolutions of art is that it corrects the misconception that there's only one "end of art." For example, Gadamer does not recognize that there are three dissolutions of art, including Roman satire and romantic ironism, emphasizing the demise of the Classical at the expense of Hegel's own period. On his reading, "Hegel is not primarily referring to the end of the Christian tradition of pictorial imagery in the West... When Hegel spoke of art as a thing of the past he meant that art was no longer understood as a presentation of the divine in the self-evident and unproblematic way in which it had been understood in the Greek world" (Gadamer, 1991: 5-6). But the most important example of what happens when we translate "*Auflösung*" as "the end of art" is Arthur Danto. One of the most influential figures in aesthetics today, Danto has tried to adapt Hegel's aesthetics to a philosophical and art historical understanding of the contemporary artworld. However, by not distinguishing between "dissolution" and "end," he ends up misreading Hegel's thought. On Danto's account, once art poses the question "what is art" in the most articulate possible way, it has achieved its end, and the work that does this is Warhol's *Brillo Box* (1964). After Warhol, there's no particular way a contemporary or conceptual artwork has to look, so that anything can be an artwork.¹⁷ Today, there's no direction for the artworld to move in, no great Modernist narrative about the liberating powers of art, no development of different, competing styles. Instead, the artworld exhibits a remarkable pluralism. Thus, Danto's narrative offers us a way of understanding art history philosophically; once art has fulfilled its purpose (or end), it stops developing (or comes to an end). But again, "end" is an inaccurate and misleading translation of "dissolution" because it suggests a kind of finality that Hegel could not seriously intend philosophically

¹⁷. Arthur C. Danto, "The Last Work of Art: Artworks and Real Things" in *Theoria* No. 39 1973, pp. 1-17, reprinted in Dickie, George, Sclafani, Richard, and Roblin, Robin (eds.) *Aesthetics, A Critical Anthology*, 2nd ed. St. Martins Press, 1989 pp. 551-562

and that's not supported by the text of the *Lectures*.¹⁸ By translating “*Auflösung*” as “dissolution” instead of “end,” we avoid this clever but ultimately misleading double-reading of art's end as “end-as-purpose/end-as-death.” We would thereby avoid ever using the oxymoronic notion of “posthistorical art,” a concept that amounts to a *reductio* of Danto's interpretation of Hegel's art history.

5. the middle term

So, besides the key concept of *Auflösung*, the periodic dissolutions of art reflect another larger term of Hegel's discourse. An important clue to art's dissolution is that art, for Hegel, is a “middle term between pure thought and what is merely external, sensuous, and transient, between nature and finite reality and the infinite freedom of conceptual thinking” (*Lectures on Fine Art*:8). Art functions analogously to the middle term of a syllogism, which binds the premises to the conclusion to the premises but which does not itself appear in the conclusion. In fact, within Hegel's system, art itself plays the role of a dialectical catalyst between opposed terms generating a higher unity from out of that opposition; “art is the middle term between purely objective indigent existence and purely inner idea” (*Lectures on Fine Art*: 163). Since the middle term of a syllogism, like a catalyst in a chemical reaction¹⁹ or a sublated element in a dialectical resolution, is not discerned in the conclusion or result, Hegel's language suggests that art, by virtue of being a middle term, may seem to disappear without really doing so. That may be a clue to the sense in which art is said to undergo dissolutions, periods during which art is perhaps unable to fully perform its function as a middle term between the sensuous and the spiritual. Recalling Hegel's comment in the *Logic* that “what is sublated...is the result of mediation” (Hegel, 1969:106-7), we find that a concept performing the function

¹⁸. We must here admit the following passage, which is the single most challenging statement to the idea that we should no longer speak of an “end-of-art” thesis in Hegel: “...we have seen that art, and visual art in particular, comes to an end when the representation of such objects has the aim of displaying the artist's subjective skill in producing semblances of them.” (Hegel, 1828-9: 635). On one reading, art's end is the last, romantic dissolution. However, such a judgment cannot coherently be maintained from within Hegel's epistemology, and must surely reflect the man's nostalgia rather than the philosopher's system of aesthetic history. That point will be addressed in a later section.

¹⁹. For example, in his discussion of the complex relationships between electricity and chemistry, Hegel comments that physics “refuses to see anything in the galvanic process but electricity...so that the difference between the extremes and the middle term of the syllogism is regarded merely as the difference between a dry and a wet conductor...the activity manifested in and by water as the middle term, is disregarded and set aside.” G.W.F. Hegel *Philosophy of Nature* Vol. II Trans. M.J. Petry (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1970) pp. 192-3

of a middle term undergoes sublation. Whatever plays the role of a dialectical catalyst between opposed terms is sublated by virtue of that function. Art is both cancelled and preserved as a result of mediating between thought and the sensuous.

Then, however, a problem arises: does the special role of sublation-in-mediation refer to the transhistorical nature of art in general, or describe the structure underlying the periodic repetition of art's dissolution, or indicate the unique conditions of the Romantic dissolution in particular? The answer is *both*; art always plays the role of human self-recognition, and always requires the embodiment of some human idea and feeling. However, art must also reflect the changes that take place in the human spirit over the course of historical time, and must therefore be different at distinct stages of *geistlich* development. Art itself, in the course of reflecting historical change develops into the highest form that is possible for it from within a particular style, Ancient, Classical, and then Romantic. At any transition point between one style and another, there is a period of dissolution, a transformation of the previous style into the next. With the transition into Romantic art, there is a fundamental change in the human relationship to the artwork, causing a further, historically specific relationship of mediation. In other words, in Romantic period there takes place a loss of intimacy between the human being and the work of art, which constitutes a further mediation. The historical impossibility of worshipping artworks itself makes possible, indeed, makes necessary the museum, the critic, the historian and the philosopher of art.²⁰ "The philosophy of art is therefore a greater need in our day than it was in days when art by itself yielded full satisfaction. Art [now] invites us to intellectual consideration, and that not for the purpose of creating art again, but for knowing philosophically what art is" (Lectures on Fine Art: 11).

If we turn to the encyclopedia *Logic* of 1827, we find another example of a middle term: "Nature is the middle term which links [the Logical idea and Spirit] together. Nature, the totality immediately before us, unfolds itself into the two extremes of the Logical Idea and Spirit. But Spirit is Spirit only when it is mediated through

²⁰. Douglas Crimp, "The End of Art and the Origin of the Museum" in *Art Journal* Vol. 46, No. 4, *The Political Unconscious in Nineteenth-Century Art* (Winter, 1987), pp. 261-266

Nature.”²¹ Here, Hegel indicates that Spirit, as concrete human subjectivity, must engage in a process of representation, of making-appear, of embodiment in order to attain self-recognition. Appearance, then, requires the sensuousness of a Nature that is inherently foreign to and other than Spirit, but on which human beings must nevertheless labor in order to recognize themselves in their own works. In art, human beings stamp themselves on the natural world, thus making themselves at home in it, reducing its foreignness, seeking to reconcile the spiritual and the sensuous aspects of ourselves. Spirit “generates out of itself works of fine art as the first reconciling middle term between pure thought and what is merely external, sensuous, and transient, between nature and finite reality and the infinite freedom of conceptual thinking” (Lectures on Fine Art: 8; the second and third terms are religion and philosophy). Works of art are the impressions of the inner world of Spirit on world on material objects, mediating between the invisible world of mind and the visible world of things. Hegel’s approach to aesthetics is work-centered (rather than audience centered, like Kant’s, or institutional), and we find here that the work of art itself occupies a special location within Hegel’s ontology as a kind of hinge between the material and Spirit:²² “the work of art stands in the middle between immediate sensuousness and ideal thought. It is not yet pure thought, but, despite its sensuousness, is no longer a purely material existent, either...” (Lectures on Fine Art: 38). From that position on the nature of art comes an approach to aesthetic judgment that structures the *Lectures on Fine Art*. For any artwork should ideally achieve the goal of sensuously expressing the human spirit. If it fails to, it’s a “work,” but not a work of art.

For now, we may be satisfied that the concepts of sublation and the middle term are vital to a full grasp on art’s dissolution, and that the usage of the terms “dissolve” and “dissolution” offer several advantages over the phrase “end of art.” First, “dissolution” prevents the misleading idea that art somehow stops during the course of historical

²¹ G. W. F. Hegel *Logic* (Part 1 of the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*) William Wallace, trans. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1828-9/1998) p. 251, § 187 I altered the translation of “Geist” from “Mind” to “Spirit” in order to maintain continuity with Knox’s usage.

²² Gary Shapiro suggests that art functions as a of “middle term” between “the three elements of the artistic situation, i.e., the artist, the work, and the audience...The middle term of this relationship...consists in the depiction or performance of human actions” (Shapiro, 1976:28). The description seems to apply principally to the performing arts.

development and encourages a much more complex reading of Hegel's account; art is not reduced to nothing, but our relationship to it is radically transformed over time.

Secondly, the term "dissolution" directs our attention to the ways in which Hegel's philosophical history of art is systematically linked to the wider contexts of dialectical sublation and mediation. These fundamental terms indicate the systematically imbedded nature of art's dissolution, and through their characteristic subtlety and complexity help to correct the oversimplification implicit in the "end of art" slogan. In fact, that art works through sublation-in-mediation will require carefully locating the *Lectures on Aesthetics* within Hegel's larger philosophy of history and metaphysics. In addition, the term "dissolution" has an ethical sense that accurately reflects Hegel's moral approbation of Roman satire and romantic irony, both moments of art's dissolution; but these complex relationships can only be unfolded by tracing them through the details of art history. We will examine Roman Satire and Romantic irony in detail later, but first we must situate Hegel's aesthetics within the wider context of his philosophy as a whole. Specifically, we have to clarify the metaphysical position of art, both in terms of the artwork itself and in terms of the human artistic endeavor.