

# INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

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## END OF ART

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It. *Morte dell'arte, Fine dell'arte*; Fr. *Fin de l'art*; Germ. *Ende der Kunst*; Span. *Fin del arte*. The term designates the idea or thesis that art is no longer able to fulfil its highest (metaphysical, cognitive, religious, ethico-political) role. This general idea can be, and has been, specified in different ways. Accordingly, art is no longer an adequate vehicle for the truth, nor for the presentation of the divine, nor for the embedment of moral and political principles and values, or art has become irrelevant in a largely disenchanted, prosaic, technological world; or artworks can no longer be beautiful or even distinguishable from common objects, or they are no longer autonomous insofar as they require a non-artistic perspective for their interpretation. With its many senses, the thesis, or the rejection thereof, characterizes a substantial part of the discourse on modernity starting with Hegel.

### THE ORIGINS OF THE END OF THE ART: HEGEL'S AESTHETICS

Philosophical statements about the inadequate or even deceiving nature of art and its subordination to philosophy can be found as early as in Plato's *Republic*, and lamentations of the decadence of art are already present in the classical, especially Latin, world. However, the first significant occurrence of the thesis of the end of art is most commonly traced back to Hegel, even though Hegel himself did not use the expression "end of art". In his lectures on aesthetics, Hegel states e.g. that "art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past. Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our ideas *instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality* and occupying its higher place" (Hegel 1975, 10). The pastness of art is systematically well rooted in the paragraphs on art from Hegel's *Encyclopedia* (Hegel 2007). There, art is presented as the first, merely intuitive form of absolute spirit, bound to become inadequate and be superseded by the representation-based form of revealed religion and the conceptual one of philosophy. Hegel pursues in this way both a critique of

contemporary romantic assertions of the primacy of art over philosophy (e.g. in Schelling), and a multi-layered constructive philosophical aim.

### THREE DIMENSIONS OF THE PASTNESS OF THE ART

For the sake of simplicity, one can identify three main dimensions of the thesis of art's past character. The first dimension is the metaphysical-epistemological one: art, despite its progressive dematerialization from architecture through sculpture, painting, and music up to the almost-conceptual form of poetry (Ophälders 2014) is, because of its structural materiality, no longer able to adequately embody and communicate the truth, i.e. absolute or divine spiritual contents. Besides, the less we depend on art to grasp these contents, the more we need philosophy of art or aesthetics instead: art is no longer "absolute", but relies on aesthetics for an adequate exhibition of its truth contents. Secondly, there is a practical dimension: art is no longer an autonomous, adequate vehicle for the configuration, presentation, and communication of the highest religious, ethical and political contents and values innervating modern ethical life (Siani 2012). Finally, there is the aesthetic dimension: art has become the more and more fragmented, arbitrary product of the individual artist, thus giving up its claim to universal meaning and relevance, but at the same time becoming a freer, secularized depiction of the human world. Hegel's thesis hence does not designate the end of art's existence or legitimacy, but rather the past character of art's highest function (D'Angelo 2007). Even with this clarification, however, the thesis of the end of art has remained highly controversial, not only among Hegel scholars, but also among philosophers who have developed their own interpretation of it beyond the Hegelian text and intention.

### 19<sup>th</sup> AND 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

A non-Hegelian version of the thesis can be found in Nietzsche and his idea of the death by suicide of tragedy, as well as, later, of the decadence of contemporary art, most notably with Wagner (Nietzsche 1967). Heidegger, on the other hand, directly refers to Hegel's thesis, instituting a tight connection between diverging conceptions of truth and the different roles assigned to art. He then suggests that Hegel's thesis may be valid under current conditions, but it might be revoked in the future, pending on the possible transition to a conception of truth antithetical to the current one, namely the "modern", subject-based one supporting Hegel's thesis (Heidegger 2002). Building on Hegel's thesis as well as on Heidegger's "work" concept, Gadamer (1985) remarks that art after its end is no longer subject to historical progress, and is hence contemporary presence of the past. Also Nancy (1996) identifies the dissolution of art with the affirmation of its independence and intrinsic plural character.

The end of art thesis has also been resumed in the context of the critical discussion of the industrialization of art and culture, e.g. in Benjamin's idea of the loss of artistic aura due to technical reproducibility (Benjamin 2007). Adorno (1997) insists on the emancipatory function and autonomy of art, while at the same time warning of the role played by the capitalist cultural industry in the distortion and deaesthetization of art.

In the analytic tradition, the most significant contribution to the debate is offered by Danto (1986). Making explicit reference to Hegel, he defends and develops the end of art thesis based on a direct confrontation with 20<sup>th</sup> century artworks. His claim is that contemporary art is no longer self-sufficient, but needs a philosophical discourse for its explication (Danto's most famous example concerns Warhol's *Brillo box*). The consequence is "the philosophical disenfranchisement of art". A similar perspective is adopted by art historian Belting (1987), who theorizes "the end of the history of art", meaning that contemporary art, though aware of its history, does not carry it further, and that art history as a discipline can no longer rely on a guiding model.

As for artists themselves, the theme of the end of art is certainly a constant in 20<sup>th</sup> Century art, which has often thermalized not only the dissolution of the classical and the beautiful, but also the dissolution of the aesthetic aura and of the difference between the artistic and the non-artistic object (e.g. Warhol, Duchamp, Cage).

#### THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

The contemporary debate on the end of art is lively and diversified. A good starting point is Geulen (2006). While offering focused readings of the end of art in Hegel, Nietzsche, Benjamin, Adorno, Heidegger, and Hölderlin, she advances the provocative idea that the end of art is not so much a philosophical concept or thesis, but rather a rumor. The point is hence not to inquire into the end of art as such, but into the genesis, reasons, and persistence of the rumor according to which art is at its end, a rumor instituting a complicate, paradoxical relation between tradition and modernity: "At the end of the end of art one does not find an end, but a beginning: the discovery of the end of art as a discourse of modernity" (Geulen 2006: 14). García Düttmann (2000), partly drawing on Adorno, disputes the historical pastness of art. He suggests that, rather than referring to art in general, we should consider each artwork in its singularity as the very possibility to "end" art. However, through a sophisticated analysis of the term "end", he then argues that every single end of art implies a liberation into "endlessness" and the impossibility of a full disappearance of art into its philosophical interpretation.

Another significant part of the contemporary debate revolves, whether implicitly or explicitly, around new interpretive approaches to Hegel's thesis, and to Hegel's aesthetics as a whole. Introducing and using a more diversified and reliable textual basis on Hegel's aesthetics, Gethmann-Siefert (1994) has also challenged received interpretations of Hegel's thesis. Insisting on Hegel's awareness of the historical character of any artwork, she claims that, while the highest function of art certainly is and remains a thing of the past for Hegel, art still plays a non-dispensable role in the construction of individual consciousness and culture. On the contrary, Pippin (2014) insists that Hegel's thesis of the end of art is wrong both about art and about modernity: modernity has not achieved a condition of full-fledged rationality, and art still expresses our highest spiritual needs. At the same time, he maintains that Hegel's aesthetics, if effectively detached from its most burdensome thesis, can still substantially help us deal with art "after the beautiful", which remains a non-disposable sensuous vehicle of the actualization and intelligibility of the Absolute. Against Pippin, Kottman affirms the pastness of art, arguing that "art is so important to us now

because its pastness is one of our most precious bearers of historically indexed demands of mutuality" (Kottman 2018: 288). He furthermore remarks, with main reference to Shakespeare, that the awareness of art's limitation or loss of vocation is embedded in artworks themselves, thus preserving art's historical relevance.

#### THE DEBATE IN ITALY

The end of art thesis was at the core of a controversy between Croce (1934) and Gentile (1975), with the former explicitly speaking of the "death of art" and interpreting it as art's historical dissolution and loss of meaning, and the latter referring to it as a transcendental, ideal, and eternal end, following which art in fact never dies. Argan (1964), on the other hand, denounces the end of art as the result of industrial technologization, whereas Formaggio (1983) more optimistically sees the end of ideal art as the birth of art as subjective, self-conscious transformative praxis. Vattimo (1985) theorizes a "sunset" of art, signaling the dissolution of metaphysics and the transition to postmodernism and weak thought. More recently, Iannelli, Garelli, Vercellone, Vieweg (2016) have challenged the end of art as a persisting legend, reassessing its influence in the horizon of aesthetics of crises, and Siani (2017) has reaffirmed the end of art as an indispensable piece of a defense of modernity and the primacy of the right of subjective freedom.

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