

SEDUCTION OF THE END OF THE END

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The end of art is informed by a sense of art in its relation to discourse or philosophy. It is within this sense of art that I attempt to practice as an artist, and it is from the position of a practicing artist that I speak about the end of art.

Here, 'art' is a historically determined concept rather than one essential to human existence. It is important to make the distinction between this concept and one such as 'creativity', which *may* be essential to human existence or activity, and which may be seen to inform fields as diverse as mathematics, agriculture, or housekeeping. The sense of art as a historically determined concept is restricted here to the visual arts and is based on the concept as it arose in modern western thought: it is necessarily linked to a linear view of the development of the art object's ontology via the tradition of modern art's self-critique through form. This tradition may be depicted as the search for that which is essential to, or 'real' about, the concept 'art' via the deletion of that which seems extraneous to it. This process may arguably be seen as having begun with the eradication of the image or representation via abstraction, a subsequent challenge to the necessity of the traditional mediums of painting or sculpture, the removal of aesthetics, and finally the obsolescence of form itself, of the necessity that art exist within an object. A sense that the history of this self-critical, historical development of art as a visual medium is over is the meaning of the end of art, due to the connection between this history and art's ontology as a concept.

Where Hegel theorised the end of art as the end of the significance of the field as a higher or spiritual realm and its return to everyday concerns, Danto emphasised the fact of art's ending as a necessarily *visual* concern, its previous developmental significance transferring to the field of philosophy or discourse. Conceptual and Pop Art - either the final or most recent significant modernist movements - embodied both these senses, either rendering art invisible in its delivery to the mundane objects of everyday existence or emphasising art *as* a concept over its necessary existence within an object. Contemporary art practitioners inherit the legacy of this end, and while this may represent a stalemate or endgame, I attempt to contextualise my own practice as a contemporary artist within the idea of the end of art, at the end of the modern search for that which is real or essential to art as a visual form. How can a contemporary art practitioner contribute to a visual discourse when its subject has disappeared, its absolute significance having been finally, ideally, withdrawn? The end of art accompanies the end of history via the shared sense of a subject-centric discourse within modern art and philosophy, with these endings perhaps presenting similar practice-based challenges.

The end of art is located at its beginning in the sense that art as a concept was over at its outset, when it was named. Within this view the onset of the progression of modern art movements is the *outcome* of art's having ended, meaning contemporary or post-modern art more accurately inhabits the *end* of 'the end of art'. In critiquing art, the modernist metanarrative ultimately and paradoxically reinforced art's presence further while simultaneously rendering art's critical or ontological potential less possible. By saying 'the end of art' while continuing to make it, I attempt to maintain a philosophical art practice at a point where this is potentially no longer possible. While my practice primarily involves the production of objects, like many artists today I am equally engaged with art as situation, relation, or concept: within this view the delivery of this talk today is art, equal to a work I may produce in my studio and exhibit in a gallery. This strategy is a weak one in that the work I produce cannot contribute to any particular critical discourse: all I can do is attempt to inhabit the reality of the contemporary art world, the ongoing art activity made almost mandatory by art's having ended with the modern. The drive towards the end of art as a visual form results ironically in its re-entrenchment, evident in the failure of conceptual art's pure project to free art from its connection with materiality or aesthetics. This leads to an inescapable sense of art as primarily object- or material-based within the contemporary moment, a sense of the inescapability of aesthetics.

At the end of the end of art, the significance of contemporary artworks is increasingly located within their function as allegory, wherein an object's meaning is interpreted to provide comment on or insight into a matter normally unrelated to art discourse, frequently a political issue. Within such a context it is increasingly impossible to make work that is 'about' nothing, since any form or situation that is framed as 'art' is automatically attributed with meaning or significance. This framing of art occurs increasingly within the work of curators, commentators, and collectors, rendering the artist a somewhat mute producer of material to be allegorically shaped. The disenfranchisement of the artist within the contemporary moment is a symptom of the end of the end of art, the cessation of the development of art as a form rendering all art equally valid, within the view of art as individual expression. When the art object no longer embodies the conditions of its existence, it may be seen to inhabit roles such as decoration, commodity or allegory, or exist as a symbol of art's previously significant history. An attempt to make work that embodies this significance, that makes a contribution to the development of art as a visual form – or which is 'about' nothing – is automatically condemned to the role of allegory and lent interpretation and meaning. The impossibility to contribute to discourse via practice necessitates an end of art statement.

Having located the final characteristic that had previously been considered necessary to art's definition – that is, that art must be aesthetic, visual, or object-bound – the short history of conceptual art attempted its eradication, to create artworks in the absence of these qualities. This continued the modernist project of attempting a definition of art or a seeking of art's essence, in relation to conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth's 1969 description of the artwork as a *proposition*:

Works of art are analytic propositions. That is, if viewed within their context – as art – they provide no information what-so-ever about any matter of fact. A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist's intention, that is, he is saying that a particular work of art *is art*, which means, is a *definition* of art.¹

The idea here is that by exhibiting a work the artist is declaring that something – that which they are presenting – *is art*, thus engaging with the question, 'what is art?' and a sense of art's ontology. The idea of the artwork as a proposition differs from the more frequent attribution of an allegorical function to art within the contemporary moment.

While the question 'what is art?' seems either unfashionable or impossible within contemporary art discourse, the question, 'what is *contemporary art*?' does hold a place in current theorisation, having been posited increasingly frequently since the start of the millennium. Attempts to answer the question, or to provide a discourse for contemporary art, are thwarted by the desire to remain true to the nature of contemporary art's avoidance of theorisation, its evasion of a single definition or metanarrative. While that which may be characterised as the modern compulsion to classify, define or philosophise art still moves theorists to provide a discourse for the contemporary moment, a post-modern suspicion of such impulses equally compels us to celebrate the contemporary's lack of such a discourse. Contemporary art theorisation tends to frequently attribute the modern with a negative status, as something we must escape, something 'the contemporary' as a good force can deliver us from. The idea of the end of art may be useful here, in that it accounts for what is characterised as a modernist drive to answer the question 'what is art?' while recognising the impossibility of this question within the contemporary. If the discourse of art as a visual form is complete, the idea of the end of art declares it cannot be replaced with another, satisfying both the contemporary desire to escape the metanarrative and the seemingly ineradicable modernist impulse to provide one.

Contemporary art is frequently defined or theorised in its perceived *difference* to the modern, due in large part to its post-historical status and its tendency to occur globally rather than arise solely from western centres of power. These readings of contemporary art are accurate, as the field does display

¹ Joseph Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy*, first published in *Studio International* (London) 178, no. 915 (October 1969), 134-137

a sense of historical stasis, and it is produced by cultures once considered 'other' to, or 'outside' those considered 'western'. In this sense it may be seen that within contemporary art, as the result of the liberation of art as a concept through modern western art history, art *is* released from the imperial confines of western culture. However contemporary art is only effective as such *as the result of* modernism and in line with modernist aims, and should therefore be viewed as inextricably linked to the modernist project. Contemporary art requires theorisation in its relation to the structure of modernism and as the outcome of modern art rather than as having sprung from alternative ideological conditions or structures. In line with this theorisation, I contextualise my own practice within the idea of 'art' as a particularly western construct rather than something essential to all cultures historically. Equally, a philosophy of contemporary art requires acknowledgement that the infinity of forms at the contemporary artist's disposal are the outcome of the modernist search for art's essence rather than something inherent to the concept 'art' itself.

Contemporary art's indefinability or lack of theorisation is reflected in the indefinability of practice: the end of the metanarrative of art's liberation is keenly felt when all forms, narratives or viewpoints are open and available, and when there is nothing of significance to contribute further to art as a specifically visual format. The art object's liberation within the ordinary forms of everyday life accompanies the notion of the end of history, for it is *as* this historical development that art is seen to end in life. However while 'art' as a distinct field of activity exists it is necessarily accompanied by the institution, which prevents its final liberation within the world. It is as the logical conclusion to the modernist development that the idea of the end of art applies, and without which this development concludes only in name within the contemporary moment. A gap exists between the desire for the ultimate liberation of art within the everyday, as something available to everyone in every culture and in every activity, and the reality that 'art', as a *concept*, requires housing by institutions. A sincere attempt to escape the ideology of the modern, or to separate art from the institution, necessitates the statement that art – as a concept – is over.

Ironically, saying 'the end of art' tends to maintain the modernist concern with art's essence: it furthers the sense of the critique of the concept 'art' by discarding that which is finally viewed as essential to it – the concept 'art' itself. Whether contemporary art is ultimately strengthened or weakened when defined as the end of art – or the end of the end of art – this definition itself may be seen as a continuation of that upon which contemporary art *forms* have themselves evolved: that is, the contextualisation of the development of modern art as based on a sense of self-critique. Saying 'the end of art' and thus returning contemporary art to a concern with critique may at least allude to the sense of radicality within the modern for which we display nostalgia, and which seems so

impossible today. Equally, the act of practicing art while saying 'the end of art' may be seen to embody the paradox of the end of art itself, where rather than ending at the end, art practice and reception can be seen instead to multiply. Where it could be said that modernist artists progressively sought to make art more 'real' by rescuing it from illusion and fantasy (deleting the frame, the image, the painting itself and so on), it may be possible within the contemporary moment to continue this sense of realism in art by mirroring that which confronts today's artists: the paradoxical situation wherein art's end is accompanied less by a sense of nihilism than by the increased hope and blossoming of art activity worldwide via 'contemporary art'. Saying 'the end of art' while practicing it continues the strand of realism characteristic of the modern, while simultaneously alluding to the impossibility of this.

Despite the legacy of conceptual art having lent all art post this movement a sense of gravity and significance by its explosion of the traditional forms of art and attempted eradication of aesthetics, it is not uncommon within the contemporary art world to hear difficult, restrained, highly conceptual or even invisible artworks appreciated in terms of aesthetics. Gavin Brown's enterprise in New York recently restaged a 1969 work by Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled (12 Horses)*. Here, 12 horses were housed within the gallery for a week last month, standing on a specially cushioned floor surface and eating hay. The exhibition was reviewed on the popular art blog Hyperallergic: while this site describes itself as 'a forum for serious, playful and radical thinking', it isn't known as the most theoretical of contexts for art discussion, despite its having been founded by art critics. Kounellis' work was originally created in the spirit of the Art Povera movement of which he was a member: this 60s movement questioned the art institution and applied art as a concept to everyday, banal or anti-art situations, and like conceptual art was created in the spirit of radicality, questioning that which comprised the concept 'art' and attempting to liberate it from the institution.

The Hyperallergic review of this work represents a common tendency within art reception today, wherein an experience of the work refers less to its challenging or radical history, and more to its aesthetic affect in its present materiality. The reviewer describes Kounellis' work for Hyperallergic this way:

The space is cool and still, and the horse's sleek bodies of rippled muscle and smooth manes are illuminated by the skylights. Similar to the original 1969 staging of the Kounellis piece at Rome's Galleria L'Attico, there's a consideration of the art in the beauty of an animal like a horse, which artists have been drawn to since the Lascaux caves were painted.²

A comment from a viewer follows:

² <http://hyperallergic.com/218248/the-calm-and-controversy-of-12-horses-in-an-art-gallery/>

It's so quiet', Melanie Kress, a curatorial fellow at Friends of the High Line, remarked after seeing the horses. 'Having fallen in love with that piece in art history class, it's still stunning.'³

At any level of involvement with the art world, one will experience aesthetic references to works that may have originally been created in a spirit of the anti-aesthetic, of ugliness or anti-art. While there is nothing wrong with appreciating something aesthetically, that which may have been significant or profound about a work's contribution to art's historical discourse tends to disappear in the immediate aesthetic appreciation of its objects. Anything we come across in our everyday existence may be appreciated aesthetically: a pile of rocks, a sunset, a road in a certain light, a clean floor, and while this may have been a point that the discourse of conceptual art was making, it is lost when reactions to the work remain within the realms of the aesthetic over the historical.

Gavin Brown, the gallery's director, attempts to return the work to its original historical significance by deflecting the sense that it is 'about' something, or that it is allegorical. The *Hyperallergic* reviewer writes:

When I asked gallery owner Gavin Brown what he thought it meant to bring these live animals into the space as art, he said: 'I don't think it's about anything.' He added that it's 'more through the coverage than the art' that the piece takes on a meaning more than what it is, saying that the press reactions were part of what drove the crowds lined outside the building.'⁴

Here Brown impedes an attempt to read conceptual art allegorically by insisting that the work is not about anything, thus maintaining the sense of the work's significance as a concern with art's ontology. It may be due to Brown's deflection of the idea that Kounellis' work is 'about' something, his attempt to keep the historical significance of the work at the forefront of its appreciation that led to the aesthetic emphasis of the review, but my point in mentioning this instance of the re-aestheticisation of the anti-aesthetic tendencies of conceptual art is to illustrate a more general tendency that occurs within contemporary art appreciation and discourse, and not only within popular media such as *Hyperallergic*.

'Art' as a concept is traditionally highly regarded in western culture, and even within a conservative view of contemporary art as inferior to the art of the past, there remains a sense of art as a special, perhaps magical and almost religious field accompanying the civilisation of humankind: it is perhaps viewed as something that *makes* us civil, and is therefore something we don't want to lose. If we apply an evolutionary theory to the field of art wherein the characteristics of an organism that enable its continued survival within its environment are strengthened over time, an explanation for

³ *ibid*

⁴ *ibid*

the re-aestheticisation of art post the conceptual moment may be apparent: at art's end, its strongest characteristic, that which has survived all attempts at eradication, is the one that remains loudest and longest.

Eva Geulen, in her book *The End of Art: Readings in a Rumour After Hegel*, traces the analysis of the idea of the end of art in the German philosophical tradition, specifically in the thought of Nietzsche, Benjamin, Adorno, and Heidegger, post Hegel. In treating the end of art as a rumour, Geulen does not attempt to, 'unmask its pretensions or to denounce its truth content'⁵, but to account for that which she sees as the paradox inherent to the idea, in its tendency to recur historically, *beyond* Hegel. Identifying Hegel as having started the rumour of the end of art as a question of form, Geulen claims it is due to the development of art as form that it forms a privileged site for the exploration of problems of the end more generally. Within Geulen's first chapter, 'The End in the Meantime', the question of the rehabilitation of aesthetics is raised as a new tendency counter-radicalising the end of art: as she puts it, 'at the end of the end of art, at the end of its radicalization, the fine arts appear once again'. Geulen declares her lack of interest in end of art strategies, the radicalisation of the end of art versus the rehabilitation of aesthetics: as an artist at the end of the radicality of the modern however, I find the idea of the end of art an inescapable basis of my practice. Whether or not the idea is most successfully contextualised via a return to aesthetics, I believe what Geulen identifies as the necessary connection between the aesthetic and anti-aesthetic at the end of art makes an end of art statement necessary at the re-aestheticisation of contemporary art.

⁵ Eva Geulen, *The End of Art: Readings in a Rumour After Hegel*, James McFarland (trans.) (California: Stanford University Press 2006) 7