

THE NEGATIVE NECESSITY OF THE END OF ART: A FRAMEWORK FOR CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE

Conference paper, *Endgames and Emotions: The Sense of Ending in Modern Art and Literature* 2017

While the conference's theme addresses the sense of ending in *modernist* art and literature, I want to extend the idea to contemporary art. Whether viewed as an extension of modernism or an entirely new era, contemporary art is undoubtedly the outcome of the self-critical, radical or 'anti-art' impulse typically viewed as inherent to the modern, and requires theorisation as such. It is from my position as an art practitioner rather than theorist that I argue for a view of contemporary art as the end of art, since it is via practice that I confront this end.

The idea of the end of art is not a popular theme in contemporary discourse, but I'll argue here for the necessity of the negative emotion it tends to engender. I'll outline the issues that complicate the theorisation of art in the current moment, and relate these to claims concerning conceptual art's failed attempt at escape. I'll define and discuss the idea of contemporary art as the end of art, and argue for the potential of the negativity of an end of art statement to allow for escape in relation to Hegel's dialectical model.

A description of contemporary art as the end of art is not a concern with art as affect, political or social action, ethics, pedagogy, communication or any particular social value or outcome, but an historical, ontological or philosophical view of western art's development, as concept and object, through the modern. This development is visually represented by the evolution of art's objects from nineteenth century representational paintings and sculptures to today's radical openness to form, wherein art may be located in any or all formats or situations. In this sense, art as a concept may be conceived as the embodiment of the history of the subject in western philosophical enquiry.

The idea of contemporary art as the end of art is situated somewhat unfashionably within the metanarrative of the modernist tradition, a view wherein each new art movement fed off that preceding and gave rise to those following, developmentally refining the definition of 'art' as a concept via an ongoing process of self-critique and an anti-art impulse. This metanarrative is frequently characterised as imperialist or patriarchal by post-modern theorists, while contemporary art's apparent openness and inclusivity is posited as an alternative to, critique of, or solution to, this tradition. At the same time, an emphasis on its open and ahistorical nature is increasingly viewed as an obstacle to contemporary art's theorisation.

In his book of 2013, *Anywhere or not at All: a Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Peter Osborne claims that art today is 'badly known'. He identifies three tendencies that have sustained what he believes

is a general ignorance regarding the field: 'straw conceptualism', (the idea that contemporary art requires only conceptual interpretation, or is reducible to 'direct propositional expression'), the reduction of art to aesthetics, and the exemption of contemporary art from history. Osborne believes the realm of contemporary art requires more rigorous theorisation than currently exists, which he aims to achieve via his own philosophy.

To Osborne, when contemporary art is defined as art created within the current, or postmodern, moment, it lacks a critically meaningful referent since it designates merely, 'the radically heterogeneous empirical totality of artworks produced within the duration of a particular present'. Osborne claims a true philosophy of contemporary art must be a *critical* one: "'contemporary' is, at base, a critical and therefore selective concept: it promotes and it excludes"¹.

This assertion by Osborne implies that not all art made today is properly contemporary, or worthy of the name. He states that, 'to claim something is contemporary is to make a claim for its significance in participating in the actuality of the present'; Osborne believes contemporary art is most critical when it is, 'the artistic construction and expression of contemporaneity'.

Despite his demand for contemporary art's critical theorisation and assertion of its exclusivity, at no point in his argument does Osborne identify or describe the types of artwork his philosophy *might* exclude. His requirement that contemporary art articulate the time and space of its moment seems both rigid and out of touch with the actuality of contemporary art's prevailing sense of openness to a multitude of forms, and is especially unable to account for the plethora of work that persistently and unambiguously revisits high modernist media and formats today.

In 2009, critic and historian Hal Foster published the responses of thirty-two curators and critics to his *Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary'* in October Magazine. Like Osborne, Foster was concerned that contemporary art's heterogeneity precludes its critical definition, rendering the field 'free-floating' and unattached from history. His questionnaire quizzed respondents as to whether this 'free floating' is something real or imagined, whether it is the result of the end of grand narratives or an outcome of an increasingly neoliberal society, and if there are any benefits to what he describes as the 'apparent lightness of being' of the field.

The answers that resulted from Foster's survey tend to reflect the issues he raised himself within his question, and frequently state that contemporary art should be defined and practiced in relation to contemporary issues, similar to Osborne's assertion. While many respondents affirmed the

¹ Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All - Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 2

importance of interrogating contemporary art in order to augment its sense of definition, an equal number viewed this lack of definition as valuable, something that should be maintained rather than challenged or solved. This contradiction reflects the difficulty inherent to the project of defining the art of today: while a desire exists to define or delineate the field and render it critical, an equal and opposing desire to retain the contemporary's openness to form tends to hamper its definition.

In an attempt to answer the question, *What is Contemporary Art?* in his book of 2009, Terry Smith employs a series of categories and subcategories: he offers 'three core meanings' of the term 'contemporary', two 'contentions' describing the conditions of contemporaneity and four 'main themes' – rather than one ultimate definition – of contemporary art. Theorist Rex Butler has identified Smith's attempt to define contemporary art as resulting in fact in *three* definitions, describing them as 'somewhat tautological'. Butler's summary of these definitions is that:

1. Contemporary art asks what it is to exist in the conditions of contemporaneity.
2. Contemporary art is contemporaneous.
3. Contemporary art is the most evident attribute of the contemporary world picture.²

Smith's defining contemporary art in a vague relation to its sense of contemporaneity echoes Osborne's demand that contemporary art reflect or articulate contemporary time or space. Definitions or philosophies based primarily on artworks' ability to reflect or articulate their historical context are slight, and relegate artworks to the role of description, precluding any sense of their philosophical embodiment. In addition, while Osborne and especially Smith are at pains to distinguish the contemporary moment from that of the modern, the very impulse toward definition itself indicates nostalgia for the structural nature of the modern and its self-critical, reflective project.

Within his philosophy, Osborne makes an argument for contemporary art as a 'post' conceptual art. While he is concerned to differentiate his version of 'post' from the sense of linear time inherent to a modernist narrative, I view contemporary art as postconceptual precisely in this literal, linear sense: that is, as a movement that follows conceptual art chronologically, its character determined by the aims and outcomes of the conceptual moment.

In her essay *Escape Attempts* of 1997, Lucy Lippard reflected on the nature of the conceptual moment in art twenty five years prior. Her text refers to the many and varied forms and styles of conceptual art, including mail art, earthworks, performance art, happenings, actions and even

² Rex Butler, 'What is Contemporary Art? Terry Smith in Conversation with Rex Butler,' *Column* 5 (Sydney: Artspace, 2009): 134-44

minimal art. She defines 'capital C' conceptual art as: '...work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and/or "dematerialized"'.³

She quotes Sol LeWitt from 1969:

Ideas alone can be works of art; they are a chain of development that may eventually find some form. All ideas need not be made physical...the words of one artist to another may induce an idea chain, if they share the same concept.

John Baldessari:

I was beginning to suspect that information could be interesting in its own right and need not be visual...

And Joseph Beuys:

To be a teacher is my greatest work of art. The rest is the waste product, a demonstration...objects aren't very important for me anymore.

Similar quotes from a variety of artists exist from this time: artists whose work we may understand visually today desired an alternative to the image and the object, reflecting an impulse towards dematerialization which Lippard describes as an attempt to escape the 'frame-and-pedestal' syndrome. Ultimately however, Lippard is realistic about the actual outcomes of this period:

However rebellious the escape attempts, most of the work remained art-referential, and neither economic nor esthetic ties to the art world were fully severed (though at times we liked to think they were hanging by a thread).⁴

Lippard writes that in 1969 artists did not believe anyone would pay money for objects such as photocopies, documentary photographs, written projects for unrealised works or spoken words, however only three years later such objects were selling for large amounts of money in the US and Europe, and major conceptual artists were represented by prestigious galleries. The flexibility of art's institutions to accommodate the ephemeral, everyday nature of conceptual objects and actions can be narrated as the colonising force of the market, or neoliberal capitalist culture, moving to reclaim art's escape from its clutches. It can equally be theorised as the outcome of the modernist impulse toward the absolute freedom of art as a concept, a stretching of the boundaries of its definition to include all forms, and non-forms, as 'art' – especially perhaps the non-art forms of the ordinary and the everyday. Where this move originates as an impulse toward freedom, it paradoxically tends to increase the sense of confinement of 'art' as a concept: when art's institutions – such as the market, the museum or the academy – accept the identification of this concept within each and every

³ Lucy Lippard, *Escape Attempts*, from *Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (California: University of California Press 1997), pvii

⁴ Lippard, pxvii

possible situation, location, action or object, the attempt by this concept to escape, or to exist *convincingly within* the everyday, is thwarted. Art's citation or location within the realm of 'non-art' by its institutions results less in art's freedom than in the colonisation of *the everyday* by the institution of art. As philosopher Jean Baudrillard described in 1987:

Some say that art is dematerializing. The exact opposite is true: art today has thoroughly entered reality. It is in museums and galleries, but also in trash on walls, in the street, in the banality of everything that has been made sacred today without any further debate.⁵

In his unforgiving critique of the field throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Baudrillard characterised contemporary art as 'a conspiracy'. Despite this description's exaggerated sense of unseen forces secretly conspiring, it does reflect the stifling sense of art's colonisation of reality, its resulting inescapability and its slippery evasion of definition. Comparing modernism's sense of increasing liberation to an orgy, Baudrillard reframes an anxious, 'what is contemporary art?' with a more emphatic, 'WHAT DO WE DO AFTER THE ORGY?' In other words, how do we practice art critically via form when all form is available? What constitutes an outside to this slippery, boundary-less moment?

In the 1980s, artist and philosopher Arthur C Danto defined the state wherein art objects became indistinguishable from ordinary ones as the end of art, leading him to cease practicing as an artist in favour of writing art theory or philosophy. When art had no further to go in distinguishing itself from everyday objects in its drive toward self-definition, the medium of philosophy seemed to Danto more effective in continuing this analytical effort. Similar to Baudrillard's assessment of conceptual art's colonisation of reality, Danto characterises the end of art as the explosion of art as a concept within the world: not an actual end of art's activity or production, but the end of its philosophical significance and a reduction of its objects and actions to the roles of decoration, commodity or entertainment.

While Danto's theory was subject to scrutiny and debate in several philosophical publications and symposia in the 1980s and 90s, it didn't impact the field of contemporary practice, which continued in seeming ignorance of its discursive fate. In 2006, theorist Eva Geulen described the end of art discourse as having come to 'a peculiar sort of end in sheer exhaustion'; she claims that, 'nowadays it is de rigeur to debunk the end of art as a white elephant of modernity'. In his book, Osborne rejects Danto's end of art theory as a negative contribution to contemporary discourse, and it seems

⁵ Jean Baudrillard, 'Towards the Vanishing Point of Art (1987),' in *The Conspiracy of Art: Manifestos, Interviews, Essays*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Ames Hodges (New York: Semiotext(e), 2005), 105

Danto himself may have been concerned by the negativity of his end of art statement, since he softened its blow by describing the featureless, stylistically open state of contemporary art as a kind of utopia, the final fulfilment of the freedom to which modern art had historically striven.

The idea that art has ended is a negative one, difficult perhaps to entertain or consider. This may be due to our view of art as a place of freedom and unfettered individual expression, or as a location of hope and optimism for a radical voice and place for the 'other', a threat to which constitutes a kind of violence. This overriding sense of positivity and hope however tends to overlook the fact of contemporary art's origins within the modernist progression of critique and self-reflection; that is, from the *negative* tradition of its anti-art, anti-aesthetic drive.

The current theoretical concern with the contemporary's sense of historical stasis, or 'free-floating' nature, could be embodied by the question, 'what's next?' Is contemporary art doomed to the endless reproduction of modern forms, nostalgic for their original radicality yet unable to engage further in real critique *via* form? This question forms the location of current theorists' concerns with our inability to critically locate the contemporary, an overly positive moment of absolute freedom that paradoxically demands forward movement and a sense of historical development.

A solution to this lack of forward movement may be found in Hegel's dialectical model. Like the progressive view of modern art, Hegel's dialectic has been derided for its similarly apparent sense of the developmental movement of thought historically toward some particular end, and for its origins in a patriarchal, western viewpoint. However correlations can be drawn between Hegel's claims for this model and the description of contemporary art considered here, leading to a view of the necessity of the negative emotion engendered by an end of art statement. I'll explain this via Daniel Berthold-Bond's interpretation of Hegel's dialectics from his 1989 publication, *Hegel's Grand Synthesis: A Study of Being, Thought and History*.

For Hegel, the dialectic is powered by the energy or force of negativity. Here, negativity is the act of opposing something to its 'other', described as the process of a substance's 'disenchantment' by which it 'becomes other' to itself. In a state of self-identity that does not possess negativity – that is, no sense of disenchantment or opposition – Hegel claims there is a death of being, whether that of an individual, or of the historical being of a world culture. He describes the simple essence of substance as a state of unreflective 'satisfaction', or a 'self-consuming' state. That is, when a substance or being – say, art – conceives of its essence and believes it has finally located its definition, rather than this state representing a sense of its life force or vitality, it is instead 'self-

consuming', a state of substance in 'self-response': Hegel describes this state as 'not yet', as only *potentially* Spirit, a motionless tautology of simple self-identity.

Parallels can be drawn here with the tautological tendency apparent in defining contemporary art, where, in an inability to step outside, become 'other' to or disenchant itself via negation, art's simple self-identity – apparent in the definition that 'contemporary art is contemporary' – illustrates Hegel's 'self-consuming' state as the real death of being; a state wherein art is 'not yet'. When a culture or individual is exactly what it wants to be, it slips into what Hegel calls 'customary life', an activity that lacks opposition and which results in a natural death: similarly, when contemporary art is defined as having achieved some ideal state, as having solved the problems that previously plagued it, it reflects Hegel's sense of 'customary life', becoming décor, commodity or entertainment.

Hegel writes of necessity as essential to freedom, since without it freedom cannot be distinguished from arbitrary choice; necessity renders freedom more than just potential, and completes it. Along these lines, and in a view of art as a site of freedom, anti-art (necessity) is required if art (freedom) is to exist. If we are to define art – if it is to exist *at all* – we require its disenchantment; it's other, or the negative of anti-art. The negative emotion of Danto's end of art statement or Baudrillard's critique means they are more convincing assessments of the contemporary; while Danto's attempt to continue art's radical project via philosophy was a logical step – and a historically necessary one – art's true negation seems to require its location within art activity and practice. An attempt to confront contemporary art as the end of art presents artists with a philosophical challenge, re-enfranchising contemporary practice and allowing for a full realisation of the contemporary.