



Aesthetics After Hegel

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Evental Aesthetics

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Aesthetics After Hegel

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Aesthetics After Hegel

Mandy-Suzanne Wong and Joanna Demers Introduction	4
Angela Hume (Rescuing) Hegel's Magical Thinking	11
Jason Miller <i>Collision: The Death of Art and the Sunday of Life:</i> Hegel on the Fate of Modern Art	39
Shannon Mussett Irony and the Work of Art: Hegelian Legacies in Robert Smithson	48
Joanna Demers <i>Collision: The Ethics of Apocalypse</i>	77
Mandy-Suzanne Wong Hegel's Being-Fluid in <i>Corregidora</i> , Blues, and (Post-)Black Aesthetics	85
Timothy Morton Art in the Age of Asymmetry: Hegel, Objects, Aesthetics	121

Introduction

Mandy–Suzanne Wong
and Joanna Demers

“The time of Hegel still lies ahead,” wrote Slavoj Žižek in 2011.¹ Like the twentieth century before it, the young twenty–first century is a din, replete with the strident clanging of stark opposites against each other, and the terrified cries of those crushed in between. Liberalism versus fundamentalism, “terror” versus “freedom,” exploitation versus conservation, singularity against plurality, identity against difference, humanity against nature, deconstruction against metaphysics. What is yet to come, what “lies ahead,” says Žižek, still yet to be realized and comprehensively conceived, is the effective mediation of such oppositions: mediation which, Hegel would say, can result in creative movement beyond the oppositions, that simultaneously preserves and forsakes them.

It is true that on political and ecological, as well as certain scholarly and philosophical planes, antinomy and stubborn antagonism are still the orders of the day. But since Hegel’s time, throughout the twentieth century and even today, aesthetic practices have, in an overwhelming variety of idiosyncratic ways, confronted, enacted, and deconstructed the very notions of opposition and mediation. By thematizing such issues as the relationship between art and non–art, between ending and beginning, individuality and community, mysticism and rationality, irony and sincerity,

communication and meaninglessness, object and process, modern and post-modern art summon opposition and mediation, and call them into question at the conceptual level. Unlike, say, political practices today, contemporary art *practices* opposition and mediation, *utilizes* these concepts in creations that transcend them both, *and asks what it is* to oppose and to mediate. Art and related projects, such as art scholarship and aesthetic inquiries, are able to do this because they are art and not politics. Our point here, though, is that aesthetic practices today do what Hegel did in his philosophy. As he predicted, albeit not at all in the manner he predicted, art has become philosophy.

Aesthetics After Hegel, then, refers not just to aesthetic phenomena occurring after Hegel's death, but also to aesthetic phenomena that "take after" Hegel by carrying on his thought in their own ways. Indeed, the very notion – or threat – of "afterness," which casts a shadow over most of Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, is itself an evocative problem in art born of an age that brushes up against all kinds of apocalypse. Thus there are multiple senses in which, with Paul de Man, we can realistically say that in our contemporary aesthetic practices, "Whether we know it, or like it, or not, most of us are Hegelians and quite orthodox ones at that."² Such distinguished thinkers as Arthur Danto, William Desmond, Joseph Margolis, and Robert Pippin have therefore gone in search of the precise relationships between Hegel's ideas and works of art of which he never could have dreamed, in the hope of deepening and extrapolating from those relationships. We and our contributors continue that quest in this inaugural issue of *Evental Aesthetics*.

To call something "evental" is to say that it promises change. With this issue of *Evental Aesthetics*, we hope to begin to change, in ways however small, how Hegel's relevance to contemporary situations is perceived. Our contributors invite new ways of thinking Hegel's ideas through contemporary art and theories that arise from current perspectives; and of thinking through such art and perspectives via Hegelianism.

• Articles •

In “(Rescuing) Hegel’s Magical Thinking,” Angela Hume sounds a theme that occupies a few of our contributors: Hegel’s notion of the fluidity of being. For Hegel, all beings are always already both subjects and objects that call for recognition as such. Hume traces the acknowledgement of subject-object concurrence to the creative, affective practice of magic, which relies on similarly fluid and complex ontologies. What she calls “magical thinking” is just such creative recognition of the empowered complexity of beings, a generous recognition that may encourage more ethical relations between persons and their others (drastic ignorance of which has led to innumerable ecosocial crises). She suggests that the groundwork for contemporary magical thinking is already in place: not just in Hegel’s *Phenomenology* but also in Donna Haraway’s work on posthumanism, and in such contemporary aesthetic practices as Brenda Hillman’s experimental ecopoetry.

Mandy-Suzanne Wong applies Hegel’s conception of being-as-fluid to the personal identities enacted in classic blues songs, Gayl Jones’ “blues novel” *Corregidora*, and Paul Taylor’s theory of “post-black aesthetics.” Similarly to Hume, Wong argues that identity is a creative, performative process that involves as much violent dissolution as construction, as what Hegel calls “substance” – his term for one’s surroundings, which include historical and sociocultural circumstances – both shapes and is shaped by one’s individual propensities as a subject. As at once communal and private, impersonal and definitively personal, identity is a fluid experience that cannot be encapsulated by bounded racial, historical, or otherwise sociocultural categories.

The instability of being, a consequence of its fluidity, also plays a role in Shannon Mussett’s thinking. Her essay, “Irony and the Work of Art: Hegelian Legacies in Robert Smithson,” unpacks Hegel’s obscure take on irony by reading it in counterpoint to Smithson’s artistic practice and writings. Mussett reveals a fruitful dialectic between Hegel’s gnostic approach to art – that there exists truth that an artist must reveal – and Smithson’s embrace of the instability and seeming irrationality of nature.

Observing the inherent instability of human subject positions and human knowledge in relation to nonhumans – both of which are manifest

in Hegel's three "phases" (Symbolic, Classical, and Romantic) of art history, Timothy Morton hypothesizes a fourth aesthetic phase. Hegel could never have predicted that rather than "ending" via abdication, surrendering to philosophy, art in the twenty-first century would come to embody the consciousness, integral to our efforts to address current ecosocial crises, that human acts impact the rest of the world. In this new era of ecological awareness, Morton argues, art enters an "Asymmetric Phase" in which, thanks to the vast stores of scientific knowledge humans have amassed, the meaningful, interpretable *content* of art is richer than ever; but at the same time, the *objects* or *materials* of art are recognized as denizens of the nonhuman aspects of the world. And in our augmented ecological awareness, we cannot help but observe (as Hegel never could have realized, given his sociohistorical circumstances) that such nonhuman phenomena have the necessary agency and intricacy to elude human knowledge and control.

• Collisions •

With *Evental Aesthetics*, we also hope to advance new ways of writing about art and philosophy – new, at least, from the academic perspective. To this end, our first issue introduces a short form of critical essay that we call the *Collision*. A Collision is a striking encounter, enacted in writing, between an author and a specific aesthetic experience. As part of its at once arresting and compelling quality, such an encounter includes the questioning of both artwork and respondent by one another. This questioning plays out in the written Collision, the idea of which is to point towards paths of discussion without entirely following them. Where a longer article would exhaust an argument and its implications, a Collision does not necessarily argue at all. It rather catalyzes argument by indicating points of intersection between philosophical questions and aesthetic experiences, leaving the argument itself to take flight in the minds of readers and later inquiries. We propose this short essay form as an avenue for authors who may not feel ready, or perhaps not feel it necessary, to exhaust a question. Philosophical, critical, and scholarly ideas-in-progress, or the conceived but untheorized intuitions of artists, will find a venue here.

Our inaugural issue includes two Collisions. Both authors encounter artworks – of Dutch painting and contemporary literature – that summon Hegelian notions and questions.

Jason Miller's "The 'Death of Art' and the 'Sunday of Life': Hegel on the Fate of Modern Art" provides a rare, concrete discussion of what Hegel might have meant in proclaiming the end of art. Miller's careful consideration of Hegel's writings on Dutch genre painting argues that Hegel's periodization *affirms*, rather than negates, everyday life, and in doing so opens up aesthetics to the commonplace, the incidental. Miller recasts Hegel as a philosopher of inclusion rather than system, of multiplicity instead of merely teleology.

Joanna Demers, meanwhile, considers Michel Houellebecq's novel, *The Possibility of an Island*, in proposing that apocalyptic stories might bear ethical responsibilities. Comparing the novel's bleak worldview to Hegel's system, Demers argues that when art utterly denies hope, it is left with no recourse but the aestheticization of suffering. And this precisely is the fate of the jaded humans that populate Houellebecq's dystopian future.

But what more might it mean to say that the time of Hegel lies ahead? For Hegel has already run through several cycles of fashionableness; his status in popular and scholarly opinion has ranged from that of an obscure curiosity to that of a Lazarus-hero of newly resurrected metaphysics. For midcentury socialists, Hegel was the *éminence grise*, a prophet in the wilderness who made possible the coming of an even greater hero, Marx. Yet for midcentury Christians, Hegel achieved the impossible feat of bridging the gap between philosophy and dogma. Some today see Hegel as the epitome of sexism, ethnocentrism, or sloppy pseudo-science. Others see him as the champion of the plastic, the contingent, and that which will come. What else could Hegel be, today and tomorrow? What is Hegel's future?

These questions are ironic, considering that Hegel was the philosopher *par excellence* of progress and teleology. Perhaps one of the most seductive subjects in Hegelian aesthetics is his theory of the end of art, a topic to which several of the essays in this issue speak. But we take heart in the fact that the ideas in this issue confound or at least complicate easy interpretations of Hegel's periodization of art, and of course put into question Hegel's thesis that humanity has outgrown its need for art. Art, as many of our authors point out, continues to do philosophical work. This

leads us to wonder whether a fruitful road for inquiry might be interrogating Hegelian speculative trajectories for the possibility that they might go in retrograde. As Morton suggests in his discussion of the Asymmetric Phase, can Hegel's periods of art merge and coexist? Can aesthetics somehow de-evolve, or are they condemned to proceed teleologically? Further, in political and artworld climates that have been over-determined almost to the point of collapse, our authors confront the dangers of determination and challenge its very possibility – and they do this *via Hegel*, philosopher of the Concept and "the cunning of reason." Our question is, then: if some form of "regressive progress" is a possibility for aesthetic practice, and if contingency and fluidity can be aesthetic, even ontological forms, what does this suggest about interpretations of Hegel as the preeminent progressive?

- Notes •

¹ Slavoj Žižek, "Hegel's Century," in *Hegel and the Infinite: Religion, Politics, and Dialectic*, ed. Clayton Crockett, Creston Davis, and Slavoj Žižek (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), xi.

² Paul de Man, "Sign and Symbol in Hegel's Aesthetics," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 763.

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Žižek, Slavoj. "Hegel's Century." In *Hegel and the Infinite: Religion, Politics, and Dialectic*, edited by Clayton Crockett, Creston Davis and Slavoj Žižek, ix–xi. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.