

Towards a Materialist Theory of Art

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Art, for Hegel, is not only distinct but self-distinguishing of and from nature – it happens in and through the latter. It liberates us from being merely natural creatures, and it does so by a dynamic of a cut or break - even though this liberation is achieved only through natural sensuousness, and hence, keeps us tethered to nature in some particular way. Inspired by Todd McGowan's emphasis on the central role of contradiction in Hegel's philosophy, this paper considers the possibility to applying the dialectic between art and nature as it is unfolded in Hegel's *Aesthetic* to a more insidious constellation — namely, what Marxists came to refer to as second nature: the world of commodities, in which man-made things appear to those who produce them as a naturalised and repressive opposite, a pseudo nature, an alienated solidified history.

I. A Cut in Nature

In *Emancipation After Hegel. Achieving a Contradictory Revolution* Todd McGowan forcefully and convincingly argues that the central contention of Hegel's philosophy is that we are not only able to think contradiction but that being itself is contradictory. "Contradiction is not the anathema of thought but what animates both thought and being."¹ What the Hegelian intervention made explicit is that every identity is incapable of "being identity without introducing some form of otherness that reveals the lack of perfect self-identity"². The most controversial move of Hegel is that he doesn't confine contradiction to thinking but sees it in the natural world as

well. For readers of Hegel it is usually philosophy and its task to recognise contradiction as intractable that gets the most attention. What is often underexposed is art's intricate relationship with contradiction by being positioned on the thresholds of matter/nature and thought/culture.

In the introduction of his lectures on aesthetics, Hegel clarifies that although the sensuous element in art is essential, it is only important insofar as it exists for the human spirit. That is to say, we should distinguish the sensuousness in an artwork from other modes of apprehending with the senses: First, the spiritually poor, purely sensuousness apprehension, a state which can manifest as a form of zoning out in that one merely looks, hears, feels, and wanders around without thinking - a sort of passive attitude, that opens the receptivity of our senses without any further selection or distinction; and secondly, that of desire [*Begierde*], which engages in a more active manner with things (maybe appetite would be a suitable association) in which one encounters an outside object, negates the object's authority and independence, and realises the power to sustain oneself against it – thereby maintaining the status of an agent, an acting subject. Against the backdrop of these two modes of sensuous relations, the one that is crucial for art is markedly distinct. In art, we don't relate to the object in ways of desiring, but rather, with a certain disinterest. With works of art one neither spaces out (but maintains a spiritually attentive attitude towards them), nor does one consume them, negate them, have an "appetitive" relationship to them. Instead, one leaves them be, grants them a certain independence and freedom of existence.

On the other side, Art is equally distinct from the sort of purely theoretical attitude towards an outside realm seen in science, where rational intelligence is not driven by the bodily needs, but the need to understand things in their universality through theoretical studies – unearthing their inner laws and structure. Science does so by ultimately

turning its back on the object in its immediate individuality, transforming it within; out of something sensuously concrete it makes an abstraction, something thought, and so something essentially other than what that same object was in its sensuous appearance.³

Contrary to science, the approach essential in art is a spiritual attentiveness that is located precisely between theoretical thinking and sensuousness. This double bind is what makes Hegel especially fond of the speculative dimension of the German word *Sinn*, as it expresses two opposing meanings simultaneously. A

twofold meaning that is equally evident in its English translation “sense,” referring both to a faculty of the body to perceive external stimuli (eg. the sense of smell) as well as a comprehensible rational (as in, “to make sense of something.”). *Sinn* is symmetrically the organ of sensual apprehension and an underlying universal. For Hegel, this renders it the categorical term to describe the specificity of approaching/producing a work of art as it is both intellectual and sensual.

A summary in Hegel's own words:

From the practical interest of desire, the interest of art is distinguished by the fact that it lets its object persist freely and on its own account, while desire converts it to its own use by destroying it. On the other hand, the consideration of art differs in an opposite way from theoretical consideration by scientific intelligence, since it cherishes an interest in the object in its individual existence and does not struggle to change it into its universal thought and concept.⁴

In this vein, we could describe works of art as *sensuous things on their way to thought*. A phrase that makes a certain paradox at the foundation of the aesthetic relation, namely that the material thing in all its concrete sensuality, upon which an artwork nevertheless relies, is exactly not just a material thing. Hegel steers us further down this road in the following quote:

The sensuous aspect of a work of art, in comparison with the immediate existence of things in nature, is elevated to a pure appearance, and 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, like stones, plants, and organic life; on the contrary, the sensuous in the work of art is itself something ideal, but which, not being ideal as thought is ideal, is still at the same time there externally as a thing.⁵

We need to underline the phrase, “elevated to pure appearance” [*zum bloßen Schein erhoben*], as it inverts a common criticism of art that goes all the way back to the infamous treatises of art in Plato's *Politeia*, which views artworks also essentially as appearances, but – with a negative connotation – as *mere* appearance. In this trajectory, art is principally even more distanced from the pure ideals of which concrete natural things are already imperfect copies. Art under such a headline is

therefore not just one, but two levels away from the realm of ideal forms. Art then, is the production of copies of copies that should be regulated if not even banished, because it hinders the quest for truth as it undermines the fake/real distinction.

For Hegel, on the contrary, it is exactly this appearing of the sensuous “only as the surface and as a pure appearance”⁶ that *opens the gap that liberates from, and elevates above immediate material existence*. Thus, another way of putting this would be to think of art as a *cut* into nature⁷ – a cut by which a sensuous presence, which indeed must remain sensuous, is “liberated from the scaffolding of its purely material nature”⁸. Consequently, the appearance [*Schein*] constitutive of art is not an illusionary trickery or a misleading bootleg, but that which indicates the break with and in the material, which opens the space for the infinity that is ultimately – freedom. Natural objects in art do not exist solely in themselves, in their immediate being – rather, they *appear*, and appearance [*Schein*] already indicates a minimal difference from what they are in themselves and what they are for something other: a *cut*. Through this cut, art resonates with the spirit/spiritual of which, to use the heavy Hegelian terminology, the being-in-itself and for-itself are essential moments of the movement driven by the power of the negative.

This dialectic, of course, works both ways and dynamizes a harsh dichotomy between, say, conscious/mindful human activity on the one side and material nature on the other. In this manner, we have to understand what Hegel means when he says that “the sensuous in art is spiritualised, because the spiritual appears in it as sensualised”⁹. This double-sidedness must be emphasised. Mladen Dolar puts his finger on this dialectic: “[In art] thought works within the matter and shapes the matter. It is attached to matter, and matter thinks in art. This is very important: the materiality of thought”¹⁰. In art, spirit deals with its own material dimension, precisely through the point where it does not coincide with its materiality. And one must add: it can only do so because *already the material (organic & inorganic nature) does not coincide with itself*. Here, art points at a contradiction that “isn’t just an error of thought but a prerequisite of being”¹¹ and as such impossible to avoid. Rather than progressively solving a contradiction (by reuniting with nature or finally leaving it behind), art marks the totality of this contradiction, since what is mobilised in art is precisely that things are already in a fundamental way not identical with themselves – because their identity forms through differences. Contradiction is here not a problem to be eliminated but the driving force.

This reading runs contrary to the all too tempting reduction of Hegel’s philosophy of art to the caricature of the movement from thesis to antithesis to synthesis. The way this is usually done is by misperceiving his account of the

different art forms as a historical movement of progressive dematerialisation in which subjectivity moves from expressions that occur in material forms which are, as such, alien to subjectivity (eg. architecture or sculpture), to those which are more adequate to subjectivity's immateriality (eg. music) all the way to poetry, which leaves no barrier between the subject and its artistic expression. But as McGowan rightly points out: we should not confuse this movement with a historical development towards an overcoming of the contradiction between subjectivity and its articulations, but see it as a systematic account of increasingly stubborn contradictions that become less evident and more recalcitrant:

Poetry enables us to recognize that the subject's alienation from itself is not the product of the artistic form it employs. The subject is divided from itself even in the form in which it is completely at home. Even in language without any material substrate, the subject remains alien to itself in the artwork. [...] Poetry doesn't eliminate the contradiction of architecture but reveals that contradiction as such is impossible to overcome.¹²

What should be underlined then, is that the progressive dematerialisation is a becoming apparent of the unavailability of the constitutive contradiction or alienation of subjectivity that is *also* (and that would be the speculative twist) always already at play in the material. The challenge is to think this dialectic of the *spiritualisation of matter and materiality of spirit, hinging on a negativity of a lack/cut*. Taking that into account would be to conceive a *materialist theory of art* – materialist, because its ontology would not take recourse to the rationalist-idealist insistence on an always already established separation of planes (such as Plato's intelligible versus visible realms – or an authentic uncorrupted immaterial subjectivity versus the dirty matter it needs to express itself in).

Consequently, the metaphors of the eye, which Hegel employs later on, should be understood in the context of a spiritualised sensuous:

Art makes every one of its productions into a thousand-eyed Argus, whereby the inner soul and spirit is seen at every point. And it is not only the bodily form, the look of the eye, the countenance and posture, but also actions and events, speech and tones of voices, and the series of their course through all conditions of appearance that art has everywhere to make into an eye, in which the free soul is revealed in its inner infinity.¹³

The eye, unlike any other part of the human anatomy and the predominant locus in which we suppose the subject to appear, is the punctual window into the depth of the soul – a crack in the bodily surface that disturbs its unity, its harmonious whole: A gap, a negativity.

This dynamic in art outlined here, is equally essential for subjectivity. As conscious, spirited subjects, our zero level of engaging with the world and its objects is discovering that things are not simply what they appear to be – there exists a gap between appearance and reality (the *in-itself* and the *for-us* of the object fall apart). We understand that what we perceived to be the reality of the thing, the in-itself, was in fact an appearance all along; it was an “appearing of essence.” It is here that the twist of Hegel’s speculative thought kicks in in its extreme. We should ultimately understand that the “appearing of essence” functions like a mask that veils the fact that there is nothing beneath it – it works as an “appearing to appear”. Yet, the important lesson to be learned here is that *what cannot be reduced is the very gap* that separates mere appearance from the appearance of essence. At its most radical, the Real (to borrow a Lacanian concept) is not an in-itself beyond illusory appearances, but the very gap that separates different levels of appearances.¹⁴

Should we not, at this juncture, draw the connection to the basic operation of art? The holes in the mask – the cracks in the surface through which we hope to see the real/full thing, like the essence or soul we suppose when we gaze into the eyes of another person or equally into the thousand eyes of the artwork – by closer inspection, turn out to be an endless abyss: the irreducible and, as such, ungraspable negativity in the dialectic of appearance and essence.

This insight makes us able to grasp what Hegel means when he says that “everything turns on grasping and expressing the true, not only as substance, but equally as subject”¹⁵. To cut a long story short, it is the irreducible gaps inherent within the reality, at the zero-level of the ontological register, the crack that runs through being that should be identified as the subject. The Hegelian subject is ultimately nothing but the name for the externality of the substance to itself, for the crack through which the substance becomes alien to itself.¹⁶

At one point, Hegel writes that the thousand-eyed work of art is “essentially a question, an address to the responsive beast, a call to the mind and the spirit”¹⁷. But by whom is this question posed? To put it briefly, by spirit itself. By the spirit that encounters an outside other (nature) but eventually recognises the intimate entanglement with that which in its immediate appearance seems to be an opposite other, and with which it is ultimately driven to reconcile – less in the sense that the opposites (thought - sensuous, subject - object) are really just one and the same

(only profane matter or only ideal thoughts) but in realisation of the dynamic between the moments of self-externalisation and recognition are *constitutive* for spirit (“the identity of identity and non-identity”). Art for Hegel is not only distinct from nature but self-distinguishing of nature through which it becomes something else – it “liberates man [...] *from the power of sensuousness*,” and “lifts [man] with its gentle hands out of and above imprisonment in nature”¹⁸. This moment occurs in and through nature. We could think of this as the dynamic of the break – a cut by means of repetition, a doubling. We are liberated through this negative space as spirit – from merely being natural creatures, even though this liberation is achieved only through natural sensuousness, and hence, keeps us tethered to nature in some particular way.

Art is thereby not an “instruction, purification, moral bettering, financial gain, struggling for fame and honour”. For Hegel, art has an end and aim in itself: “art’s vocation is to unveil the truth in the form of sensuous artistic configuration, to set forth the reconciled opposition [nature - spirit]... and so to have its end and aim in itself, in this very setting forth and unveiling”¹⁹. But we must remind ourselves again that the Hegelian reconciliation is not a peaceful state in which antagonisms are overcome – not the recovery of a lost harmonious whole, but the reconciliation with failure itself.

II. Art Undead

According to Hegel’s (in)famous diagnosis, with the rise of modernity “the form of art has ceased to be the supreme need of the spirit”, even if excellent works of art are still produced: “we bow the knee no longer”²⁰. For Hegel “Art remains for us a thing of the past”²¹.

It has fulfilled its highest vocation which is to assist “man’s rational need to lift the inner and outer world into his spiritual consciousness as an object in which he again recognizes his own self”²². It is this self-externalisation, a detour through the sensuous, that is fundamental in art. In art we encounter sensuous things on their way to thought. But precisely because of this particular form, “art is limited to a specific content”. The sensuous constitutive of art is what simultaneously restricts a “deeper comprehension of truth”, which is, though initiated by art, “no longer so akin and friendly to sense as to be capable of appropriate adoption and expression in this medium”²³. Hegel sees in the history of art the grand trajectory of developing self-consciousness – a trajectory in which the capacities of art itself would eventually be exhausted, no longer be adequate to its own object. Rather, it is reason and philosophy that conquers that which art incubates.

Even if Hegel was unable to forecast the specificities of our current predicament, the thesis of the end of art acquires a new meaning in light of our secular, capitalist way of life – which elevates sciences into the pinnacle of reason. Despite the fact that Hegel's philosophy is generally dismissed as the highpoint of speculative madness, his thesis of the end of art not only survives this critique, but is implicitly agreed upon – what matters is science, not art. Yet, can we really affirm the thesis of the end of art that easily, or are the circumstances in our contemporary world much more intricate? Is it really the case that spirit is no longer in harsh opposition to an other, but can find itself within – that is, without requiring a material embodiment (the beauty of a work of art)? This should be followed by a question posed by Slavoj Žižek: “How are we to advocate, against Hegel and his diagnostics of the end of art, but nonetheless in the spirit of Hegel, the continuing relevance of art, if we are not allowed to posit an impenetrable Other with which spirit is caught in an eternal struggle?”²⁴.

One way of approaching this question would be to note that the very fact that if art continues to play a role in an epoch, this means that in this epoch spirit is not reconciled with itself – which is why it still needs sensual embodiment in the form of art. Hence, if we claim that art still accounts for a major part of contemporary society, then there must be an unresolved antagonism lurking in the background. Pippin suggests reading Hegel against Hegel in such a way:

[Hegel's] failure was to anticipate the dissatisfaction that this 'prosaic' world [the bourgeois society]...would generate, to appreciate that there might be a basic form of disunity or alienation that his project could not account for, for which there was no 'sublation' or overcoming yet on the horizon.²⁵

Again it is Žižek who calls out the deep ambivalence of Pippin's critique, as it entails at least three possible inferences²⁶: (1) Is authentic or relevant art only possible in an unreconciled society? If so, does the supposed persistence of art therefore indicate the presence of antagonisms in contemporary society (in contrast to a modernist dream of a society in which art disappears as a separate institution because it overlaps with everyday life itself)? (2) Does art exist even in a reconciled society? Or, (3) does the persistence of art denote that reconciliation is not possible for a priori reasons?

III. Breaking the Commodity

“Spirit only occupies itself with objects so long as there is something secret, not revealed, in them...[but now] everything is revealed, and nothing obscure”²⁷. This is Hegel’s view on the modern society in its prosaic and profoundly unheroic character, which precisely for this reason is no longer a subject for the idealising transformations of aesthetic portrayal. Here, the “idea” needs not “sensibly shine” any longer, because it can be grasped conceptually. Spirit, as modern ethical life, has a sensible appearance that is not suited for such a “shining,” because our sensual lives have themselves been rationalized – transformed into normative practices, habits, and institutions with some sort of rational transparency (something radically different to an opposed nature).

However, is this truly the case? Is our contemporary society really that transparent to us? Is “everything revealed, nothing obscured?” The answer is of course: not quite. At the center of our contemporary capitalist society rests something that we should perceive as the nucleus of our current predicament – the commodity; the commodity in something only seemingly trivial, which, upon closer inspection, turns out to be quite significantly obscure. Marx points this out in the famous opening line from the chapter on commodity fetishism from *Capital*/Vol I:

A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a use-value, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it satisfies human needs; or that it first takes on these properties as the product of human labour. It is absolutely clear that, by his activity, man changes the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. [...]. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a sensuous supra-sensuous thing [*sinnlich-übersinnliches Ding*].²⁸

This sensuous supra-sensuous thing, one of the prime outcomes of Marx’s critique, is not a natural, but a socio-historical constellation of a specific mode of human organisation. We are here not dealing with an impenetrable *Other*, but with something produced by humans themselves, albeit unaware, and further, in a certain way, appearing. This appearing, as Marx ultimately points out, is, under capitalist conditions, a “necessary appearing” and as such, we could say, is “something secret, not revealed”. But this appearance (*Schein*) essential to commodities is not a cognitive mistake in the heads of the participants of this capitalist system, but rooted in material practices. Commodity fetishism is not located in our mind but in our

social reality.

It is here that we can find an entry point to advocate “against Hegel and his diagnostics of the end of art, but nonetheless in the spirit of Hegel, the continuing relevance of art”²⁹ that does *not* posit an absolute Other, but a struggle of spirit with itself, its own self-externalisation. Marxists later came to coin the term *second nature* for this other: the world of commodities, in which man-made things appear to those who produce them as a naturalised and repressive opposite—a pseudo-nature, an alienated, “solidified history” (Adorno). My proposition would be to ask the following questions: How to think of art in relation to this “sensuous supra-sensuous thing”? What does art do, how does art work in second nature? If there is a specific artistic relation to second nature that deviates from the relation to first nature, does the former still contain an emancipatory/liberating dimension as Hegel assigned to art of the first order? If art in Hegel’s understanding reaches its limits and is overtaken by philosophy (or more broadly *Wissenschaft*) because it insufficiently contains the progress of spirit, does that then mean that art in second nature is inevitably bound to the same predicament? Must we anticipate or hope for a second end to art?

These questions are hefty but they might assist us in uncovering some of the essential aspects of artworks made in recent history. An on-the-nose example would be the well-known *Brillo Boxes* by Andy Warhol – at the time, based on the omnipresent and ‘totally normal’ soap boxes, the artist appropriates an object that usually functions as a commodity par excellence. The pieces were not only indistinguishable from the ‘real’ boxes, but were produced in large amounts – reminiscing its industrially produced object of reference. In the same vein, we can reference Jeff Koon’s sculptures, that are, on first sight, identical to the cheap, mass-produced inflatable Hulks, Lobsters, or Elephants – but are massive replicas birthed from intensely-laboured massive stainless steel. And by tracing this trajectory even further ahead in recent art history, we could be able to grasp what Harun Farocki and Hito Steyerl do in relation to the overwhelming jungle of ever more new images circulating in digital media or Jon Rafman in relation to the virtual worlds of video games and internet culture.

Despite the major differences between these examples, we could find here again art’s essential operation. We could say that the works of art mentioned above are not only distinct and self-distinguishing from first nature, but that they also repeat the same gesture in regard to second nature. We experience a homological dynamic of a break, a cut by means of a repetition or doubling that opens the negative space – which, in a certain sense, liberates us from the commodity world. With Warhol’s Brillo boxes, there is *not only* a degree of separation from actual boxes and the

becoming of an object that is not really a box, but the box *as a commodity* comes into the spotlight and as a commodity it is already a sensuous supra-sensuous thing, carrier of use and exchange value, and as such already “not really a box” – it is the cut into these “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” that makes Warhol’s art interesting for us.

¹ Todd McGowan *Emancipation After Hegel. Achieving a Contradictory Revolution*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019: 6

² Ibid: 8

³ G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*. Trans. by T. M. Knox. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975: 37

⁴ Ibid: 38

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Dolar, M., "Interview with Mladen Dolar: I think art is to make a break" <https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/interview-with-mladen-dolar-i-think-to-make-art-is-to-make-a-break/5075>, 2016.

⁸ Hegel, *Aesthetics*: 38

⁹ Ibid: 39. (transl. altered).

¹⁰ Dolar 2016.

¹¹ McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel*: 9

¹² McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel*: 21

¹³ Hegel, *Aesthetics*: 153f

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, "In Defence of Hegel's Madness." *The Slovene Re-Actualization of Hegel's Philosophy. Filozofija i društvo* vol. 26, no. 4 (2015): 758-811.

¹⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. by A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977: §17

¹⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993: 30

¹⁷ Hegel, *Aesthetics*: 71

¹⁸ Hegel, *Aesthetics*: 49

¹⁹ Ibid: 55

²⁰ Ibid: 103

²¹ Ibid: 11

²² Ibid: 31

²³ Ibid: 10

²⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Figures of Disparity*. New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2016: 415.

²⁵ Robert B. Pippin, *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014: 46

²⁶ Žižek, *Figures of Disparity*: 146.

²⁷ Hegel, *Aesthetics*: 604.

²⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital. Volume I. A Critique of Political Economy*. Trans. Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin, 1990: 163.

²⁹ Žižek, *Figures of Disparity*: 145