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Alain Patrick Olivier, Elisabeth Weisser-Lohmann (eds.). *Kunst – Religion – Politik*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2013. ISBN 10-3770553209 (pbk). ISBN 13-978-3770553204 (hbk). Pp. 442.

Claudia Wirsing

Technische Universität Braunschweig

In the *Paralipomena* of his *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor W. Adorno reflects on the truth of art: “Art is directed toward truth, it is not itself immediate truth; to this extent truth is its content. By its relation to truth, art is knowledge; art itself knows truth in that truth emerges through it. As knowledge, however, art is neither discursive nor is its truth the reflection of an object.”¹ What Adorno captures here is that, as a form of *Geist*, art expresses truth in the mode of perception and it does so not by mere imitation of reality but through form alone – herein lies art’s ‘enigmatic character’ (*Rätselcharakter*) and its necessary relation to philosophy whose interpretation it requires. German philosophy’s close connection to art goes back at least to idealist theories of the 19th Century, in particular to Hegel’s aesthetics. For the idealists, art expresses what is, but only via its specific forms of representation. Art is an expression of a social state of being, because it arises through a reflection upon the political, social, and religious tendencies of its time. The current state of an epoch becomes manifest in art’s materials. According to the editors of *Vom Ende her gedacht* art, like religion and politics, is a ‘living sphere of human self-interpretation’ (9). Since the 19th century, these spheres have become ever more central to philosophical debates, particularly as regards the resources they offer to cope with social change. In this connection two recent anthologies stand out, undertaking as they do a critical examination of art while simultaneously justifying the rescue of idealistic aesthetic categories.

¹ T.W. Adorno (1997): *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. & ed. R. Hullot-Kentor, London and New York: Continuum, p. 282.



The anthology *Vom Ende her gedacht. Hegels Ästhetik zwischen Religion und Kunst* attempts to rethink Hegel's aesthetics 'from its end anew' (10). And in many respects it is successful. The volume, arising from a biennial workshop at the University of Marburg, takes Hegel's famous hypothesis of the end of art as a starting point for a new understanding of art and future artistic possibilities. Alongside the editor's preface and a concise introduction by Katharina Scholl, the volume contains articles by the following authors: Walter Jaeschke, Guido Kreis, Joachim Ringleben, Gunnar Hindrichs, Niklas Hebing, Daniel M. Feige, Michael Murrmann-Kahl, René Thun, Tobias Braune- Krickau und Thomas Erne.

Each of the contributions seeks to convey the current relevance of Hegel's aesthetics and to rehabilitate Hegel's notion of the 'end of art', a thesis which has caused not a little indignation and misunderstanding. The two contributors who take a slightly different tack are Michael Murrmann-Kahl, who interprets the 'end of art' as an end of aesthetics in the sense of a 'philosophical interpretation of religious art' (148) and René Thun, who dismisses attempts to rehabilitate Hegel's aesthetics altogether (171 & 177). Thun argues that artworks are "unfit to represent ideas in an adequate way or to make a contribution to historical development" (175) on the basis of Hegel's claims that *Geist* can only fully realize itself within the concept, and that the concept exceeds art's limited capacities for capturing reality. Here of course is one meaning of the 'end of art', namely, the suggestion that art ceased to be an appropriate medium for representing reality once subjectivity became the core principle of philosophy – a thesis that has rendered Hegel suspect in the eyes of contemporary philosophers of art. For Murrmann-Kahl, on the other hand, this is the challenge of modern aesthetics: to learn how to justify itself independently and without drawing on the idea of religious truth (148). For all the other contributors, much rests on how we interpret the phrase 'the end of art'. If art's inevitable transience is misunderstood as its demise, then one misjudges the "present-oriented character of Hegel's philosophy of art and instead pictures a blind classicist who viewed ancient art as an unsurpassable perfection of art's concept, and who strictly closed his mind to the apparently bleak post-history of this golden age" (100f.).

What unites the contributions in *Vom Ende her gedacht* is that none of them attempt to vindicate Hegel's theory in its original form nor overlooks the one-sidedness of much interpretation of Hegelian aesthetics. Instead, they undertake an immanent critique that keeps an eye on the present relevance of Hegel's thoughts. This generates some quite innovative and fertile applications of Hegel's thinking to modern art, for instance with regard to the

objectifications of spirit in history and its particular forms of representation (Jaeschke); or the mysterious character of art as a form of representation (Hindrichs); or a revaluation of ‘absolute spirit’ and art’s special reflective capacity (Kreis, Hebing); or the free character of art in the sensuous appearance of the idea (Ringleben, Hebing); or the mode of aesthetic experience (Erne) and the notion of art as a “practice of self-understanding” (Feige).

Niklas Hebing shows that the end of art as depiction of the ‘beautiful’ meant the essential liberation of art. Although the end of art meant the loss of its highest vocation – conveying truth via sensuous intuition – art could now retreat to a limited function “for a new purpose of spiritual self-relation” (106). With art’s ‘end’ begins its self-awareness: art becomes reflexive, subjecting itself to critical scrutiny and making transparent its own historicity and *Geistigkeit* (101). Like Gunnar Hindrichs, Hebing emphasizes that art is no longer able to represent the absolute in an appropriate way – art has necessarily become ‘partial’. Yet he draws a different conclusion from this. Whereas in Hindrichs’ reading art remains in a “limbo of appearance” [*Schwebe des Scheins*] (95), falling short of philosophy’s attempt to construe the totality of spirit [*Geist*] and being [*Dasein*], Hebing puts the notion of the human (108) at the heart of modern (free) art. Because art lacks a comprehensive form of representation it starts to address itself, making itself a subject of discussion, and thus elevates itself to a cultural “practice of freedom within post-aesthetic modernity” (13). Both authors agree that the possibility of a new art as either “partial art” (cf. Hindrichs: 92) or as “self-consciousness of spirit” (Hebing: 111) provides “new experiences and reflections” (Hindrichs: 95) or the possibility of “new aesthetic practice” (Hebing: 107). In its self-relation art also reflects immanently on its own crisis and its own opportunities.

Guido Kreis also emphasizes this aspect of self-reflection and draws a brilliant conceptual miniature of absolute spirit which brings to light certain inconsistencies between Hegel’s notion of the end of art and his overall system. At the same time he brings into sharp relief the relevance of Hegel’s theory for modern art by undertaking an immanent revision and reassessment of his system. Only where art is detached from its immediacy and begins to “define itself as a representational medium capable of self-reflection” (11f.) – something that Kreis calls Hegel’s “aesthetic antinomy” (26, 54) – can art confront philosophy on an equal footing. After all, the peculiarity of absolute spirit consists precisely in its absolute and therefore “fundamental” freedom (41), which is essentially bound to self-reflection, generating the categorical structure of freedom. It is within this structure that the highest

forms of expression of the spirit (religion, art, and philosophy) are realized. Consequently, these highest forms of expression must also become aware of their own freedom.

The anthology edited by Alain Patrick Olivier and Elisabeth Weisser-Lohmann goes one step further and attempts to add a political dimension to the discussion of religion and art. The contributions in this volume are comprehensive and highly multi-faceted. However, the volume may appear somewhat eclectic. The chapters are in German and French and bring together a number of international authors who provide a remarkable overview of current research debates in France, Italy and Germany.

Taking the *Oldest System Program of German Idealism* (1796) as a starting point, the contributions in this second volume attempt to “define modernity in terms of the leitmotif of aesthetic, religious and political reflection” (9) and to determine its relevance for the present. The three-part structure of the volume mirrors the cultural spheres mentioned above – art, religion, politics – which, as the authors emphasize, can only be understood as mutually mediated.

Some contributions in the volume attempt to update Hegel’s aesthetics (Iannelli, Berr, Siani). Thus, Paolo D’Angelo discusses the contradictory role of the body in Hegel’s aesthetics. The body is both the place of the human soul and spirit and a deficient way to express them. Here lies art’s contradiction, the attempt to “homogenize two sides that are not and that cannot be completely homogeneous” (51). Nevertheless, we know from Hegel that if art occurs in the sensuous sphere, it is still an essential form of articulation of the spirit. From its beginnings as mere material, the work of art is subject – whether as a commissioned product or the result of an artist’s intentions – to an idea inherent in it. An artwork becomes comprehensible (or at least interpretable) precisely through its material. The sensual or natural is, to this extent, historical, and vice versa. Thus D’Angelo notes that art’s “glorification of the human bodily frame and [the] liberation from its weaknesses” (37) was never more prominent than in the mid-18th to mid-19th centuries, a tendency that is diametrically opposed by contemporary art’s representation of the body. Yet the most intriguing question D’Angelo raises – how Hegel might view contemporary art – remains unanswered.

Only a few pages later, however, Francesca Iannelli provides an impressive response. In her contribution *Would Schlegel and Hegel like contemporary art?*, one of the highlights of the volume, Iannelli shows remarkably clearly that Hegel’s aesthetics, especially his hypothesis of the end of art, is no mere “corpse of which only a few bones are left” (93).

Drawing on textual evidence, for example transcripts of the Berlin lectures 1820-21 to the winter semester 1828-29, she shows that Hegel was far less pessimistic and closed-minded about the future of art than many assume. In particular it seems that what Hegel was referring to in ‘the end of art’ was a change in function of art itself, an alteration Hegel seems to have foreseen very presciently. Drawing upon contemporary artworks from Joseph Beuys and Sol Lewitt to the land-artists Denis Oppenheim, Richard Long and Andy Goldsworthy, Iannelli shows how deeply conceptual, minimalist and geographic art are permeated by Hegelian ideas, and how far, even if implicitly, Hegel sought to find a legitimate place for disharmonious aesthetic production. If, for Hegel, art achieves the “transformation and spiritualization of the natural” (95), this also applies, for example, to consciously staged alterations to the human body (such as the ancient act of tattooing), to the transformation of a geographical space, for instance Richard Long’s footsteps of the artist in grass, or in Andy Goldsworthy’s transient ice figures. In such works, says Iannelli, art “is seen as a process, as interaction with nature” (96). Though she admits that Hegel might not have liked this “victory of the natural over the spiritual” (96) one can add that Hegel never set spirit and nature against each other – absolute spirit is what has found itself at home in the other, whether external nature or sense perception. However primitive contemporary artistic gestures might appear, they are nevertheless so many new attempts by spirit to relate to the surrounding world.

One final – and fascinating – contribution is worth mentioning: Alain Patrick Olivier’s *Hegel and the spirit of Islamism*. Olivier is well-known for having co-edited (together with Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert) Adolf Heimann’s notes from Hegel’s final Berlin lectures on aesthetics from the winter of 1828/29. Here his topic is Islam, which he analyzes “as a historical phenomenon, [...] which includes art, religion, and politics” (309). His article attempts to show that the “topicality of the public discussion about Islam” (310) can only be understood in the context of a philosophy of spirit as self-understanding, i.e. self-consciousness. According to Olivier, it is important to construe Islam in three key aspects: as a *religion* of sublimity, as a revolutionary process within *political* events, and as *aesthetics* of pantheism. In its sublimity as something supernatural the human being in Islam rises above natural being (“the oriental principle”) to true self-consciousness but remains alone in this negation of the natural and the particular. For Olivier a tendency within Islam to become “Islamism” is precisely what Hegel saw in the phenomenon of “fanaticism”: it is present in the reverence and enthusiasm for an abstract object that does not tolerate phenomenality (it is

a sin to depict Allah pictorially) and in the obligation to convert other peoples to this absolute One. Yet in this fanaticism or enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*) there is also a rational, ethical moment, according to Olivier, represented on the one hand by the remarkable poetry of the Persians and on the other by political and social upheaval, the revolution. In Hegel, so Olivier argues in what is doubtlessly a controversial thesis, “Islam appears as the ‘highest freedom of *Geist*’ – not only as a negation, but also as an affirmation.” (318)

Recent years have seen Hegel scholarship turn again with renewed attention to Hegel’s aesthetics and the question of its proper place within his overall system. The two volumes discussed here represent an admirable attempt to revisit the notion of art as a living sphere of self-understanding and to explore anew the current relevance of Hegel’s aesthetics (and its complex relationship to religion and politics). What is common to these contributions is the belief that questions about the end of art and why we need art have to be integrated with a philosophical aesthetics if they are not to remain merely formal. We need to see art as a social medium of self-interpretation through which we gain new insights into ourselves and a new relationship with the world. Hegel’s aesthetics, rather than heralding art’s demise, allow just such a highly present-oriented approach to develop.

Claudia Wirsing
Technische Universität Braunschweig
Seminar für Philosophie
Bienroder Weg 80
D-38106 Braunschweig

c.wirsing@tu-braunschweig.de