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## Hegel's Symbolic Stage: An Old Perspective on Contemporary Art

Laura T. Di Summa-Knoop

### Abstract

This paper proposes an evaluation of contemporary art works in light of some of the concepts embedded in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's symbolic stage. My belief is that an analysis of Hegel's conditions for the affirmation of art opens the door to a discussion of contemporary artistic trends, a discussion that also takes distance from the (perhaps) abused question of what defines art. Art does more than question itself; art questions, and challenges, the nature of our perception.

### Key Words

contemporary art, end of art, self-consciousness, symbolic stage

Art is the presentation of the Idea in its sensuous form. In Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's system, art, religion, and philosophy are the three steps of the spirit's unfolding into self-consciousness. In his *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*,<sup>[1]</sup> Hegel reflects on two central problems in philosophy of art. First, less interested in judgments of taste and only in part concerned with what counts as beauty, Hegel's analysis placed itself in the debate over what counts as art, which arguably became one of the central questions in twentieth century aesthetics. Second, Hegel was interested in the evolutionary history of art, and in how the sensuous appearance of the spirit is described by means of the three different stages of art: the symbolic, the classical, and the romantic. Finally, Hegel believed that once the spirit has reached the romantic stage, art itself reaches an end. In the dialectic of the spirit, art is confined to its sensuous expression.

Famously, Hegel's end of art claim was the basis for Arthur Danto's "end of art" theory.<sup>[2]</sup> Formulated in 1985, Danto's thesis states that the evolutionary history of art has reached an end. What reached an end is not the creation of art works, as basic evidence shows, but the possibility of analyzing art through evolutionary patterns. Art ended its phase of self-discovery, its evolutionary pilgrimage, precisely when it admitted, more or less happily, that any object, if theoretically supported, can be art. The work of art triggering this idea was Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box*. Its appearance as an exact plywood replica of a mere ordinary object topped any prior artistic endeavors in its ability to ask a very self-conscious question, the question of what art is, or can be. The *Brillo Box* brought Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz's problem of indiscernible objects to the Stable Gallery in uptown New York in 1964, and made clear that two identical objects can be different, and that one can be, in fact, a work of art. In his 1998 reevaluation of the end of art thesis, Danto said his conclusion, only apparently dreadful, is not the worst imaginable outcome; on the contrary, if anything, the end of art is a promise for new movements, more artists, and even more art works.<sup>[3]</sup>

Danto's theory generated much discussion and criticism, criticism that, in what was probably its most successful attempt, questioned the very premises of the argument.<sup>[4]</sup> This paper shares most of the concerns about the validity of the end of art argument. Its goal, however, rather than to rebut Danto's theory, is to point to something that I take to be a more promising solution than Danto's pluralistic alternative. This alternative, as with most forms of pluralism, leaves too many questions unanswered. The purpose of this paper is to show that a better solution to pluralism can be found in a reconsideration of what is usually an underrated component of Hegel's aesthetic, namely, the symbolic phase. Although art reaches its apex in classical art and its end in romantic art, an analysis of the initial stage, symbolic art, can become the standpoint for a re-evaluation of the end of art claim. More ambitiously, it can also become the standpoint from which to contemplate a new direction or horizon in the history of art. I argue that some of the elements and concepts embedded in the symbolic phase are at the center of contemporary artistic production, and that because of these components, art has either revived or has never ended at all.

The first part of this paper offers a historical clarification of what Hegel meant by symbol and of the features of the symbolic we need to account for. It then moves to a brief analysis of the concept of 'the end of art' and of the differences between Danto's and Hegel's accounts. Finally, it considers a number of contemporary art works that, I believe, find their conceptual strength in the appropriation and further elaboration of the concepts related to the symbolic phase.

Section 3. *Contemporary symbolism* will ultimately lead to an analysis of the new perspectives that art is proposing and creating. The apparent pluralism of art has a common denominator. The problem, as it will turn out, is not that art is asking a question of itself; it is that art is asking its viewers to start questioning.

### **1. The symbolic stage**

Hegel's approach to art, or, more specifically, to the study of fine arts, is not limited to the construction of an evolutionary history of art. Art, in its unfolding and in its definition, is a functional element in the rational and dialectical system that has as its purpose the affirmation of the Spirit's self-consciousness, of Spirit going back to itself. Art, followed by religion and philosophy, marks the first differentiation of Spirit: a differentiation from nature. Hegel's claim, hinted at in his criticism of Immanuel Kant's aesthetics, is that art is an entirely human product, a product going beyond nature, and able to disclose human consciousness.

To understand the importance of the symbolic stage we cannot simply analyze the symbolic as a historical phase, nor can we limit the analysis to a consideration of symbolic art works.

Simply cataloging different arts as pertaining to the symbolic or to other stages would not do justice to the systematic nature of Hegel's work. Nor would such an analysis help the understanding of one of the points I aim to show, namely, the relevance of the conceptual meaning that the symbol embodies aside from its presence at a particular stage in the history of art.

It might be easier to explain what the symbol is not, to start with its negative description. Hegel introduces the symbol as standing in a negative relation with the sign: the symbol is *not* a sign. In Hegel's philosophy the sign is arbitrarily connected to a meaning. The connection with meaning is not based on any physical or actual resemblance between the sign and what is signified. For instance, a flag is a sign, even though its meaning is detached from the physical nation it represents. On the contrary, the symbol is analogical; its meaning is connected to the immediate appearance of externality. The lion, as a symbol, is tied to the immediate intuition of strength and power.

Based on a particular concrete entity, the symbol, according to Hegel, is also able to refer to something outside itself, to look beyond its own material constraints. In so doing, however, the externality of the symbol is exceeded, thus opening the symbol to the abstract and indeterminate. The symbol engages in a transforming activity with nature, and yet it cannot properly signify anything without it. The symbol depends on its own attachment to what it is simultaneously trying to differentiate itself from.

The symbol's inherent inability to fully detach itself from nature affects the presentation of Spirit. The symbolic stage is described obscurely, with exaggeration and tension between the internal realization of the Spirit and the external world.

Hegel's purpose was to present contrast, a negative first step in the evolution of the spirit and of consciousness. This contrast hinders the symbolic phase from a harmonic and balanced presentation of content and form, an achievement that art will only reach in the classical stage.

It is in light of the contrast embodied by the symbol that the three stages of symbolic art should be analyzed. Initially, in the prehistoric period, art is still not visible. As already mentioned, art exists as a human product, but in order to be a human product it has to become a conscious activity. The shaping of artistic consciousness runs parallel with the shaping of humanity. It follows that the symbolic emerges when people become witnesses of their own capacity to transform concrete reality, to interpret and translate it. The material of this initial shaping and research is nature. Yet in the first movement of the symbolic stage, *unconscious symbolism*, nature and spirit are presented in immediate unity: there is no substantial differentiation. The attempts to modify nature are relegated to the *quantitative* dimension, and include figures with multiple limbs, heads, etc., changes that do not, according to Hegel, address the *qualitative* difference of art over nature.

It is only in the following stage, the *sublime stage*, that the difference is understood as qualitative, as seeking for a separate level of spirituality. What was only suggested in the unconscious stage is now looking for a realization. Sublime symbolism is characterized by the emergence, on the negative background of immediate, unconscious symbolism, of a form of creativity. Egyptian art and architecture are the frame for successive stages in the evolution of art. The sublime is still immersed in concreteness, but it can now host inner spirituality. The Pyramids, the *symbol* of symbols, are the

most suitable example of this point. What makes the Pyramids the acme of the symbolic phase is their capacity to understand the presence of spirituality: they literally contain spirituality, thus becoming a "temple" for it.

However, Judaic art, the last stage of the symbolic, shows how the balance achieved in Egyptian art is only precarious. Despite its spiritual content, Judaic art remains within the boundaries of abstract representation. It is this abstraction and its failure in representing spirituality that marks the end of the symbolic.

The three stages of the symbolic represent different levels of incompleteness in which the spirit has not yet achieved its sensuous appearance and is, for this reason, deficient. The deficiency and ambiguity of the symbolic stage diminish its importance, and lead attention to future stages of art and to their role in the unfolding of spirit. Yet the relevance of the symbolic phase resides in being not only the first stage in the evolutionary history of art, but also the first stage in the *overall* presentation of the spirit. As Kathleen Dow Magnus emphasizes:

Precisely because these symbolic forms correspond only partially to the idea of spirit, they grant spirit the unique occasion of experiencing itself in a form through which it cannot think. Through its various acts of symbolization, the thought that will later "think itself thinking" gains the experience of thinking itself not thinking. [5]

In other words, the symbolic phase is the first phase in which spirit, despite not being able to engage in self-investigation, recognizes the necessity of such a process. The symbolic stage affirms itself through its own alienation. Symbolic art reflects on what is missing, on the presence of discrepancies, and on the need to resolve them.

Classical art comes as a response to this alienation. It has to establish an equilibrium between content and form, the lack of which had been highlighted by its predecessor. Given Hegel's attention to the contrast between nature and what humanity can create, the equilibrium will inevitably be marked by the preeminence of the human element, and by what is, contingently, the triumph of the human body. Classical sculpture, the peak of artistic expression, is able to grasp the right kind of symbolization, a symbolization that invests the body with human significance. Classical art is sensuous in the sense of the corporeal, in its perfect harmony with the human body.

The balance of form and content found in classical art is disrupted by a new turn. Whereas in the initial stages the challenge was to find the most suitable sensuous representation of spirit, the romantic stage is characterized by questioning whether sensuous appearance is sufficient for the self-discovery of spirit. The transition to romantic art becomes a reflection on this last incongruity, spirit's need to abandon the constraint of artistic form for the sake of its own revelation. The religious content of romantic art suggests a different kind of internalization that is not satisfied by the

forms of classical art or, at this point, by art in general. As classical art was a *symbol* of the highest achievement of art, romantic art is a *symbol* of its limit.

The symbolic can be viewed as a paradigm for the "limited" nature of art. What is expressed at the level of the symbolic can be magnified and applied to art in general. In Hegel's system, art is symbolic in reference to religion and philosophy and, ultimately, in reference to the self-conscious journey of spirit. Art is intrinsically and unavoidably two-sided. On the one hand, art strikes us in its immediate, physical presence, while on the other, its physical presence, as seen in the description of the symbol, directs us toward a meaning that goes beyond its tangible physicality. The dual nature of art is carried from the symbolic to the romantic, and it will, in this last stage, lead to the end of art. Art ends because of its inability to extend its function from the revelation of the sensuous form to the next steps the spirit has to perform.

This is the Hegelian end of art, and yet, as this paper aims to show, contemporary art points to the fact that there is no conclusion, final response, or sublimation of these questions into a separate non-artistic stage. The questions provoked by the symbolic are visible in the unfolding of art in general, from its beginning to the art works populating the contemporary scene.

With this intuition in mind and with a certain hope for the continuation of art, it is worth analyzing the similarities and differences between Hegel and Danto's end of art thesis. For art to affirm that its continuation is, in fact, a part of its very nature, a nature exemplified by the features of the symbolic, it has to confront not one, but two theoretical deaths.

## **2. The end of art**

The symbolic stage is a paradigm of the tendency toward self-interrogation that characterizes art per se. The symbolic shows how the materiality intrinsic to art can never fully represent spirit, thus pointing to its later end. Yet, the Hegelian "end of art" cannot be assimilated with the disappearance of a phase. As the symbolic does not cease to exist in the stages of art that follow, art does not cease to exist in the evolutionary history of spirit. What verifies this claim is not the description of art but the dialectical sequence of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis underlying Hegel's philosophical system. The last stage, synthesis, is characterized by the realization that the synthesis was already present, in an unaware state, in the thesis. Hegel's system does not erase previous steps, and it moves as if to disclose, through the self-discovery of spirit, what was there all along.

Art, the appearance of spirit in its sensuous form, is a necessary step without which the synthesis cannot be achieved.

The idea of art as self-questioning is a crucial component of philosophy of art, a component that entails the creation and codification of different art theories. There is a connection, almost omnipresent in contemporary philosophy of art, between the questions posed by art, and the theories that result from these questions, to such an extent that theories have become the building blocks for the definition of art. This

approach, the necessity of an apparatus of art theories for the definition of something such as art is at the core of Danto's investigation of the evolution of art, and also, importantly for our purposes, at the basis of the end of art claim.

In Danto, theories are what make us distinguish mere objects from works of art. Danto's *Artworld* includes, together with artists and art works, the presence of a set of theories, formulated in a fashion similar to scientific revolutions, that are not only able to describe an artwork, but that also make of a work a work of art.

To see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry—an atmosphere of artistic theories, a knowledge of the history of art, an Artworld.[\[6\]](#)

Artistic validity is conceived as a step in a different world, a bundle of theoretical recognition, a response to the cleavage between pure, immediate reality and the reality embedded in art works. Theories also apply contingently; they are tied to history, and to the historical circumstances surrounding an artwork. The theory that makes the *Brillo Box* a work of art is a theory expressed in a specific moment of the history of the New York art scene, a theory that follows from previous periods in the history of art, but also a theory that could not have been formulated prior to the appearance of the *Brillo Box* at the Stable Gallery in 1964.

Together with a connection between art theories and art works, the *Brillo Box* and its conceptual justification also carry with them the reason for Danto's end of art claim. Warhol, with his work, intentionally asks a question of a philosophical nature, a question on what art can be, and he responds, quite disarmingly, that anything can be a work of art, even something that, from a representational standpoint, is identical to a "mere thing." Beginning with Marcel Duchamp and eventuating in Warhol, the evolutionary history of art has reached an end, an end marked by art's entrance into the realm of philosophy. The *Brillo Box's* existence as a work of art is indebted to a philosophical justification that stems from the indiscernibility between art and reality and that, at the same time, puts art at stake: it confronts it with the question of its own definition. There is no response to this question; when art asks itself what art can be, it has reached the theoretical awareness of the need of a philosophical shift. The evolutionary history of art has reached a conclusion or, as noted by Noël Carroll,[\[7\]](#) a form of narrative closure, and it has now entered an age of scattered pluralism.

There are several analogies between Danto's and Hegel's theories that go from the emphasis on historicity to the combination of art and philosophy, to the necessity of ending art to open philosophical doors of conceptualization. And yet, when comparing the two we should bear in mind a number of important differences.

First, Hegel and Danto have distinct conceptual aims. Hegel's concern was with art's functional role. Art is a movement in the development of spirit and of humanity; its function depends on its contribution to the unfolding of spirit. In Danto, far from idealistic ambitions, the focus was narrowed to art

and art works, and to their position and relevance in the *Artworld*.

Second, Danto's analysis is not concerned with the origin of art. He did not divide art into three stages nor is his account characterized by evaluative or hierarchical judgments. Danto showed us how to discriminate between art and mere objects; his focus was not on how the history of art began but on what belongs to it. Hegel, instead, began his treatment of fine art with a negative stage, unconscious symbolism, in which art is *still not art*, and moves to the description of later stages in the light of their contribution to spirit.

Lastly, Hegel and Danto differ in their understanding of the end of art claim. In Hegel, as we have seen, art ends because its form cannot represent the religious content of Christianity. Yet, art retains its definition and function as the revelation of spirit in sensuous form. For Danto, the problem is not that art is unable to represent spirituality; the problem is that, after Warhol, anything can be art. The end of the evolutionary history of art is based on the fact that art has asked itself what art is. For Hegel, art does not end because it has asked itself a question of definition; art ends because it has fulfilled its historical trajectory. For Danto, art ends because nothing, or better, anything, defines it.

I briefly summarized a few differences between Hegel and Danto; these differences are related to the goal of their analyses and specifically to their approaches to the definition of art. However, despite their relevance, these differences do not erase the problem of understanding whether art can or cannot continue. As mentioned, I do not believe art has ended nor do I believe in the central role played by the question of the definition of art; on the contrary, I believe that new perspectives can be disclosed by contemporary art works, works that have, so to speak, survived the end of art.

The modest goal of this paper is to analyze these perspectives through a revision of the symbolic stage and of the concepts embedded in that stage. I believe that the phase of alienation embodied by the symbolic, the uncertainty that followed, and the final search for an investigation of consciousness that is truly human, and specific to the medium of art, are constitutive parts of what art communicates. This is not only a way of reestablishing an active connection and dialogue among art, theory, and philosophy (there is no reason, after all, to think that art cannot express philosophical concepts), but also a way of affirming art's independence. Art is independent in its ability to raise questions that are closely connected to the nature of human beings, from their ability to perceive, to their own understanding of reality. Let me turn to a set of examples that, from their relation to the problems raised by the symbolic stage, can be looked at as "symptoms" of the continuation of art. These works are able to show how certain questions, contrary to the question of the definition of art, can still be viewed as functioning parameters in the understanding of the artworld.

### **3. Contemporary symbolism**

The symbolic stage, in Hegel's analysis, is described as a phase of alienation, as the negative stage in which art, a



human creation, battles with the constraints of nature. The symbolic verges toward exaggeration in its attempts to find a balance of form and content and ends, in its last stage, with the realization of the necessity of turning inward to fully represent the nature of reality and human beings, a representation it cannot achieve. These questions, the conflict between human products and nature, the alterations of reality, and finally the attention toward self-consciousness and self-investigation are still on the agenda of contemporary art and of those works that, at least chronologically, have survived the end of art. What characterizes these questions is their ability to belong to art in itself and not to a specific stage in the history of art. Being intrinsic to the nature of artistic creation, they are largely independent of the historical and evolutionary unfolding of art, and in this sense also immune to the end of art thesis.

My decision to select these three questions is based on their presence in Hegel's analysis, and on the possibility of isolating potential responses in the contemporary panorama. Even if these might not be the only questions intrinsic to the nature of art, my point remains unaltered: there are elements of art, and questions asked by art that are independent of a linear evolutionary history of art,<sup>[8]</sup> and that, because of their independence, escape the risk implied in an end of art.

Danto's end of art thesis is based on the presence, in the history of art, of the philosophical question concerning the definition of art. Yet this is not the only question asked by art; in fact, it might not even be the most pressing one.

The first question to be analyzed concerns the relation between art works and nature. In particular, I am interested in the extent to which the modification of nature and public spaces is able to construct a new sphere, something that, along the lines of the symbolic, can build a temple for meaning by playing with the concreteness of material and of what surrounds the places considered. Secondly, I will analyze the impact of the element of distortion in its quantitative and qualitative senses. Specifically, I will focus on the perceptual and cognitive effects triggered by distortions and alterations.

The last example deals with the contrasting relation between the dissolution of concrete materiality and the presence of a different set of concepts stemming from a consideration of self-consciousness. My analysis of the conceptual meaning of the symbolic in contemporary art closely follows the steps outlined by Hegel, from his questions to the movements detected in the unfolding of the symbolic. At the same time I point to the differences and new routes that can be observed today.

### *3.1. Nature and earthworks*

*Spiral Jetty*, Robert Smithson's work in Utah's Great Salt Lake, has emerged only a few times since its construction in 1970 when the lake's water level was especially low. Built of crystals, salt, and other lake sediments, the work is probably one of the most effective examples of land art, an earthwork.

Land art echoes minimalism in its representational simplicity as well as in the choice of materials while, at the same time, polemically rejecting the institutionalization of art. Works of land art are not only oftentimes too large or too inaccessible

to be moved to a museum, but they are also impossible to preserve in a collection because of their material components.

Land art reinforces a close connection between art and nature, a connection in which the two act upon each other. The installation emerges from nature; it is made of natural components, and yet it is bound to disappear because of the very same reasons. *Spiral Jetty* will return to nature because it is, in its very artistic status, part of it.<sup>[9]</sup>

In the construction of earthworks we can observe the two movements of unconscious symbolism. On the one hand, nature is recognized as a state from which art can evolve, something human beings have the ability to alter. The modification of nature is the product of the recognition that nature can become an artifact. On the other hand, as in the symbolic stage, the construction cannot truly abandon its material component. If art remains tied to nature, the progress of nature will “submerge” the art work. An important feature of the symbolic is the difficulty of distinguishing art from nature. In the same fashion, earthworks belong to nature in their way of supporting their own existence on the site. They are an alteration, but an alteration that shares the same spatial and temporal constraints of nature; they are never formally dissociated.

It is interesting to recall, on this point, another Hegelian feature of symbolism. Hegel describes the first phase of the symbolic—unconscious symbolism—as something that is not yet art. Unconscious symbolism lacks a conscious component; more specifically, it is not self-conscious. Smithson gets to the same conclusion, but following an opposite route. He turns Hegel upside down by emphasizing how, precisely when his creation realizes its existence, what we might want to address as its self-conscious nature, it ceases to exist and sinks back into nature, the victim of its own entropic power. Reflecting his deep awareness of Hegel’s philosophy, *Spiral Jetty* is Smithson’s response to the question of the relationship between art and nature, the first question posed by the symbolic stage. His response is that the encounter of art and nature should not be phrased as a struggle for differentiation but as a connection abetting the final blending or reunion of the two.

In his analysis of Smithson, Gary Shapiro<sup>[10]</sup> condensed the questions that can be asked about the artist’s production into one: “Where are the art works?” Smithson’s works are not *there*, and yet they have never left. They have become the symbol of a connection, and a contrast that is always in place.

In their relationship to nature, earthworks keep going back to what Hegel saw as the initial differentiation of art and nature but with a great difference. Smithson’s works accept their own incapacity to distinguish themselves from nature; they take the alienation of the symbolic as a stance, and in so doing they remain self-questioning.

### 3.2. Exaggerating

The second feature of the symbolic I want to analyze, and with it a second question characterizing art works, is the Hegelian reference to quantitative exaggeration. The symbolic is at this point aware of its power to create, yet its willingness to affirm this power is affected by exaggeration, distortions, or

superfluous additions. The symbolic is trying but, in a sense, it is trying too hard, its energies wasted in the creation of something still far from the desired equilibrium. The excesses of the symbolic are symptomatic of its attempts to modify materiality, and yet the modifications taking place at this point are not qualitative but exclusively quantitative. Instead of separating itself from its material element, the second stage of the symbolic multiplies it to the point of finding itself trapped in it. Hegel's classification and description of this phase does not come without an evaluative judgment. The figures represented, so quantitatively distorted, are, according to him, horrific, repugnant, grotesque. And yet, his judgment originates from a conception of harmonic beauty as the privileged standard by which to evaluate the quality of a work, a conception that can hardly be endorsed. Not only can art be ugly; distortions can convey meaning and encourage further reflection. In being repugnant, grotesque, or fascinating and enchanting, quantitative distortions can become qualitative.

David LaChapelle's photography in *Hotel LaChapelle* and in his other numerous works gravitates around these tenets. From his first photographs, for Warhol's *Interview Magazine*, to his glossy portraits of celebrities for fashion magazines, exaggeration has been the trademark of LaChapelle's work. His photos are larger-than-life exposures of sculpted bodies, the bodies of celebrities such as Paris Hilton, who are even too well known. LaChapelle's photos are glossy and deeply unpleasant. Colors are over-saturated, the set clogged and surreal at the same time, and yet there is something inherently vulgar in his work that translates into social criticism and ultimately into self-criticism. Quantitative distortions are qualitative statements, a commentary on what photography is depicting, can depict, or, as it is legitimate to suggest, is commanded to depict.

Hegel does see in quantitative distortions a positive or self-critical feature of art, and he does not altogether condemn grandiose exaggerations. As mentioned earlier, the balance of quantitative and qualitative distortions, the highest expression of the symbolic, is found in the Pyramids' capacity to host, in their disproportionate size, an equally disproportionate spirituality.

Contemporary art responds to the question posed by the "symbol of symbols" with symbols that are either too small or too large. Richard Serra's production is an example of the latter. Possibly one of the most fervent advocates of minimalism of forms and materials, Serra creates giant, self-standing sculptures made of rusting steel or other oxidized metals. Some of his projects, such as *Tilted Arc*, were public installations. The *Arc* was installed in 1981 in New York's Federal Plaza with the purpose of revitalizing the otherwise dreadful look of the square, and yet, Serra's intentions had little to contribute with a somewhat simplistic amelioration of a public space:

I do not make portable objects. I do not make works that can be relocated or site adjusted. I make works that deal with the environmental components of given places. The scale, size and location of my site-specific works are determined

by the topography of the site, whether it be urban, landscape, or an architectural enclosure.

My works become part of and are built into the structure of the site, and they often restructure, both conceptually and perceptually, the organization of the site.

My sculptures are not objects for the viewer to stop and stare at. The historical purpose of placing sculpture on a pedestal was to establish a separation between the sculpture and the viewer.

*I am interested in creating a behavioral space in which the viewer interacts with the sculpture in its context.* (Italics mine.)[\[11\]](#)

Pyramids and *Tilted Arc* are perceptual symbols. They both refer to a specific historical and social context, and they both carry a distinct intrinsic meaning. In the Pyramids, the meaning is a form of spirituality that blends with religion, while in *Tilted Arc*, the meaning is an internalization of the perceptual space characterized by the encounter between “my” perception and the barrier imposed by the sculpture on the site.

Serra’s work was at the center of a trial that ended with the destruction of the work.[\[12\]](#) The *Arc* was considered to be an obtrusive and parasitic element by the people working in the square, a distortion of the previous design of the plaza. Yet, this very criticism recalls another feature of the symbolic: the ability to evoke something that goes beyond immediate appearance. Gregg Horowitz[\[13\]](#) noted how many of the depositions against Serra’s work tended to emphasize the beauty of the square, a beauty that the installation should have improved by making the square a relaxing space for people working all day in windowless offices. However, remembering Federal Plaza as an idyllic space is delusional. *Tilted Arc* reminded people of its undeveloped potential, of what in their dreams the plaza could have been but was not. *Tilted Arc* made people think about the necessity of something that never existed in the plaza, the desire for something beyond the material existence of the surroundings. The work became, for those employed in the area, a way of rediscovering their own perception and sensibility; it made the public self-conscious of its condition. Materiality and externality can become human once they assume symbolic significance. Contemporary art can again respond with an affirmation of what, in Hegel’s understanding of the symbolic, was an obstacle.

### 3.3. No more works of art

In the last stage of symbolism, the spiritual content of the works exceeds the available art form. This, for Hegel, is the end of the symbolic stage, a stage bound to material concreteness and formal abstractness. It is also, on a larger scale, the reason for the end of art: art is limited to sensuous appearance, and once it realizes its tendency toward spirituality, it shows its inability to embody it.

Contemporary art, however, seems provocatively capable of existing even without the presence of a material object, substituting materiality with what is, in the end, only a

thought. By eliminating the materiality of the object, art has condensed its critical message to the conceptual or, as in Tino Sehgal's work, to situations.

From *Welcome to the Situation* (2006) to his latest project, *The Associations* (2012),<sup>[14]</sup> Sehgal has deprived art of any corporeality, from its physical permanence, to its commercial value (how do you buy a work that does not exist?), to somewhat paradoxically the possibility of being physically observed. Hans Ulrich Obrist, the co-director of the Serpentine Gallery in London, (and also an artist famous for his "eventful" interviews),<sup>[15]</sup> has defined Sehgal's works as "living sculptures." The meaning of 'living' is in this case quite straightforward: Sehgal's installations are acted by living people and, in order to be appreciated, they require the audience to be physically present. Recordings are banned.

Sehgal does not provide written instructions for his performances, leaving ample margin for what is not improvisation but simply a form of respect and fascination for what can naturally happen. In *The Associations*, seventy interpreters, both dancers and civilians, were asked to approach the visitors in the Turbine Hall at the Tate Gallery, invite them to say something, and then translate it into another language. The encounter involved a form of physical interaction; whether dancing, or simply walking, visitors and performers had to "associate" and to make a translation of that association. More than a language translation, Sehgal wanted it to become an appropriation of something internal to the visitor, thus having the visitor and the translator associate in a space that began swirling with encounters.

And yet, as I mentioned earlier, nothing, not even a recording, remained of a performance whose instructions were only verbal. In Sehgal, the "sensuous appearance" of art is only temporary, transient, and it is substituted by its disappearance. Forcefully oblivious of their tendency toward dissolution, his works remain permanent. Sehgal's performances negate the end of art in placing themselves precisely where art was supposed to end. Sehgal shows, quite simply, how there can be art in the absence of any physical object.

Hegel's conclusion of the symbolic stage and his end of art theory are based on the belief that art has completed its function, the revelation of the spirit in its sensuous form. For spirit to move further into self-consciousness, into its full disclosure, it has to abandon art and its relation to what is material and concrete. Other artists in conceptual and performance art, but Sehgal in a very radical fashion, are capable of showing how art can not only absorb the tension between materiality and spirituality but also sublimate this tension and accept an existence that is in no way sensory. Contemporary art embraces the problems raised by the symbolic, the problems that led to the dissolution of art, and responds by accepting dissolution as an artistic statement. Art does not need to transition into philosophy nor does it become philosophy from having asked a question over its definition.

What art does now is play with materiality, with its presence and absence, and with the perspectives that can be disclosed from this very interrogation.

#### 4. An old idea for a new chapter of art

The works I have presented point to the presence in contemporary art of questions that originate in the symbolic stage, and that are still today characteristic of the creation and analysis of art. What I want to highlight is that these questions not only escape the end of art but also a system according to which art can only be viewed as the product of a linear evolutionary history whose guiding thread is the issue of what art is. Responding to the question of what comprises art is not and should not be considered the only goal of art. Art poses questions that touch on other philosophical and non-philosophical issues. Among them, and I think prominently in the examples I have offered, are the cognitive and perceptual impact of art works, as well as our role as collaborators, participants, and questioners.

The symbolic provides a basis for this investigation, an investigation that, by restating the questions of the symbolic, remains open to the responses that art can provide. This openness is not for the purpose of reaching an end nor is it an affirmation of pluralism. Even if we admit that new questions can be raised, we also have to admit that other questions, as in this case, the ones raised by the symbolic, are embedded in the creation and appreciation of art.

In my analysis, I isolated three questions that art has been asking independently of its stage in evolution and independently of what defines art: a question over its relation to nature, a question over the modifications of materiality, and the question of whether art can exist if deprived of materiality. Responding to these questions, challenging previous responses, and disclosing new perspectives are essential steps to building the texture of a discipline that need not face dissolution.

There is a final element I want to highlight, an element that is common to the three questions posed by the symbolic and that closely relates to Hegel's philosophy: the relation between art and the revelation and disclosure of human consciousness. In Hegel's view, art explored the sensuous appearance of consciousness. Contemporary art responds with an analysis of perception and the perceptual consciousness of the beholders. To borrow an expression from the artist Olafur Eliasson, being the spectator of art implies "seeing yourself seeing."<sup>[16]</sup> When compared to philosophy, art might be at a disadvantage from its inability to propositionally articulate concepts. And yet art has a tremendous advantage in its capacity to use perception as a tool to discover new ways of expressing self-consciousness. Art can coexist with philosophy; it has a heuristic value in instructing human beings about their own perception, an essential feature of self-consciousness. Reflecting on the symbolic stage, the oldest and least refined phase of art, can make us consider a value that art has never lost and will likely never lose. Contemporary art reflects on what in the symbolic is the first affirmation of the self-consciousness of humanity by re-evoking our sensuous, perceptual abilities. This is a question about the nature of who we are and to which it is much harder to respond.

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### Endnotes

[1] G.W.F. Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* (London: Penguin Classics, 1993).

[2] Arthur Danto, "The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art," *Grand Street*, 4, 3 (Spring 1985), 171-189.

[3] Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art. Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1998).

[4] Noël Carroll, "The End of Art?," in *History and Theory*, 37, 4 (Dec. 1998), 17-29.

[5] Katheleen Dow Magnus, *Hegel and the Symbolic Mediation of Spirit* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), pp. 134.

[6] Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 61, 19, American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Sixty-First Annual Meeting (October 15, 1964); ref. on 580.

[7] Noël Carroll, "The End of Art?," in *History and Theory*, 37, 4 (Dec. 1998); ref. on 18.

[8] This is not to say that art can be analyzed independently from its history and from the relation among different works and movements, but simply that an exclusively historical approach to art overlooks too many elements of art that are fundamental not only to the production, but, as we shall see, to the reception of artworks.

[9] Edward S. Casey, *Earth-Mapping, Artists Reshaping Landscapes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2005).

[10] Gary Shapiro, *Earthwards, Robert Smithson and Art after Babel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

[11] Alex Neill & Aaron Ridley, eds., *Arguing About Art* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 430.

[12] The trial over *Tilted Arc* lasted over six years. Among the solutions proposed, three were at the center of the discussion: the work could have been kept in the Plaza, it could have been removed, or, finally it could have been destroyed.

Despite the fact that Serra and most of the artistic community would have preferred the first option, the destruction of the work still accommodated the belief according to which a work of public art has to be site-specific, thus making of the possible relocation of the work a theoretically mistaken option.

[13] Gregg M. Horowitz, "Public Art/Public Space. The Spectacle of the Tilted Arc Controversy," in Alex Neill & Aaron Ridley, eds., *Arguing About Art* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 446-456.

[14] Lauren Collins, "The Question Artist. Tino Sehgal's Provocative Encounters," *The New Yorker*, Aug. 6, 2012; 34-39.

[15] Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Interviews Vol. I-II* (New York: Charta, 2010).

[16] Madeline Grynsztejn, Daniel Birnbaum & Michael Speaks, *Olafur Eliasson* (New York: Phaidon, 2000).