



## The End of Art: A Hegelian Conception of the Postmodern Paradigm

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*This essay will use the Hegelian understanding of dialectical history as a model for the history of art. Through this model it will be shown that postmodern art is the actualization of artistic freedom whereby greater artistic autonomy has enabled artists to conceptualize, philosophize and theorize about the world around them to a much greater extent than at any other point in history. The result of this artistic autonomy is that art has now taken on a dual identity of both art and philosophy. Consequently, art, as it is historically known, is a thing of the past.*

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Contemporary art galleries are seen as the realm for higher art form and intellectual consideration — the paradigm of artistic creation. Yet as one walks through a postmodern art exhibition, what meets the eyes is an array of works that are so deeply ingrained in abstraction that, unless the story behind a particular piece of work is known, what is present is as disconnected and absurd to us as quantum physics was for Einstein. This disconnectedness we experience towards a postmodern piece of art is cause for contemplation, as we are unable to enter the inner realm of the artist's mind to understand the form as well as the content of what the artist is trying to convey. The core question is, most simply put, *what makes this art?* A postmodern piece of art can take the form of a canvas

splattered in paint, a single brushstroke circumscribed by an empty background, a photograph of a photograph of a photograph, a mundane and ordinary object thrust under the harsh lighting of an art gallery — the possibilities are endless. Take, for example, the work of Marcel Duchamp's *In Advance of the Broken Arm*. In true postmodern spirit, this piece of art retains the identity of a perfectly ordinary snow shovel.<sup>1</sup> This “ready made” is an accepted piece of art, and it reportedly sold for \$600,000 in a private sale. So what artistic attribute does this snow shovel have that distinguishes it from other snow shovels that sell for a fraction of that price in a regular hardware store? What, indeed, captures the essential characteristics of a piece of art?

Further complications arise when we try to differentiate between the art of appropriation and “original” art. Such is the case with conceptual artist and photographer, Sherrie Levine, who re-photographed famous Walker Evans photographs and presented them — without further manipulation — in her 1981 solo exhibition. Within the polemics that surround the art of appropriation and optical duplication emerges the all too real question of what constitutes a piece of art when the rules of postmodern photography are so obscure. Indeed, the whole art industry seems to lack the cohesion and systemization that it had formerly professed. The former order was replaced with an art form of seemingly no constraints, where anything and everything goes. For example, when you juxtapose Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* with Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.*, it appears, as art critic and philosopher Arthur

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1. Arthur C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (Columbia University Press, 1986), 82. In actuality, Duchamp is associated with the Dada movement that preceded postmodernism.

C. Danto reflects, “a certain extraordinary adventure had run its course and that all that lay ahead was cycle upon cycle of repetition of much the same options...that meant the end, in disorder, of a closed system of energy everyone up to then had believed open.”<sup>2</sup> However, a close analysis of postmodern art theory reveals that it is not so much a question of whether artistic energy really had withered away, but a question of *why* art had transformed so dramatically over the course of the twentieth century, and to what end.

What becomes evident is that our former method of critiquing, analyzing and ranking art had exhausted itself. This is because up until the innovation of motion picture technology, the progress of the history of art was largely characterized in terms of the ability of an artist to produce a work of art that simulated optical duplication.<sup>3</sup> So with the coming of new technology which depicted moving things, representational art began to disintegrate. Moreover, the way we conceptualized perceptual reality was jolted to the extent that the inevitable, daunting question arose and reverberated throughout the entire art world: *Where does art go from here?* It was not until this change in our exposure to a different sort of perceptual reality that artists were freed from the framework of representational art and able to pursue their own agendas. This new found autonomy rapidly reshaped the art world in a sense that the art that was being created began raising questions about its own nature and, in doing so, was, as Danto claims, “raising from within itself the question of its

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2. Arthur C. Danto, *Encounters and Reflections: Art in the Historical Present* (Prometheus Books, 1986), 331. *L.H.O.O.Q.*, a reproduction of Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, is adorned with a comical moustache and goatee.

3. Danto, *Disenfranchisement of Art*, 86.

philosophical identity — was *doing* philosophy....”<sup>4</sup> This philosophical metamorphosis thus facilitated, through the channeling of artistic creativity, what G.W.F. Hegel would identify as another mode of Absolute Spirit.<sup>5</sup> According to Hegel, history is the unfolding of the idea of freedom. In the same respect, one can see the history of art as a progressive movement of the development of the idea of artistic freedom, which culminates in the postmodern era. This actualization of artistic freedom thus marks the end of a certain historical narrative that is known as the history of art. Understanding the full weight of this view requires an analysis of Hegel’s philosophy of history and a closer look at the progression of art history until the explosion of the postmodern art era.

Hegel’s much quoted statement in his introduction to *The Philosophy of History* reads, “The History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom...the Eastern nations knew only that *one* is free; the Greek and Roman world only that *some* are free; while *we* know that all men absolutely (man as *man*) are free.”<sup>6</sup> This passage is especially telling because it triangulates three key notions. First, Hegel’s philosophy of history is a progressive model whereby the history of the world is driven by our consciousness of the idea of human freedom.

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4. Danto, *Art in the Historical Present*, 333. (Emphasis added.)

5. Ibid. Hegel uses the technical term *Spirit* (or *Geist*) to explain the unfolding of freedom. According to Hegel, Spirit is a life force that is manifested in philosophy, art, religion, the human mind and social institutions. The history of the world, for Hegel, is the unfolding of Spirit through all of these different conduits.

6. Georg W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (Prometheus Books, 1990), 19. Original italics.

To put this point in other terms, the criterion by which we can understand progress in history is the realization that human beings are intrinsically free. Second, his summed up epigram of ancient to modern history, in the context of who was free, alludes to his dialectical theory of history, which I will discuss further on. Finally, by stating that “we” know that all men are free, in accordance with the premise that the history of the world is none other than the process of the consciousness of freedom, Hegel commits himself to two controversial claims, namely, (A) in *his* contemporary world, the realization of freedom was actually achieved and (B) if it is in fact true that the idea of freedom had been realized, then this implies that this realization of freedom marks the *end of history*. I will now look at each key notion individually to further explain these theories.

In order to understand Hegel’s progressive model of human history, we must first understand his concept of categories. Throughout his writing, Hegel places emphasis on his view that we cannot ever simply perceive the reality within which we function without preconditions or presuppositions.<sup>7</sup> This is because, according to the interpretation of author and philosopher Stephen Houlgate, “all human consciousness is informed by categories of thought which mediate everything we experience” [FTH.5]. This can be understood to mean that the world as it is known is experienced through a framework of categories which determines our modes of thought [FTH.6]. I interpret Hegel here not as rejecting the

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7. Stephen Houlgate, *An Introduction to Hegel: Freedom, Truth and History* (Blackwell publishing, 1991), 5. Hereafter, all references to Houlgate will appear in text as [FTH. Page number].

range of emotions that play an important role in the way we perceive the world. Rather, he is stating that those emotional, physical and practical stimuli are themselves determined and directed by categories of thought [FTH.6].

For Hegel, these categories do *not* place limitations on conceptual understanding of what *is*. On the contrary, it is through these categories that the structure of the world is disclosed, as individuals are born into the world, and so share the essential character of it [FTH.8].<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, it is because our minds are conceptually prepared for the truth that, through these categories, there is the ability to access genuine consciousness of reality as we know it [FTH.8].

Hegel also stresses that categories of thought are *not* fixed. The full weight of this claim can be felt when comparing Hegel's view of categories with Plato's view of the forms. Plato's view of knowledge consists in the realm of forms. So, to reach absolute truth, one must contemplate the forms, which exist independently of the realm of the senses and experience. Whereas, for Hegel, categories of truth are not fixed eternal forms that remain unchanged throughout history. Rather, categories of truth are dependent upon human experience, i.e., what is experienced corresponds with the reality within which one lives and the time period within which one is born [FTH.9]. Thus, categories facilitate the changing nature of meaning in history and constitute, as Houlgate maintains,

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8. Hegel's view on categories differs from that of his predecessor the German Enlightenment thinker, Immanuel Kant. It was Kant's belief that we create categories to make sense of our perceptions. Therefore, the world as we know it is compiled of layer upon layer of human interpretation, whereas, for Hegel, the structure of our conceptual categories is innately linked with the world itself.

“the changing *historical* preconditions of knowledge” [FTH.9].<sup>9</sup> Those historical changes in conceptual presuppositions — albeit they perpetually alter the way one finds meaning in the world — are what allow the truth to become gradually more apparent and accessible [FTH.9].

It follows that if the way one gains access to the truth is through our ever changing conceptual categories, significant changes within civilizations (such as major shifts in thinking, revolutions and uprisings or new ideologies taking root within a society) can be seen not just as contingent occurrences that historically arise, but as the result of fundamental changes in our conceptual categories. Accordingly, all major differences between civilizations are reducible to the differences in the categories they employ, which directly affect the way they govern their lives [FTH.10].

Following immediately from this, one understands that *all of history is the history of thought*, insofar as historical events are determined by human *acts*.<sup>10</sup> Historical events and political struggles can be understood, not by examining what historical figures did, but by analyzing what they thought.<sup>11</sup> R.G. Collingwood, in his book *The Idea of History*, attributes to Hegel the proposition that the history of the world consists only of the history of human life, more specifically that of rational life, the life of thinking beings.<sup>12</sup> By this, Hegel means that everything that happened in history takes place in conjunction with

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9. Original italics.

10. Robin G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford University Press, 1956), 115.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 116.

the will of man.<sup>13</sup> So, if history is filled with human actions, the “will of man” can be seen as man’s thought expressing itself outwardly in action.<sup>14</sup> Collingwood’s interpretation of Hegel continues: “Thinking...is always done by a determinate person in a determinate situation; and every historical character in every historical situation thinks and acts as rationally as that person in that situation *can* think and act.”<sup>15</sup> Collingwood’s interpretation speaks for itself, so I will add just a few comments. Hegel reduces human beings to nothing but the activity of producing and determining their identity and themselves [FTH.21]. While the geographical and historical contexts into which an individual is born facilitate the conditions from which one must start, they do not necessarily fix what a person can become [FTH.21]. What does change, though, is the development of self-understanding. As human beings become more conscious of themselves as self-determining beings, then the very nature of social, political and cultural spheres, which as determinate beings we create and inhabit, is transformed [FTH.21]. Therefore, fundamental historical advancements, according to Hegel, can be attributed to the growing awareness of potential for self-determination, which in turn enables us to *become* more freely self-determining in history [FTH.21].

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13. Ibid. A distinction should be made here between changes that are determined by humans and changes that are a result of the natural world – the underlying difference being that, according to Hegel, human developments can be attributed to changes in conceptual categories, whereas the natural world is always governed by the same laws.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.



What fuels this process forward, within a particular social milieu, is human passions. It is through the desires of people that history is marked with wars, political endeavors and social activities. So, although freedom is perpetually unfolding, maturing and revealing itself, it is not without great sacrifice and loss that this occurs. Hegel uses an analogy of a “slaughter-bench” to illustrate this point: “But even regarding History as the slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of States, and the virtue of individuals have been victimized — the question involuntarily arises — to what principle, to what final aim these enormous sacrifices have offered.”<sup>16</sup> From this quotation, it is quite clear that Hegel acknowledged the fact that history does not advance smoothly. However, the atrocities that occurred in history were necessary for the rational advance of freedom. His concern was to show where in historical upheavals and bloodshed progress does actually reveal itself and to what degree revolutions, genocide and war were the horrific, tragic, yet necessary result of advances in political, religious and social self-understanding [FTH.29].

If history can be explained as the unfolding of freedom, then the purpose of the so-called dialectic is to actualize freedom. The Hegelian dialectic has, at its roots, the principle of contradiction.<sup>17</sup> Francis Fukuyama, philosopher and author of *The End of History and the Last Man*, uses the basis of the Socratic dialogue to illustrate this point:

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16. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 21.

17. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press, 1992), 61.

[I]n such discussions...the less self-contradictory side wins, or, if both are found in the course of the conversation to be self-contradictory, then a third position emerges free of the contradictions of the initial two. But this third position may itself contain new, unforeseen contradictions, thereby giving rise to yet another conversation and another resolution.<sup>18</sup>

How are we to understand this passage? First, we must understand Hegel's notion of negation, so that we can see how it plays a role in the Socratic dialogue. Hegel challenged the entire rationalist tradition with his belief that contradictions and negations are necessary conditions for the truth. The rationalist, classical logician discarded contradictions as a means for unearthing the truth, whereas Hegel looked at the whole spectrum, including contradictions, in order to reach any kind of conclusion. It was his belief that contradictions do not bring arguments to a halt; rather, they are the moving force of truth. Returning to Fukuyama's example of a dialogue, one may see history as a dialogue between civilizations, whereby an inherent contradiction within a particular civilization erupts at a certain point in time and is then superseded by another civilization. However, each succeeding civilization retains something from the previous one. Take for example, the progression of Ancient Greece, the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages. While the Roman Empire negated Ancient Greece, it still retained something from Ancient Greece. In turn, the Roman Empire ultimately

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18. Ibid.

collapsed because of its internal contradiction, which, according to Hegel, was the establishment of universal equality of all men, without recognition of rights and inner human dignity.<sup>19</sup> The collapse of the Roman Empire paved the way for the rise of the Middle Ages, but by virtue of absorbing the Roman Empire, this period also absorbed Ancient Greece. So, there were Greco-Roman themes, ideals and assumptions inherent in the Middle Ages.<sup>20</sup> This means that every concept, every theory and every state of consciousness contains, within itself, its own contradictions and inner tensions which will eventually play themselves out, making way for new concepts, theories and states of consciousness. In summary, nothing is ever discarded according to this model. Negations are always informing, creating and contributing to a particular time period. When those tensions erupt, we are propelled into a new era, which subsequently preserves both the good and the bad of its predecessor.

According to Hegel, if Spirit's consciousness of its freedom is the driving force of history, it rationally follows that the actualization of this freedom is the final purpose of the world. However, this does not mean that we simply become conscious of Spirit or gain a more accurate picture of our own progression. Rather, it means that the whole process whereby we produce ourselves must be brought into our consciousness [FTH.34]. To reach this full state of consciousness, we must not only recognize the process whereby we produce ourselves, but also recognize that this

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19. Ibid.

20. German philosopher Gottlieb Fichte explained Hegel's triad in terms of a thesis, antithesis and synthesis. If the antithesis absorbs what is best in the thesis, then what is left from this is synthesis.

process is *itself* the process of understanding how we produce ourselves [FTH.34]. It is only through retrospective reflection on our history and recognition of what we have *become*, through understanding what we *are*, i.e., self-determining beings, that full consciousness can be achieved [FTH.34].

The terminal point of this continuum of progress and regression is derived from full self-consciousness. According to Fukuyama's interpretation, this terminal point or, to put it in Hegel's language, the *end of history*, was embedded in his belief that the dialectic would come to an end with the achievement of absolute self-consciousness and the implementation of liberal ideals in the world political scene.<sup>21</sup> The principles of equality and liberty, which were at the core of the American Revolution in North America and later in the French Revolution in Europe, ultimately led to the emergence of the modern liberal state. So even if after the battle of Jena in 1806, these principles were not accepted and implemented worldwide, the manifestation of these principles, in concrete form, was nevertheless the climatic point in world history. This is because liberal societies were not bound to the "contradictions" that had been inherent in earlier forms of social organizations; subsequently, the historical dialectic was brought to a close.<sup>22</sup>

By declaring the end of history, Hegel was not claiming that there would be an end to events arising out of our social, political, ideological realities. He was, however, stating that although the future may hold changes, these changes would come without further development in our

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21. Fukuyama, *Last Man*, 64.

22. *Ibid.*

level of rationality and freedom, thus no longer bringing forth any historical significance. Furthermore, history cannot end in the future because the future is a closed book to us; history *must* end in the present because, quite simply, nothing else has happened.<sup>23</sup> “The future is an object not of knowledge but of hopes and fears,” as Hegel put it, “and hopes and fears are not history.”<sup>24</sup> Consequently, we are all a product of our specific times and places. Although we may appreciate philosophical ideas, aesthetics, values and political ideas from past ages, we can no longer, in our contemporary society, generate that same fundamental impact of these historical attributes [FTH.14]. Houlgate presents us with a telling statement that exemplifies Hegel’s view on the matter: “...there can now no longer be any fully-fledged Platonists, Aristotelians, Stoics or Epicureans, because we belong to a different and, in Hegel’s opinion, freer and more sophisticated age” [FTH.14].

The Hegelian conception of history that I have just presented provides a model for understanding the history of art and, particularly, the end of the history of art. In the same respect that history must end in the present because the future is a closed book to us, the history of art *must* end in the present because it is only possible to imagine what the art of the future will be like. Even when we imagine what the future of art holds, our imaginary depiction will be profoundly part of our own time. When we seek to imagine future art forms, what we envision will inevitably take the form of things that *have* come to be, as we only

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23. Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 120.

24. *Ibid.*

have the forms, or in Hegel's language, the categories, we know to give them.<sup>25</sup> This "unintended historical limitation," as Danto refers to it, is further expressed in the following quotation: "The future is a kind of mirror in which we can show only ourselves, though it seems to us a window through which we may see things to come."<sup>26</sup>

To say that the history of art ends in the present because the future is unknown to us, although somewhat obvious, has more significance than it appears. It coincides with the polemical contention that the history of art has, in its truest sense, run its course, that "art, considered in its highest vocation," as Hegel maintained, "is and remains for us a thing of the past."<sup>27</sup> This is not to say that art will no longer continue to be made and celebrated. Art will always continue to be produced, insofar as art is a human activity. However, it can no longer carry the same historical significance that a discipline of its magnitude boasts. Although a certain narrative, namely the history of Western art, has come to an end, the subject of that narrative has not ended.<sup>28</sup> Changes in art can continue, in what Danto unequivocally termed "the post-historical period of art," albeit without development. What constellation of causes brought about this historical

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25. Danto, *Disenfranchisement of Art*, 82.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Danto, *Art in the Historical Present*, 340. Hegel spoke of art as having come to an end in 1828, respectively (with the establishment of the short-lived Nazerene art movement). This, for him, marked the turning point when art began to deal with something outside of itself, thus, transforming itself into something other than conventional art. His prediction, although premature, facilitates the narrative of developing self-consciousness and absolute freedom, which I am putting forth.

28. Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art* (Princeton University Press, 1995), 4.

watershed? What paradigmatic shift could lead to such a climactic historical moment in the art world? To answer these questions, one must, retrospectively, evaluate the gradual progression of linear perspective and optical duplication — the changes that came about in the modern art era — and the subversion of whatever artistic boundaries remained, which ultimately caused the postmodern paroxysm.

Throughout every art period in Western civilization, the framework through which art has functioned, both in terms of how artists created art and the way we have understood and accepted art, is through a certain art theory. Art theories hold together the structure through which art operates. Up until the latter part of the nineteenth century, the reigning art theory had been embedded in that of mimesis, which, as Danto remarks, “served the theoretical purposes of art admirably for several centuries.”<sup>29</sup> The Imitation Theory of Art (IT) was an exceedingly powerful theory, as it acted as an agent of uniformity and injected clarity into a complex domain by superimposing its rules onto the art world.<sup>30</sup> Both Hamlet and Socrates described art as a mirror held up to nature.<sup>31</sup> What the IT strove for was the verisimilitude of nature as depicted in painting, the simulation of perceptual reality. Consequently, the history of art was a progressive model whereby artists strove for perfection of line, colour, texture, space and perspective to create works of art that

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29. Ibid., 29.

30. Arthur C. Danto, “The Artistic Enfranchisement of Real Objects: the Artworld,” in *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, ed. George Dickie, Richard Sclafani and Ronald Robin, 171 (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1977).

31. Danto, “Enfranchisement,” 171.

corresponded to what reality itself presented. By perfecting and refining artistic methods, artists sought to emulate visual experiences equivalent to those furnished by actual objects and scenes.<sup>32</sup> Artistic progress was marked by the decreasing distance between actual pictorial simulations and what perceptual reality itself would present, and this progress was measured in terms of the extent to which the unaided eye could differentiate between the two.<sup>33</sup>

Referring to the Hegelian dialectic, the history of painting can be understood in terms of a gradual, internal development in representational precision and fidelity whereby advances were made in techniques and different modes of painting by means of the dialectic interplay between different art periods. The history of art took on a didactic nature, as each successive art period appropriated discoveries and innovation from previous periods and further manipulated, improved and utilized them. Artists continuously strove towards the stronger illusion of depth provided by the mastery of mathematics and visual techniques of perspective, realistic representation of light and shadow utilized by the accurate use of colour, and the refining of space to create the illusionistic depictions of three-dimensional spatial world on two-dimensional surfaces. The process of developing and perfecting these artistic elements took centuries, as artists gradually became better and better at constructing works of art that mirrored the world they perceived. Consider the major art eras since the sixteenth century — the Renaissance, which was followed by the baroque, which was followed by rococo,

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32. Danto, *Disenfranchisement of Art*, 86.

33. *Ibid.*



which was followed by neoclassicism, which was followed by the romantic, the modern era and finally the postmodern. Each era developed, to a certain degree, in reaction to its predecessor. This corresponds to Hegel's notion of negations; while each era negated its predecessor, each also retained the artistic achievements of its predecessors.

Crucial to this gradual development was the representational power to depict movement. Even before the arrival of motion picture technology, artists had long since developed methods for depicting things in motion.<sup>34</sup> From the depiction of God extending his arm towards Adam in Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*, to a young lady flirtatiously kicking off her shoe at a statue of Cupid in Fragonard's *The Swing*, it is clear that a painting can depict a moving thing without there being any movement. For the viewer, there is an awareness that what is presented to the eye is not moving, but on the basis of optical cues in the painting, it can be inferred that the artist is trying to convey movement. The progressive model of representational art was largely oriented around the imperative to replace inference to that which is equivalent to perceptual reality.<sup>35</sup> This inferential bypass is commonly referred to as "fooling the senses," yet it was limited in its ability to complete sensory reproduction.<sup>36</sup> Without the subtle cues, such as perspective implemented in a depiction of movement, there would be no connectivity between the image presented and the action implied. These limitations could only be overcome by the elimination of inference, facilitated by a transformation of

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34. Ibid., 87.

35. Ibid., 88.

36. Ibid., 89.

the medium. The transformation in question came about in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the technological innovation of cinematography, which mapped out the “significant shift in philosophical and representational issues that are coextensive with technological change.”<sup>37</sup> In 1895, the first public film screening, from the studios of the Lumière Brothers, consisted mainly of moving images from the scenes of everyday life, thus displaying movement for the sake of movement.<sup>38</sup> Cinerama was the catalyst, which, as Danto exclaimed, “hurled *us* through visual space,”<sup>39</sup> and, in so doing, systematically deconstructed the stable theory of representational art and caused the internal breakdown in the previous order of the art world. The advent of motion-picture technology subverted the capacity for illusion and thus forced artists to rethink the nature of painting or to simply become outmoded.<sup>40</sup> It was at this moment in time when the urgent question of what was left for the artist pressed itself onto the art world and provoked the ultimate question: *What is art?* Once art started dealing reflexively with the question of its own existence, it transformed into something that transcended that of visual representation, into something of a philosophical nature, and in doing so, art, as Hegel put it, “passe[d] from the poetry of imaginative ideas to the prose of thought.”<sup>41</sup> This

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37. David Tomas, “An Identity in Crisis: The Artist and New Technologies,” in *Theory Rules: Art as Theory; Theory and Art*, ed. Jody Berland, Will Straw and David Tomas, 197 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press and YYZ Books, 1996).

38. Danto, *Disenfranchisement of Art*, 96.

39. *Ibid.* (Original italics.)

40. Danto, *Art in the Historical Present*, 340.

41. Leon Rosenstein, “The End of Art Theory,” *Humanitas* 15, no. 1 (2002): 32–60.

philosophizing of art draws on a certain kind of self-consciousness, not unlike the Hegelian notion of a growing self-awareness of the Idea of freedom. Through the philosophical probing of the question of *what art is*, the eventual emancipation of art became a reality.

The invention of motion-picture technology was the advent that eventually caused the collapse of the old art order. However, other factors within the social milieu of bourgeois encroachment, the failure of the romantic art period to preserve a progressive role for art, and the growing influence of market and mass society on the art world also played a role in the shaping of the modern art theory.<sup>42</sup> While, on the one hand, the modern turn facilitated the growing consciousness of artistic freedom, by breaking free from the rigidity of IT, it also carried within its own theoretical processes contradictions that, from a Hegelian perspective, undermined and further led to its demise. An internal conflict erupted between the modernistic insistence of purifying art of anything external or extraneous to the art object, the medium (in order to avoid contamination with mass society and culture) and the imperative to sell their work for the highest price, thus conforming to the capitalist ideal.<sup>43</sup> In addition, by the twentieth century, modernist art had become even more complex and divided as distinctions between “high art” and “low art” permeated into modernist theory.<sup>44</sup> Exemplified by art critic, Clement Greenberg, conservative elitism became the residual attitude of high modernism. A

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42. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn*, Critical Perspectives (New York: The Guilford Press, 1997), 126.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid., 128.

private language and unique artistic style established by those belonging to the former category, among whom a sense of genius and purity of vision often caused feelings of alienation from the masses.<sup>45</sup> High modernist art can be viewed as the pinnacle of the artist — more specifically, the *male* artist, as master, capable of artistic genius and the bastion of refined, elite taste.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, the avant-garde movements, which advocated experimentalism and repudiated the mimesis model, coexisted in conflict with the bourgeois “institution of art” whereby the commoditization of art as a tool for political legitimation caused much controversy within the splintered spheres of the art world.<sup>47</sup> Division between “high” and “low” art, the competing manifestos, as well as the not-so-subtle exclusion of women served to strengthen the internal contradictions that were so prevalent during this art period.

The philosophical question of the essential nature of art was the driving force of the modern art era.<sup>48</sup> Modern art sought the negation of traditional aesthetic forms in favour of creating new ones.<sup>49</sup> This shift began with the French impressionists who experimented with natural properties of light to focus on the “single moment,” thus, severing ties with the mimetic model. The autonomy of art, experimentalism and “art for art’s sake” became the focus for modernistic creative modalities, and what ensued was a modernist insurrection, whereby different art

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45. Ibid.

46. Ibid., 129.

47. Ibid.

48. The modernist century began (approximately) in the 1850s to the 1950s.

49. Best, *Postmodern Turn*, 126.

movements undertook the task of finding the *essence* of art by exploring the medium itself. Each individual art movement, or “manifesto,” as Danto refers to it, tried to define the philosophical truth of art while preeminently rejecting other movements that sought to do the same. Each art movement strove to ascend to a new level of consciousness by building on the experimentalism of previous manifestos, while searching for a kind of stipulated definition of the essence of art.<sup>50</sup> The following quotation elucidates this point clearly: “Each of the movements was driven by a perception of the philosophical truth of art: that art is essentially X and that everything other than X is not — or is not essentially — art.”<sup>51</sup> From this quotation one can understand X to indicate what a particular art movement *hoped* was their claim to the essence of art. However, the implosion of the boundaries of art, which reached its apogee in high modernism, proved that none of the boundaries that had previously held the art world together could sustain the onslaught of modernistic art movements. As the boundaries systematically gave way, it became clear that the hope of X could not be realized.

The realization of this truth marks the explosive transition into the postmodern era.<sup>52</sup> There was a sense that art, like a steam engine, had run the end of its track and that there was nothing left for the artist to achieve. Subsequently, all that was left for the postmodern artist, in the face of this downsizing and diminishing new era, was to toy and parody the cultural past. While the postmodern turn in the arts maintained some modernist traditions —

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50. Danto, *After the End of Art*, 30.

51. *Ibid.*, 28.

52. The postmodern turn occurred (approximately) in the late 1950s.

namely, the rejection of realism, mimesis, and linear forms of narrative — it assailed elitism and integrated both “high” and “low” art in its artistic mosaic.<sup>53</sup> Words such as “creativity” and “unique” were discarded, and a more ironic, playful and satirical attitude was adopted.<sup>54</sup> This was brought about by the apprehension that no language, whether it be the language of science, politics or aesthetics had a superior insight or a higher vantage point on perceptual reality.<sup>55</sup> The idiosyncratic obscurities of modernist artists were replaced by postmodern artists speaking out in the language of the everyday — the most available, public and commodified language.<sup>56</sup> Signification, which was a trademark of modernist art works, also saw its demise with the postmodern turn. Instead, postmodern art became more surface-oriented as it repudiated depth, hidden meaning and interpretation.<sup>57</sup> Reality (or unreality, as such) became viewed as an intertextual, multiperspectival social construction of meaning; it left no room for stipulative definitions of art and the “true” meaning of art.<sup>58</sup> The entire structure of modernistic “manifestos” was abandoned, as a dedifferentiating approach to art gave rise to a pluralistic art culture. Boundaries between artist and spectator and among different artistic forms, genres and styles melted into one another.

The modern project had overseen an entwining of artist and their respective work: the unique vision of the

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53. Best, *Postmodern Turn*, 130.

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*, 133.

57. *Ibid.*, 130.

58. *Ibid.*

artist manifesting in a new form of artistic creativity. Conversely, those who followed the postmodern turn abandoned the modernistic notions of the creative genius, originality, authenticity and themes of selfhood.<sup>59</sup> Instead, they embraced the task of rearranging old art forms while utilizing readily available materials for this undertaking. Not only did postmodern art cease to seek out new materials and “manifestos,” it also saw a trend towards the valorization of everyday objects and commercial culture. The utilization of such everyday “life” materials for artistic purposes is exemplified by Robert Rauschenberg, who created art out of a compilation of debris from consumer and media society. Such works included, for example, his *Monogram*, which was essentially a stuffed goat standing in a tire on top of a collage of everyday objects. Similarly, Jasper Johns continued the postmodern assault on high art – in order to integrate mass culture into the art world – by developing themes of distance and detachment in his artwork.<sup>60</sup>

Johns’s successor, Andy Warhol, pushed this celebration of noumenality further still. While Johns created representations of objects from everyday life, such as sculpting beer cans out of bronze, Warhol reveled in the art of appropriation. His art tended towards simulacra, representations of representations, effectually causing a ripple of debate among art scholars and artists alike. His most notorious and perplexing work is that of his 1964 *Brillo Box*. The art piece in question was a perfectly ordinary box of soap pads, and, like Duchamp’s *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, it does not possess any interesting

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59. Ibid., 133.

60. Ibid., 171.

perceptual difference that would render it a piece of art, nor could one distinguish it from any other Brillo box that could be found in a supermarket at the time. Duchamp, in 1917, shocked the art world with his *Fountain*, which was nothing more than an ordinary urinal. In presenting the art world with *Brillo Box*, one can see Warhol following in Duchamp's footsteps. However, Duchamp's *Fountain* raised associations with some of the most heavily defended boundaries in modern society (such as the difference between the sexes), while *Brillo Box*, in contrast, did not tap into such subject matter that was considered "taboo."<sup>61</sup> *Brillo Box* is "public, bland, obvious, and uninteresting"; it was arguably void of signification and hidden meaning.<sup>62</sup> The banality of *Brillo Box* forces us to contemplate what constitutes a work of art and a non-work of art when there are no interesting perceptual differences between them. In order to answer this question, one must address it philosophically, as it is clear that perceptual grounds alone will not suffice. Not only did *Brillo Box* mark the disintegration of distinctions between artist and spectator, artwork and spectator and art and reality, but it also did so without any perceptual cues. The question of its own existence *as an art object* is brought about not by sense experience, but by *thought*. What Warhol illuminates is that there is no specific criterion for art or how it must be. As Danto remarks, "all art is equally and indifferently art."<sup>63</sup>

What stops works of art, such as *Brillo Box* or *Fountain*, from collapsing into the real and mundane objects they are

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61. Arthur C. Danto, *Philosophizing Art* (University of California Press, 1999), 75.

62. Danto, *Philosophizing Art*, 75.

63. Danto, *After the End of Art*, 34.



is a particular art theory, namely, postmodern art theory, which examines, explains and theorizes about the current status of art within this postmodern paradigm. The way the audience internalizes and accepts art *as* art is through the framework of this theory. It proclaims that a canvas splattered in paint, a single brushstroke circumscribed by an empty background, a photograph of a photograph of a photograph, a mundane and ordinary object thrust under the harsh lighting of an art gallery are, in actual fact, art. If we reflexively look upon the history of art, it becomes clear that postmodern art theory could not have come about at any other point in history other than now. To imagine a urinal presented as art to the patrons of painters during the Renaissance is absurd. Postmodern theory is only possible given the history of art and the way art has evolved from that of a visual spectacle to that of a philosophical nature.

The true philosophical discovery that emerged in the postmodern paradigm, which enabled full artistic enfranchisement, is that there is no one way art has to be.<sup>64</sup> This discovery came about after the failure of modern art to maintain a definitive, unifying function for art. Modern art can be viewed as *art about art*, and it concerns a philosophical investigation into the very nature of art itself. Postmodern art, on the other hand, can be seen as *art for the sake of art*, and it concerns the acceptance of art as a nothing more or less than art, and thus it is not bound to any definitions, genres, universal rules or progressive history. Although the Hegelian dialectic is called upon to help understand how the postmodern paradigm came

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64. Ibid.

about, postmodern art is without a history. In the same respect that Hegel believed that history ended with the coming of self-consciousness (and subsequently the manifestation of freedom), art too ends with the becoming and awareness of its own philosophy.<sup>65</sup> Postmodernism, with all of its chaos, uncertainty, discontinuity, indeterminacy and boundless artistic freedom, marks the beginning of a new narrative of art.

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65. Danto, *Disenfranchisement of Art*, 107.

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