BIRTH BY CONCEPTION: COMING TO TERMS WITH HEgel’S PHILOSOPHY THROUGH STEINBERG’S READING OF JASPER JOHNS

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My paper will examine two historically removed thinkers: philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel and recent art historian and critic Leo Steinberg. In 1972 Steinberg published his most cited work, Other Criteria. In it, Steinberg records the initial depression and bewilderment he felt in 1958 upon attending a Jasper Johns show. He was anxious in particular over Johns’ Target with Four Faces and what it foretold for all art. What distressed him was what he saw as an abandonment of the visual for the conceptual. Steinberg as of yet was unwilling to make that sacrifice. He finally found reconciliation by viewing the painting in the terms /here/ and /there/. In this moment, painting itself was resurrected for Steinberg. This was done through the ability not to see anew, but in fact read for the first time. The philosophy of Hegel is notoriously abstract and complex. In his Phenomenology of the Mind he argues that the feeling of confidence given by immediately intelligible “common sense” is in fact a false confidence, and the surest indication that one is deluded. In order to overcome the severe limitation of this sense certainty, Hegel drastically inverts some of our most common values, such as substance and intrinsic identity. Hegel argues that truth and identity can be grasped only insofar as they are mediated within a total system of conceptual oppositions. It is only through recourse to such a system of oppositions and inversion that Steinberg, after some delay, was able to perceive the value and significance of Johns’ work. Both thinkers find reconciliation in language, literally coming to terms with the other. My paper explores what happens when image is treated as text, and life as language. Steinberg’s reading of Johns’ work illustrates what Hegel discusses in Phenomenology of the Mind, and more specifically, his famous master-slave dialect. I examine Hegel through Steinberg’s anxiety and subsequent term implementation. Respectively, these two thinkers saw art and philosophy born through conceptualization. Hegel posited that truth existed in the friction between two opposing terms and Steinberg saw art exist in this same place. As the implementation of terms revitalized the art of Jasper Johns, so too can Steinberg’s experience and vocabulary revitalize Hegel’s philosophy.