

# Symposium: Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*\*

## Internal Beauty

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In the title essay of *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* Arthur Danto describes two dominant strains of the philosophy of art in its Platonic beginnings: one that art is dangerous, and thus subject to political censorship or control, and the other that art exists at several removes from the ordinary reality, impotent to effect any meaningful change in the human world.<sup>1</sup> These two ways of understanding art, really two charges laid at art's door, seem contradictory, he writes, until one realizes that the second is a philosophical response to the first. In a "kind of warfare between philosophy and art" philosophy sees art as a rival, as a challenger to the supremacy of reason over the minds of men. Thus Danto describes the premise advanced in Book X of the *Republic* that art is mimesis, or that of *The Ion* that the artist lacks knowledge of what he does, as components of a powerfully disabling theory of art, designed not so much to come to terms with the essence of art as to neutralize its power through metaphysical exile, denying art causal efficacy or epistemic validity in the real world. And the history of aesthetics, in Danto's view, continues this disenfranchisement, whether in the Kantian ephemeralization of art as an object of disinterested judgment, outside the realm of human practical and political concerns, or in the Hegelian "takeover" of art, in which it is demoted as an inadequate form of philosophy.

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\*Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Chicago & LaSalle: Open Court, 2003). All further references to this book will be given in the text.

Within modernism, the concept of artistic beauty played a powerful role in such disenfranchisement. On the one hand, when attributed to art as an essential feature, beauty suggested that art stood in a harmonious and affirmative relation to a society. If beauty were an unqualified value, then art, to which beauty was attributed as a defining goal, must stand in that same positive relation to society as well. On the other hand, treating beauty as the point or purpose of art called for forms of evaluation and interpretation in which aesthetic judgment was primary, when perhaps what the art represented asked for a different kind of engagement – moral, political – instead. Hence when the first avant-garde abjured beauty in their works – substituting ugliness, obscenity, ridicule, and so on – they both denied their art a role as an affirmative expression of a society they held in contempt, and demanded a response to art in other than aesthetic terms. In a letter describing the aims of his fellow Viennese Actionists, whose performances in the 1960s deployed, in combination, such anti-aesthetic elements as excrement, urine, blood, simulated sex, self-mutilation, animal carcasses and entrails, Otto Muehl wrote:

Blasphemy, obscenity, charlatanism, sadistic excess, orgies and the aesthetics of the gutter – these are our moral expedients against stupidity, satiety, intolerance, provincialism, dullness, against the cowardice to bear responsibility, against the sack that eats at the front and shits behind.<sup>2</sup>

Like their Dada forebears, the Actionists waged their own symbolic war against a Post-War society that they saw as conservative, repressive, and, in denying its recent past, corrupt, by attacking the markers of that society's sense of its own refinement and civilization, transforming art from a vehicle of moral, cultural, and spiritual elevation into performances that could not fail to elicit revulsion and disgust.

In *The Abuse of Beauty* Danto sees this decoupling of art and beauty in the first and neo avant-gardes as marking an advance in the philosophy of art, even if it had been motivated by decidedly non-philosophical ends. Danto shows, however, that explaining how such an advance was possible requires not only philosophical analysis of the concept of beauty, but a historical archeology of attitudes toward beauty in the past. Only against a background in which beauty was associated with goodness, and taken to be the point and purpose of art, could such anti-aesthetic gestures amount to any sort of political or cultural critique. Danto's historical achievement lies in his explanation of the veneration, degradation, and subsequent fortunes of beauty's place within the art of modernism. But his philosophical achievement is showing how we can both recognize the avant-garde insight that beauty is no part of the essence or definition of art, yet see how there is a form of specifically *artistic* beauty that is not continuous with natural

beauty. Armed with that insight, Danto explores how beauty's relationship to art, and art's relationship *through beauty* to life, can be better understood.

The core philosophical distinction of *The Abuse of Beauty* is between "external" and "internal" beauty.<sup>3</sup> One way of describing the distinction is to say that external beauty is the sensuous beauty that is paradigmatically discovered in nature where not much more is required to see beauty than to be able to see at all. And internal beauty, by contrast, is the beauty that belongs exclusively to the domain of art, wherein the beauty is bound up with a work's content. Here, to understand a work of art is to understand the constitutive role beauty plays in it, to recognize how the beauty of the work is explained by the work's meaning. Whether internal or external, the beauty is phenomenologically the same (one is not distinguished from the other through, say, drawing on different perceptual capacities). It is their functions that differ. Specifically, only internal beauty is intended to play a role in conveying a work's meaning. So Danto movingly discusses Robert Motherwell's *Elegies for the Spanish Republic* as "visual meditations on the death of a form of life," or of a political ideal, in which beauty serves to transform what may have been raw grief into something like sorrow or "a kind of abiding moral memory" (p.111). Here, the beauty of these works is not something incidental to them, but, rather, constitutive. To interpret these works is in part to offer a reason for why that beauty was what their meaning required.

But one could also characterize the distinction as operating not solely between art and nature but between an artwork and the ordinary object that serves as its material embodiment. In *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* Danto showed that the properties of a work of art are not identical to the properties of the material object with which the work of art is identified.<sup>4</sup> Only certain features of a work of art are carried over from the object that serves as its material embodiment. The boxes that Warhol used to create *Brillo Box* are constructed out of plywood, but their being made of plywood is not a feature of the artwork, it plays no role in its meaning and another material would have functioned just as well. However, the plywood Donald Judd used in many instances to create his minimalist works does bear a meaning; its identity as low-grade construction material is meant, though Judd was in fact an able carpenter, to block associations with artfulness, craft, and uniqueness, making it part of his artwork and not just a feature of the ordinary object in which the artwork is embodied. But just as only some features of an ordinary object are features of the artwork with which it is associated, so only sometimes does the external beauty of an object become the internal beauty of its associated artwork. The shape and surface of the porcelain urinal that became Duchamp's *Fountain* was no doubt aesthetically pleasing in a way, but whatever degree of beauty the artifact of turn-of-the-century plumbing possesses, that beauty is irrelevant

to the meaning of *Fountain*, as it is to the idea of his “readymades” generally. There, beauty is not a feature that carries over from ordinary object to art. It is, as well, a property of the Cor Ten steel of Richard Serra’s sculptures that in rusting it acquires an often beautiful patina, but we still need to ask, given the imposing and sometimes threatening power of the artworks, whether the beauty of the steel is also a feature of the artwork the steel entered into the creation of. Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial would have been naturally, that is externally, beautiful, whatever its meaning turned out to be. But the beauty of the form – produced in part by its horizontal orientation, the way, as one approaches, it only gradually comes in to view – is in fact internal, explained by its meaning, its disavowal of any triumphal message or political expression to reflect in the first instance on those whose names are inscribed. The black granite serves as a mirror in which visitors see themselves and others reflected, their mourning or remembrance joined. One can gain a sense of the integration of the surface’s beauty with the work’s meaning by considering what would have been the effect had Secretary of the Interior James Watt – who had the authority to block the realization of Lin’s design – been successful in trying to force white stone to be substituted for black. Finally, Robert Irwin created a series of very beautiful installations consisting of transparent scrims hung throughout a series of interconnecting chambers, each lit by colored fluorescent lamps and natural light, overlapping each other in constantly changing configurations, with corresponding changes in hue, according to a viewer’s movement through the space. The ethereal beauty of the work, in which color seemed to appear as if without material support, could have been experienced as external to the work, for, no doubt, one often sees minimal incarnations of this in the effect of light from different sources projected on white walls. But, in truth, the beauty functions internally, as a component of the work’s meaning, bound up with its reflection on color, space, contingency, and the embodied nature of vision.

So it follows from the conceptual distinction between internal and external beauty that there can be ordinary objects with no beauty embodying works of art without beauty, beautiful objects that embody works of art possessed of no beauty themselves, and beautiful objects that embody beautiful works of art.<sup>5</sup> My question is whether the internal/external distinction with reference to beauty is different in kind from internal/external distinctions that might be made of those features of a work that allow a similar indecision as to where – art or associated object – they should be assigned. Does the distinction between internal beauty and external beauty track the distinction between features of an art work and features of the object in which it is embodied?

A different way to formulate that question is to ask whether, in Danto’s view, it is ever possible for a work of art to be beautiful without that beauty being internal. For internal beauty does not exist except in relation to a

meaning or interpretation and, in Danto's theory, it is precisely an interpretation or the possession of meaning that distinguishes features of an object from features of its associated artwork. So, is beauty different in kind from other features that may variably belong to artwork and ordinary object? It appears that in Danto's theory to speak of internal beauty is just to speak of artistic beauty. Works of art may possess internal beauty but, *qua works of art*, cannot have external beauty as well. Of course, an artist may intend that her work be only incidentally beautiful, beautiful without that being relevant to the work's meaning, but then being only incidentally beautiful is part of the work's meaning, a form of internal beauty. This is just as a work created with the intention that it not have any meaning has, by that fact, a meaning nonetheless.

In any case, if the distinction between internal and external beauty is a special case of, and follows from, the broader distinction between features of an artwork and features of its associated "mere real thing," then why does Danto argue for the more specific distinction when it is already contained within the broader one? I suspect it is because one is unlikely to see the beauty of a work of art as only incidental to it, as a feature just of the material embodiment of the artwork, not an intended feature of the artwork itself. That is, while we are comfortable with the beauty of nature being wholly a product of contingency and chance, i.e. there without any functional, even evolutionary, end, we tend to take the beauty of a work as always part of the work – and it is that tendency, which distorts both art and beauty, to which Danto's distinction is offered as diagnosis and cure. At the inauguration of Rachel Whiteread's memorial to the Austrian victims of the Holocaust Simon Wiesenthal warned those assembled that the site "should not be beautiful but should hurt." I doubt one would be tempted to see as beautiful the cast concrete mausoleum-like structure, composed of four walls bearing impressions of 65,000 identical books with their spines turned inward, but Wiesenthal's injunction stemmed from the recognition that the search for an aesthetic identity would imply the memorial stood in a relationship of harmony to its context – to the culture represented by the surrounding elegant baroque buildings – rather than as a standing indictment of what that culture had allowed (an indictment the squat structure's emphatic lack of integration with its context implies). Finding beauty in that work would be to misunderstand the work's identity, just as describing as beautiful a composition such as Krzysztof Penderecki's *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima* – a screeching, harrowing, unforgiving meditation on militarism – would be to fail to grasp its meaning.

Danto says little about what makes a work beautiful, about the phenomenology or conditions of beauty, but his theory is strongly realist, construing beauty not as an attribution of judgments of taste but as a feature of a work constraining the truth of interpretations and judgments made of it. As such, the beauty of a work of art is in a sense invariant from

observer to observer and, when present and of the internal sort, is explained in some respect by what the artist intended the work to be. “Beauty is really as obvious as blue,” Danto writes, “one does not have to work at seeing it when it is there” (p. 89). It follows that one can be mistaken about the beauty of a work: A viewer who finds Matisse’s *Blue Nude* of 1907 beautiful has made as much an error in description as if he thought it realistically depicted a figure with an unfortunate complexion. Such a judgment would not be a failure of taste but a failure of true description. Danto diagnoses such errant responses as roundabout expressions of praise for what is in fact a kind of artistic excellence or profundity but not an achievement that should be cashed out in aesthetic terms: “the mistake is to believe that artistic goodness is identical with beauty and that the perception of artistic goodness is the aesthetic perception of beauty” (p. 35). In this Danto must be right; indeed, the term “beautiful” is often extended to describe almost anything that pleases us. But to retire as linguistically imprecise the notion of “artistic beauty” in such cases, in favor of “artistic excellence,” raises the question of why beauty should have come to be such a default concept of artistic appraisal in the first place, when, as Danto remarks, “Most of the world’s art is not beautiful, nor was the production of beauty part of its purpose.”

Another important question is how Danto’s theory conceives of cultural differences in what is thought to be beautiful. There may be little variation in such evolutionarily adaptive preferences for beautiful faces and body types – preferences associated in some studies with the perception of symmetry – but can we say the same thing of painted landscapes and abstract forms? While some readers may charge Danto with a kind of aesthetic imperialism, making our form of beauty out to be everywhere and at all times the same, I don’t think this is, or at least needs to be, part of his theory. For he need only be committed to the idea that when beauty is internal to the work it is a product of the artist endowing the work with what she and her viewers judge to be beautiful, with how in their culture, time, place, and so on, beauty appears.

In Danto’s view, internal beauty plays the role in a work of art that he calls “inflector”: a feature of the work intended to dispose viewers, through engaging their feelings or emotions, to respond in a certain way to what the work displays. Historically, the most important inflector has been beauty – used, e.g. to convey a subject’s desirability, to distance and universalize what it represents, or to imply its subject’s moral worth. But Danto mentions other inflectors as well, some of which supplanted beauty in the anti-aesthetics of the avant-garde: disgust, outrageousness, eroticism, silliness, even – as in the readymade – aesthetic indifference.

With the concept of an inflector Danto means to distinguish between apprehending the intellectual content of a work and being disposed to respond to that content in a certain way. But it is not clear how much

knowledge is already built into those emotional or attitudinal responses that inflectors invoke. Does the beauty with which a portrait is rendered *naturally* dispose us to respond to the person depicted as if she had other valuable qualities as well? Or does that sort of response depend on a belief about beauty of which, through experience, one is easily disabused? The perception of beauty may be innate, but how it shapes our response to those things it is used to depict may be learned. In other cases, the recognition of an inflector itself may only be learned. Outrageousness of the sort Dada used as an inflector, for example, would seem to affect only those who have a developed sense of propriety, a set of beliefs about right and wrong that appear to have been upended. These sorts of beliefs may be universally possessed, but they are not innately possessed. So there may be a distinction between inflectors that depend on a set of subtending beliefs that have to be learned, and those, like beauty and disgust, that operate in a more immediate, less cognitive way.

The question of how variable judgments of beauty are can be restated as a question of how universal the conditions or criteria for a given inflector are. If certain features of a given work make a work beautiful for one audience, will they necessarily make it beautiful for other audiences as well? Rhetorical qualities of speech, to which Danto makes a qualified comparison with inflectors, presume a degree of coordination between speaker and audience, a matching of one's language to one's listeners' knowledge, experience, attitudes, and age. And I wonder whether this means that to see the beauty of some historically distant work requires a kind of historical investigation into what its contemporary audience would have seen as beautiful at that moment – say, the elongated toe of a fifteenth-century Italian woman – just as understanding the meaning of a historically distant work might require knowledge of symbols and stories its intended contemporary audience would have been conversant with as a matter of course. I'm not sure how outrageous it was in his time for Duchamp to draw a mustache on the image of the *Mona Lisa*, not to mention his schoolboy epater in the letters L.H.O.O.Q. But today, with the painting so much a device of pop culture, it may take some historical reconstruction to see Duchamp's gesture as offensive rather than merely comical or a bit of camp. It may be that the operation of certain inflectors, such as beauty, requires no special knowledge of the subject in which they are employed. One may just see a work as beautiful without knowing what the work represents. However, other inflectors, such as abjection or outrageousness, may require that the works in which they are employed be identified for what they represent, seen, as it were, "under a description." When Andreas Serrano was attacked by religious conservatives for a work entitled *Piss Christ*, a photograph of a crucifix immersed in the artist's own urine, some of his defenders suggested that if only the title were withheld, the work could have been seen without controversy as beautiful. Those defenders were employing the kind of

formalist defense Zola made of Edouard Manet against the charge of the painter's *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* being obscene: "the nude woman...is undoubtedly there only to give the artist an opportunity of painting the color of flesh," Zola writes, for Manet constructed his scene only "to obtain an effect of strong contrasts and bold masses," And those who find themselves offended by a painting should recognize that "a head posed against a wall is nothing more than a brush stroke, more or less white, on a surface, more or less grey."<sup>6</sup> One may find Serrano's work beautiful without knowing what it displays. But only with such knowledge can other inflectors come into play, whether to cause outrage, as his critics charged, or to reflect on Christ's abjection, as Serrano's avowed Catholicism implies his intention was.

If the success of a given inflector implies an audience with a certain stock of beliefs, such that what provokes, say, outrage, mockery, disgust, or erotic desire in one context may not do so in another, then the history of art's relationship to its audience could be written as the history of inflectors: A mediaeval period in which a painter's subject calls not for aesthetic delectation but spiritual absorption; an early-modernist period in which seeing a work as beautiful is the operative response; and a later-modernist period in which anti-aesthetics – whether of power, outrage, or anesthetics – reigns. Here we can extend Wölfflin's observation that not every artwork is possible at every time to say that not every artwork can be beautiful at every time – not because at a given moment techniques for producing beauty haven't yet been discovered, but because the possibility of internal beauty presupposes the possibility of historically limited meanings that such beauty is intended to convey. The meaning of a work of art is limited by historical possibility and thus the internal beauty, the beauty that in part constitutes that meaning, is itself available only in certain times.

In any case, a history of such inflectors would include not only how an inflector was meant to work – painting a mustache and beard on a masterpiece would have provoked outrage – but whether a given inflector offered criteria for art at that time at all: Whether it was one of the standard terms in which art would have been judged. When the avant-garde distained beauty for the conciliation toward society that such beauty implied (Danto quotes Max Ernst: "My works of that period were not meant to attract, but to make people scream") it was still taking beauty as a relevant criterion of art, an appropriate lens through which art should be viewed – it just substituted anti-aesthetics for aesthetics. Hence even the anaesthetic quality of Duchamp's readymades implies that the degree of beauty in his work was carefully gauged. In other words, in such anti-aesthetic art, beauty wasn't so much absent as *excluded*, and, in that sense, included as a dimension of the work's meaning. The Vienna Actionist Otto Muehl spoke of "the aesthetics of the gutter," after all, not the irrelevance of aesthetics *per se*.<sup>7</sup>

So when Danto describes the minor role that beauty plays in contemporary art this should be understood, I want to suggest, as meaning not that anti-aesthetics still reigns instead, but that beauty is no longer criterial for art; there is no default relationship that art has toward beauty, the departure from which would entail some expressive end. Of course, beauty may still carry the moral and political implications for which it was an object of the avant-garde's disdain. Danto refers to Sebastiao Selgado's photography, which is taken to be beautiful by almost all who see it, but which raises the moral question of whether it is right to represent refugees and victims of natural disaster and human oppression in such a beautiful form. The beauty of his work – the golden glow reminiscent of Old Master glazing in which he depicts Brazilian gold miners – threatens to present his subjects as universal types, emblems of suffering instead of suffering individuals. Here, the pictures' aesthetic success is their moral failure (and artistic failure if that is contrary to what Selgado intended).

I want to close by suggesting a way in which Danto's idea of internal beauty offers a response to a particular kind of abuse of art in the name of beauty: One of the arguments made in favor of the government's right in specifying what art federal agencies can fund is that these restrictions are no different in kind from the government's obvious prerogative in demanding that what it pays for, say fighter planes, meet its specifications. However, the idea of internal beauty suggests a way in which any simple aesthetic restrictions placed, in funding or support, on works of art, are implicitly restrictions on the work's content, and thus an invitation to constitutional scrutiny. And, if beauty operates by shaping our attitude toward what a work depicts, then a state's mandate that the art it funds be beautiful would clearly be an unconstitutional mandate that the art it funds express particular – or a narrow range of – points of view. So in asking whether a government restriction on expression is content-based or view-point based rather than simply a time, place, manner restriction of the sort that is constitutionally acceptable, we need to ask not just whether the government has demanded that art mean a certain thing, but whether it has demanded that the art look a certain way – for how it looks and how it means are interdependent where internal beauty is considered. In this way Danto doesn't so much argue with those who disclaim beauty as politically neutral where political action is demanded, as meet them head on with a political theory of beauty itself.

Beauty is the object of abuse in his title, borrowed from Rimbaud's poem, and Danto can be seen as saving it from two condemnatory poles of being meaninglessly superficial or meaningful, but politically regressive. But his rescue is both exalting and deflating in relation to beauty: For he is saying that it is much less important for art than we might have thought, but much more important for life. The beauty of an elegy, for example, serves not as the ultimate object of our aesthetic regard, but as a vehicle by which the

meaning of the work can be conveyed: the transformation of raw grief into some sort of endurable sorrow, a form of pain to which one can be reconciled. Here, beauty may not be essential to art but what it can achieve through art may be deeply significant independent of aesthetic considerations. In Danto's thought, to engage with the beauty of a work of art is not to elevate it to a plane of universal and timeless appraisal but to discover how the work's meaning relates to what gives life meaning. In effect, his reflections on beauty continue his ongoing philosophical re-enfranchisement of art – removing beautiful art from the pedestal upon which beautiful things are put and showing how it enters into traffic with a human world.

## Notes

1. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).
2. Otto Muehl, letter to Erika Stocker, 1961, in *Von der Aktionsmakerei zum Aktionismus: Wien 1960–1965*, ed. by Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, Kunstmuseum Winterthur and the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh (Klagenfurt: Ritter Verlag, 1988), p. 196.
3. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Open Court: Chicago and La Salle, IL, 2003).
4. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).
5. It is a further question whether there can be beautiful works of art embodied in objects that have no beauty of their own.
6. Zola, *Mon salon. Manet. Écrits sur l'art* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1970).
7. "It's not a question of whether it's full of violence or cruelty," as another Actionist Hermann Nitsch described his work, "it must be aesthetic." Robert Enright, "Hermanneutics: A conversation with Hermann Nitsch," *Border Crossings* 17/2 (1998), 39.