

[...] **The Disappearance of Beauty**

It is a matter of some irony in my own case that while the aesthetics of Pop art opened art up for me to philosophical analysis, aesthetics itself has until now had little to contribute to my philosophy of art. That in part is because my interests have largely been in the philosophical definition of art. The issue of defining art became urgent in the twentieth century when art works began to appear which looked like ordinary objects, as in the notorious case of Marcel Duchamp's readymades. As with the Brillo boxes of Andy Warhol and James Harvey, aesthetics could not explain why one was a work of fine art and the other not, since for all practical purposes they were aesthetically indiscernible: if one was beautiful, the other one had to be beautiful, since they looked just alike. So aesthetics simply disappeared from what Continental philosophers call the 'problematic' of defining art. I must admit this may have been an artefact of the way I set about addressing the problem. Still, aesthetics had been too closely associated with art since it first became a topic for philosophy in ancient times to be entirely disregarded in a definition. And as my experience with the *Brillo Box* demonstrates, the aesthetics of artworks has a place in an account of why they please us, even if it is not much different from the way aesthetics functions in everyday choices – in selecting garments or choosing sexual partners or picking a dog out of a litter or an apple out of a display of apples. There is doubtless a psychology of everyday aesthetics to be worked out, and if there are what one might call laws of aesthetic preference, it would be greatly to our advantage to learn what they are. Intuitively, apple merchants polish pieces of fruit, and give prominence to especially well-formed items. And everyone knows the way cosmetics are employed to make ourselves look more desirable – to make the eyes look larger and the hair shinier and fuller and the lips redder and more moist. But is that the way it is with the aesthetics of works of art? To make them look more attractive to collectors? Or has it some deeper role to play in the meaning of art?

The philosophical conception of aesthetics was almost entirely dominated by the idea of beauty, and this was particularly the case in the eighteenth century – the great age of aesthetics – when apart from the sublime, the beautiful was the only aesthetic quality actively considered by artists and thinkers. And yet beauty had almost entirely disappeared from artistic reality in the twentieth century, as if attractiveness was somehow a stigma, with its crass commercial

implications. Aesthetics was the very substance of artistic experience in Abstract Expressionist culture. But what made paintings 'work' seemed poorly captured by the way beauty had been classically formulated, with reference to balance and proportion and order. 'Beautiful!' itself just became an expression of generalized approbation, with as little descriptive content as a whistle someone might emit in the presence of something that especially wowed them. So it was no great loss to the discourse of art when the early Logical Positivists came to think of beauty as bereft of cognitive meaning altogether. To speak of something as beautiful, in their view, is not to describe it, but to express one's overall admiration. And this could be done by just saying 'Wow' – or rolling one's eyes and pointing to it. Beyond what was dismissed as its 'emotive meaning', the idea of beauty appeared to be cognitively void – and that in part accounted for the vacuity of aesthetics as a discipline, which had banked so heavily on beauty as its central concept. In any case it seemed to have so little to do with what art had become in the latter part of the century that what philosophical interest art held could be addressed without needing to worry over much about it – or without needing to worry about it at all.

Another Look at Beauty

Things began to change somewhat in the 1990s. Beauty was provocatively declared to be the defining problem of the decade by the widely admired art-writer Dave Hickey, and this was hailed as an exciting thought. My sense is that it was exciting less because of beauty itself, than because beauty was proxy for something that had almost disappeared from most of one's encounters with art, namely enjoyment and pleasure. In 1993 when Hickey's essay was published, art had gone through a period of intense politicization, the high point of which was the 1993 Whitney Biennial, in which nearly every work was a shrill effort to change American society. Hickey's prediction did not precisely pan out. What happened was less the pursuit of beauty as such by artists than the pursuit of the idea of beauty, through exhibitions and conferences by critics and curators who, perhaps inspired by Hickey, thought it time to have another look at beauty.

A good example to consider is an exhibition that took place at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, in October 1999. In celebration of the museum's fiftieth anniversary, two curators – Neil Benezra and Olga Viso – organized an exhibition called 'Regarding Beauty: Perspectives on Art since 1950'. In 1996 the same two curators had mounted an apparently antithetical exhibition titled 'Dissonant Themes in the Art of the 1990s'. Only three years separate the two shows, but the contrast is sharp enough to have raised a question of whether there had not been some artistic turning point in this narrow interval – a hairpin turn in the *Kunstwollen* – and even a reappraisal of the social function of art.

Dissonance had been the favoured ambition for art for most of the preceding century. The shift from dissonance to beauty could hardly appear more extreme.

Olga Viso told me that it was the fact that many who saw the first show remarked to her on how beautiful many of the 'dissonant' works struck them, that inspired her to put together a show just of art that was expressly made with beauty in mind. But if in fact the dissonance in contemporary art turned out to have been compatible with the works' being beautiful, dissonance could not have been quite so anti-aesthetic as the term and the spirit it expresses suggested. If, that is to say, the works from 'Distemper' were found beautiful, they were probably not that different from the works in 'Regarding Beauty' after all, and in fact that turned out to be the case. My own view [...] is that the beauty of the works in the earlier show would have been incidental rather than integral to their meaning, as was supposed to be the case in the second show. But still it would be there. By 'integral' I will mean that the beauty is internal to the meaning of the work.

Consider, for illustrative purposes, the notorious example of Marcel Duchamp's perhaps too obsessively discussed *Fountain*, which, as by now everybody knows, largely consisted of an ordinary industrially produced urinal. Duchamp's supporters insisted that the urinal he anonymously submitted to the Society of Independent Artists in 1917 was meant to reveal how *lovely* this form really was – that abstracting from its function, the urinal looked enough like the exemplarily beautiful sculpture of Brancusi to suggest that Duchamp might have been interested in underscoring the affinities. It was Duchamp's patron, Walter Arensberg, who thought – or pretended to think – that disclosing the beauty was the point of *Fountain* – and Arensberg was a main patron of Brancusi as well.

Now Duchamp's urinal may indeed have been beautiful in point of form and surface and whiteness. But in my view, the beauty, if indeed there, was incidental to the work, which had other intentions altogether. Duchamp, particularly in his readymades of 1915–17, intended to exemplify the most radical dissociation of aesthetics from art. 'A point which I very much want to establish is that the choice of these "readymades" was never dictated by aesthetic delectation', he declared retrospectively in 1961. 'The choice was based on a reaction of visual indifference with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste ... in fact a complete anaesthesia.' Still, Duchamp's supporters were aesthetically sensitive persons, and though they may have gotten his intentions wrong, they were not really mistaken about the fact, incidental or not, that the urinal really could be seen as beautiful. And Duchamp himself had said that modern plumbing was America's great contribution to civilization.

Let's say the supporters believed the beauty internal to the work, while I and many others think it incidental. But there can be no question that the work was,

for many reasons, *dissonant*. So it could appear in an exhibition meant to thematize dissonance – or it could appear just as easily in a show called 'Regarding Beauty'. And this might be quite generally the case, so that we can imagine two distinct exhibitions but containing all and only the same works, the one show illustrating dissonance and the other illustrating beauty. The objects in both shows would in fact be beautiful, and in fact be dissonant. It might be unduly costly to put on two distinct shows, requiring two sets of largely indiscernible objects. One could instead simply have one show called 'Distemper', and then another called 'Regarding Beauty', and have them run one after the other by changing the banners outside the museum. Or we could have two entrances to the same show, those with a taste for dissonance entering through one and those with a thirst for beauty through the other. Mostly, I think, the two bodies of visitors would be satisfied with what they saw – though there would always be the danger of two people meeting inside, having split up since she has a taste for dissonance and he for beauty – and each then wondering if they had made a mistake, walking through the wrong entrance. All sorts of Shakespearean fun can be dreamed up. We could train the docents to say, to one set of visitors, that the beauty (or dissonance) was incidental in the one show and inherent in the other – but this is carrying things too far, since there are cases where beauty is internally related to the dissonance – where the work would not be dissonant if it were not beautiful. This would be the case with the two artists most closely associated with conservative attacks against the National Endowment of the Arts – Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano.

Readers will object that I am simply indulging my imagination and letting it run wild. We all know that there are plenty of dissonant works that are not even incidentally beautiful, and plenty of beautiful works without any dissonant aspect at all. Can we not just work with clear-cut cases? The answer perhaps is No, and explaining why will be one of the merits of this book [*The Abuse of Beauty*, 2003], if the explanation is sound. Meanwhile, it will be of some value to recognize that the connection between *Fountain* and the particular urinal that Duchamp appropriated is pretty close to that between Warhol's *Brillo Box* and the Brillo carton designed by James Harvey. It was the aesthetics of the latter that got me so interested in the former, which had no aesthetics to speak of, other than what it appropriated from Harvey's boxes. But then Harvey's boxes had none of the philosophical depth of Warhol's, for much the same reason that the urinal manufactured by Mott Iron Works had none of the philosophical – and artistic! – power of *Fountain*, which after all helped transform the history of art. But it would be questionable whether the aesthetic power of the urinals – which were designed to be attractive, the way the Brillo cartons were – belongs to *Fountain* as a work of art at all. For that matter, the dissonance of *Fountain* is not

a property of urinals as such, which are perfectly straightforward fittings for bathrooms. In any case, there is a metaphysical question in distinguishing between *Fountain* and the urinal it consisted of, not altogether different from distinguishing between a person and his or her body.

Born of the Spirit and Born Again

Since I am a philosopher with a known involvement with the art world, I found myself invited to several of the conferences convened to discuss beauty, and I wrote a number of essays as well. The first time I had to confront the question of 'Whatever Happened to Beauty?' – a conference sponsored by the Art History Department at the University of Texas in Austin in 1993 – I found myself looking into Hegel's great work on aesthetics. Ever since I had begun to write on the subject of the End of Art, I found myself consulting Hegel, who of course had written on that same subject in the 1820s. His book became a kind of treasury of philosophical wisdom for me, in fact, and whenever I embarked on a subject new to me, I found it valuable to see if Hegel might not have had something to say about it. There were two thoughts, on the very first page of his work, which became deeply stimulating to me when I began to ponder the philosophy of beauty. One was the rather radical distinction he drew between natural and artistic beauty, in the very first lines of his text. And the other was his gloss on why artistic beauty seemed 'superior' to natural beauty. It was because it was 'born of the Spirit and born again'. That was a grand ringing phrase: *Aus den Geistes geborene und wiedergeborene*. It meant, as I saw it, that artistic beauty was in some sense an intellectual rather than a natural product. That did not entail that the two kinds of beauty were, other than through their explanations, necessarily different. If someone painted a field of daffodils, to use a Romantic example, it might have been beautiful in just the same way a field of daffodils itself is beautiful. Still, the fact that the painting was 'born of the spirit' meant that for Hegel it would have an importance that the natural phenomenon would lack. As always, I found profoundly stimulating the idea that two things might look quite alike but have very different meanings and identities – like *Brillo Box* and the Brillo boxes.

It was with this in my mind that I found a way of drawing a distinction that began to seem quite fruitful. I began to think that the beauty of an artwork could be internal to it, in the sense that it was part of the artwork's meaning. This idea dawned on me in thinking about Robert Motherwell's *Elegies for the Spanish Republic* [...]. Motherwell's paintings were, in some sense, political – after all they were occasioned by an event in the political history of Spain. Their patent beauty followed naturally from being elegies, since elegies are in their nature meant to be beautiful. Somehow the beauty of the elegy is intended to transform

pain into something enduring. So the beauty would be internal to the meaning of the works. By contrast, the beauty of the urinal, if indeed urinals are beautiful, seemed to me quite external to *Fountain*, just as the aesthetics of the Brillo boxes were external to Warhol's *Brillo Box*. They were not part of the meaning. In truth I do not know what the aesthetics of Warhol's *Brillo Box*, if indeed it has any aesthetics, are. It, like *Fountain*, is essentially a conceptual work. [...]

I thought that what was distinctive of a work of art, as against a natural phenomenon, was that it had some kind of meaning, which would go some distance towards rendering into somewhat contemporary terms Hegel's idea of something being born of the spirit and born again. The meaning of a work of art is an intellectual product, which is grasped through interpretation by someone other than the artist, and the beauty of the work, if indeed it is beautiful, is seen as entailed by that meaning. It was not difficult to find other examples. I thought, for example, of Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans' Memorial*, where the beauty is internally generated by the work's meaning. And many other examples were ready to hand. [...]

Initially, I felt somewhat sheepish about writing on beauty. This was a lingering consequence of the attitude towards aesthetics that prevailed in my early years in analytical philosophy – that the really serious work to be done by philosophy was in language and logic and the philosophy of science. [...] But what had happened in art in the 1960s and afterwards was a revolution, to the understanding of which my writings had somewhat contributed, and I felt that the passing from artistic consciousness of the idea of beauty was itself a crisis of sorts. But even if beauty proved far less central to the visual arts than had been taken for granted in the philosophical tradition, that did not entail that it was not central to human life. The spontaneous appearance of those moving improvised shrines everywhere in New York after the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001, was evidence for me that the need for beauty in the extreme moments of life is deeply ingrained in the human framework. In any case I came to the view that in writing about beauty as a philosopher, I was addressing the deepest kind of issue there is. Beauty is but one of an immense range of aesthetic qualities, and philosophical aesthetics has been paralysed by focusing as narrowly on beauty as it has. But beauty is the only one of the aesthetic qualities that is also a value, like truth and goodness. It is not simply among the values we live by, but one of the values that defines what a fully human life means.

Arthur C. Danto, extract from 'The Aesthetics of Brillo Boxes', *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003) 2–4; 6–15.