

ON LATE STYLE: ARTHUR DANTO'S *THE ABUSE OF BEAUTY*

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Danto's *The Abuse of Beauty* is a late work. As such, one cannot grasp what is at stake in it without taking both its claims and its tone seriously. Read philosophically, Danto wants to reconceive art's aesthetic dimension as those features that 'inflect' our attitude towards a work's meaning, and to distinguish, in so doing, between beauty that is and beauty that is not internal to that meaning. Although welcome, I argue that his attempt to carry this through is compromised by his countervailing tendency to conceive the aesthetic in non-cognitive terms. Read as a work of philosophical confession, on the other hand, I suggest that Danto's late turn to aesthetics may be illuminated through a comparison with Philip Guston's late turn to figuration. To do so, I draw parallels between Guston's development as a painter and Danto's philosophical trajectory. Danto concludes that, though necessary to life, beauty is not necessary to art; I conclude that, on this account, only an aesthetic art makes a warranted claim on our attention.

Perhaps this book will be understood only by someone who has himself already had the thoughts that are expressed in it – or at least similar thoughts.—So it is not a textbook.—Its purpose would be achieved if it gave pleasure to one person who read and understood it.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, from the preface to *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

THE ABUSE of Beauty is Arthur Danto's most sustained reflection to date on the relation (if, indeed, there is a relation) between art and aesthetics, most notably beauty.¹ Despite this, it is a difficult book to get to grips with philosophically. Readers looking for a work of systematic argument of the kind Danto developed in *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* will be disappointed. Its author, without question one of the pre-eminent and most art-historically informed philosophers of art of his generation, begins by abjuring straightforward philosophical argument and scholarly authority, and with it the standard paraphernalia of scholarship (footnotes, bibliography, and so on). 'One must not regard this book as pretending to any kind of scholarly authority', Danto remarks in its preface, 'Its authority,

¹ Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2003). Page references to this book are given in the text of the paper.

if it has any, lies elsewhere' (p. xx), an enigmatic claim I will return to. In its stead, Danto enjoins his readers to read his book as 'an adventure story, with a few philosophical arguments and distinctions as trophies brought back from my encounters with the life of art in our times' (p. xx). The book that follows this surprising suggestion is exceptionally autobiographical and confessional for a work of philosophy, as its author acknowledges.

The Abuse of Beauty is dedicated to a series of well-known post-war American abstract painters (Robert Motherwell, David Reed, and Sean Scully).² Of the three, Motherwell's work is crucial to the argument of the book. Although seemingly marginal, the fact that this book is dedicated to a series of painters, and to several abstract painters in particular, is important. For this book, as will come as a surprise to anyone who has followed Danto's career, is a reconsideration, and to an extent a retrieval, of the discourse of aesthetics in relation to the art of our time. Thus, introducing the core theoretical innovation of the book (a distinction between 'internal' and external' beauty), Danto describes his aim as being to 'show how to use the concept of beauty with a clearer sense of art critical responsibility than has thus far been the case' (p. 86). This suggests that Danto sees his book as strictly speaking a contribution to the philosophy of criticism rather than, more generally, the philosophy of art. Painting, especially abstract painting, has a privileged place in such a project because abstract painting was the art form most closely yoked to the aesthetic in its modernist heyday (the art critic Clement Greenberg's 'Modernist Painting' being the exemplary theoretical text of the modernist arts in general) and, as a result, the medium that suffered the most acute critical marginalization in the period of modernism's demise that followed. And this, as anyone familiar with theoretical debates in the artworld of the last forty years will know, is the era most closely associated with Danto's own work, the era of Minimalism, Conceptual Art, and Pop in 1960s New York.

So it comes as a surprise that Danto—of all people—should now be turning his attention to what he still refers to as the philosophically 'toxic' notion of beauty—all the while taking Motherwell's *Spanish Elegies*, the beauty of which he acknowledges stopped him in his tracks when he first saw them, as his privileged example. Clearly, something of the stigma that attached to beauty as a topic warranting serious philosophical reflection in the 1960s when Danto set out as a philosopher still haunts him today, despite his desire to give beauty a second look. As a result what Danto wants to grant with one hand he seems impelled to fend off with the other; and this is what gives the book its conflicted, confessional, and occasionally elegiac tone. The tension generated by this philosophical and autobiographical context permeates *The Abuse of Beauty*, particularly Danto's treatment

² The book is also dedicated to the author's wife, Barbara Westman, who is also an artist. Of the others, Scully is Irish by birth, and grew up and attended art school in England. However, he has spent his working life since graduating in the early 1970s in the USA, and his work comes out of an American context.

of its core concern, the relation between beauty—as a privileged instance of the aesthetic—and art. This is what I shall focus on here.



In a nutshell, Danto's position is that while beauty—as the only aesthetic quality that is also a value—may be necessary to a life worth living, it is unnecessary to art. Beauty is not a necessary condition in an adequate definition of art. The latter is vintage Danto, but the former is new; it reflects Danto's new awareness of the *need* for beauty at moments of extreme duress, an appreciation triggered by his experience of the homemade shrines that sprang up spontaneously all over New York City in the aftermath of 9/11. But it is in respect to the former claim that this book extends the project of Danto's philosophies of art and art history. For Danto, as will be familiar, it is the philosophical service of the 'intractable' (or historical) avant-garde's 'abuse' of (that is, attack on) beauty to have demonstrated that beauty is not a necessary component in the definition of art. This is true, though Danto has to date tended to imply that a stronger conclusion is warranted: namely, that aesthetic qualities *in general* (as opposed to beauty in particular) are unnecessary to the existence of art as art. This is a point that Danto equivocates on in the present book. He claims in the preface that he would 'like' to add to his core conditions for arthood (that works of art have meanings, and that they embody those meanings), that works of art also possess 'pragmatic' qualities. By this Danto means aesthetic qualities, construed on the model of rhetoric, as properties designed to elicit a certain response or attitude in their recipients to the meaning (theme, or subject-matter) of the work of which they are predicated. Danto calls such qualities 'inflectors', because they are intended to 'inflect' or 'colour' the meaning of works of art. Danto presents this as a new departure, though it can also be seen as a development of chapters 6 and 7 of *Transfiguration*. There Danto argued that, in addition to presenting a subject, works of art express a point of view towards or about that subject, which they are intended to convey to their recipients, and that how they do so may be understood on the model of rhetoric (taken in conjunction with the concepts of style, metaphor and expression). That said, while the idea that one of the distinguishing features of works of art is that they possess qualities that 'colour' how we perceive their subject-matter derives from *Transfiguration*, the idea that these qualities constitute the *aesthetic* dimension of works of art is new. Much as Danto would now *like* to claim that such pragmatic properties, construed aesthetically, are essential to works of art, he admits that he is unsure whether this remains true of art today. On this point *The Abuse of Beauty* leaves us hanging. The reason Danto cannot resolve this issue may be that he has yet to shake off a residual tendency to equate aesthetics with beauty himself, such that when he talks about aesthetics he cannot help

privileging beauty, albeit only implicitly, despite diagnosing this very tendency as an illegitimate move in the rejection of aesthetic theory since Nelson Goodman:

The awareness that beauty belongs neither to the essence nor the definition of art . . . does not mean that *aesthetics* belongs neither to the essence nor the definition of art. What had happened was that aesthetics had become narrowly identified with beauty, so that in ridding art of beauty, the natural inference was that we are in a position to segregate the philosophical analysis of art from any concern whatever with aesthetics, all the more so since aesthetics was as much taken up with natural as with artistic beauty. (p. 59)

Danto believes that this fallacy of rejecting aesthetics in general, rather than just beauty, as unnecessary to the philosophy of art is a consequence of the close correlation between beauty and aesthetics during the eighteenth century, when aesthetics was inaugurated as a modern discipline. The lack of distinction between natural and artistic beauty that this virtual identification of aesthetics with beauty occasioned served to obscure, in turn, just how varied the aesthetic properties of *art* could be, and hence the increasingly minor role that beauty played in the appreciation of artistic value. Danto's case is compelling; but the question it raises is whether his *own* underlying beliefs about what counts as aesthetic escape these strictures in the last analysis. Danto's discussion of aesthetics in *The Abuse of Beauty* suggests that he conceives aesthetics, at least as this idea has been traditionally construed and put into practice, along broadly formalist lines. That is, he takes aesthetic theorists of art to believe that what is important, *aesthetically*, about a work of art is how its formal qualities strike the eye, rather than how it engages the mind—as his choice of Fry and Bell as representative aestheticians here attests. But this suggests that his own underlying conception of what is aesthetically—as opposed to artistically—valuable in works of art derives ultimately from the very equation of aesthetics and beauty that he wants to contest, and is therefore at odds with his intention to *reconceive* aesthetics along pragmatic lines. The idea of 'significant form,' for example, is a direct descendant of the equation of aesthetics and beauty that Danto wants to contest. And this is why Danto is unable to say whether aesthetics is, or is not, a necessary feature of works of art. Danto would want to say yes if aesthetics is construed pragmatically, and no if aesthetics is construed formally, and he has yet to free the former from the latter.

Similarly, when Danto turns to Kant's aesthetics, he tends to equate aesthetic experience with a purely sensuous, non-cognitive (pleasurable) response to visual stimuli. But even for Kant this would have amounted to a pleasure of sense (albeit aesthetic), rather than a pleasure of *reflection*, properly so-called. That is, a judgement Kant maintained is rooted in nothing more than the formal attunement of cognitive faculties we possess *qua* human and, in virtue of this fact, raises a normative claim upon the agreement of others. Hence, to my mind,

Danto tends to overlay the non-cognitive commitments of aesthetic theory as this comes down from Kant. Danto is right that aesthetic judgement is non-cognitive in the sense that it is premised on feeling (albeit feeling freighted with a complex relation to the faculties necessary for cognition in Kant). Nonetheless, Kant's claim in *CJ* §16 (cited by Danto), that free beauty 'presupposes no concept of what its object is [meant] to be' (p. 66)³ only commits Kant to the view that pure judgements of taste cannot be grounded on, or derived from, conceptual knowledge. *Pace* Danto, this does not *preclude* knowledge of their object (even in the case of objects judged freely beautiful), it entails only that such judgements cannot be *based on* knowledge of their object. Moreover, when Kant coins the notion of 'dependent beauty' to characterize more complex aesthetic judgements, including judgements of artistic beauty, that explicitly do take into account the nature or purpose of their object (that is, a 'concept of what that object is [meant] to be'),⁴ Kant's account is consonant with Danto's central thesis in *The Abuse of Beauty*. Kant's thought that the beauty of a church, for example, puts what could otherwise be judged freely (that is, would otherwise be an object of a pure aesthetic judgement) under an additional restriction or constraint—namely, that its beauty *be appropriate to* its purpose as a house of worship—is remarkably close to Danto's own conception of 'internal' beauty; that the beauty of a work of art be internal or appropriate to its meaning. Indeed, it is hard to see how this could be otherwise, given Kant's view that works of art centrally involve the expression of 'aesthetic ideas.' Prescriptive as the claim that *all* works of art embody such ideas may be (given what Kant means by an aesthetic idea), the mere fact that Kant holds works of art to embody ideas—ideas that set the mind racing over more thought that can be exhausted by determinate concepts or therefore captured in words—builds an irreducible cognitive dimension into his account of artistic beauty.⁵

Despite this, Danto underplays both the cognitive dimension of aesthetic judgement (*a fortiori*, aesthetic judgements of art) for Kant and the ways in which Kant distinguishes between artistic and natural beauty. Hence Danto is mistaken in his interpretation of *CJ* §45, in which Kant notoriously claims that 'Nature is beautiful [*schön*] if it also looks like art; and art can be called fine [*schön*] art only if we are conscious that it is art while yet it looks to us like nature' and, further, that 'fine art must have the *look* of nature even though we are conscious of it as

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. W. Pluhar (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1987), §16, 5:229.

⁴ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §16, 5:229 and §48, 5:311.

⁵ By an 'aesthetic idea,' Kant envisages a counterpart to 'rational ideas'. Just as the intelligible content of rational ideas exceeds the bounds of sense because rational ideas (for example, freedom), unlike empirical concepts, cannot be presented by imagination to intuition, so the sensory form of aesthetic ideas exceeds the reach of understanding in that they consist of presentations of the imagination so rich that no determinate concept(s) could encompass them. See Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §49, 5:314.

art'.⁶ Danto is fond of citing this passage to show that Kant fails to distinguish between artistic and natural beauty.⁷ But when Kant claims that fine art must 'look like' nature, he does not mean what Danto takes him to mean, namely, that art must (literally) *resemble* nature, as the rest of the *CJ* §45 makes clear. Rather, he means that it must seem as unforced or unwilling as nature (despite the fact that we know that it is not), that to count as fine [*schön*], art must not appear to slavishly follow academic rules. And this is a caveat that would be entirely unnecessary were Kant *unaware* that the beauty of art is, as Danto expresses it following Hegel, 'born of mind', that is, an intentional product and, as such, susceptible to coming off as over-worked, laborious, or academic.

These infelicities, if I am right, in Danto's presentation of aesthetics, particularly his interpretation of Kant as exemplifying this tradition, are familiar from his earlier work. What is unfamiliar is Danto's countervailing attempt in this new book to reconceive the pragmatic qualities that inflect a work's meaning (itself a topic familiar, if in a different vocabulary, from *Transfiguration*) as *aesthetic* qualities. This immediately opens up a far wider range of aesthetic properties than the traditional triumvirate of beauty, ugliness and sublimity. And given that Danto has been more concerned to date to sever the connection between art and aesthetics than to reconceive aesthetics in such a way as to make it more adequate to current artistic practice, this is a welcome—if unexpected—move. That said, were Danto not so committed to the view that aesthetics is irreducibly non-cognitive—a thought that would have made no sense to Kant, for whom *all* judgement is rooted in the spontaneity of mind—what he has called the 'artistic' as opposed to 'aesthetic' features of works of art need never have appeared so unamenable to aesthetic analysis.

Consider in this regard Danto's main line of objection to aesthetic theory over the years, reiterated in *The Abuse of Beauty*. According to Danto, formalists like Greenberg, Fry, and Bell are 'internalists'; they believe everything relevant to something's existence as art inheres within it, and so will be open to view. In effect, that something's status as art can be intuited aesthetically. Danto, by contrast is an 'externalist'; he believes that what is visually discernible about works of art no longer enables one to distinguish between, say, *Bottle Rack* and mere bottle racks, or *Brillo Box* and mere boxes of Brillo, and hence will not in itself tell us why the former but not the latter are works of art. In effect, the properties available to perception underdetermine the difference between art and non-art. Against the conclusions Danto tends to draw from this and analogous examples, both real and imagined—assuming, for the sake of argument, genuine indiscernibility—this only shows that aesthetics is irrelevant to what makes *Brillo Box* art if

⁶ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §45, 5:306–307.

⁷ See, for example, Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P., 1997), pp. 82–84.

one implicitly defers to a visual conception of aesthetics (namely, that what is significant about a work of art, aesthetically speaking, just is what strikes the eye).⁸ This may be one respect in which Danto's own conception of aesthetic theory is itself a product of the historical artworld (that of the backlash against modernist formalism) from which it derives. Were one willing to countenance the possibility, by contrast, that the wit, daring, and even impudence of works like *Fountain* or *Brillo Box* might themselves be understood aesthetically, that is, in terms of their *affectivity* for a perceiving subject, then the kind of qualities Danto has previously supposed unavailable to aesthetic theory no longer seem so inimical to aesthetic analysis. But doing so entails taking seriously the ways in which such works address their viewers, the ways in which they engage our cognitive faculties in non-instrumental, non-determinative ways—ways we value for the intrinsic pleasure we take in feeling ourselves mentally engaged, stimulated, or stretched, rather than instructed. As I understand him, focusing on the ways in which works of art *address* their viewers is precisely what Danto himself now wants to do by recasting aesthetics in terms of pragmatics. But that Danto should now find it necessary to make such a move, by reconceiving aesthetics pragmatically, is largely a result of his own, overly restrictive, conception of what might *count as* an aesthetic quality to date.

Beauty occupies a conflicted site in this project to reformulate aesthetics in pragmatic terms because Danto takes the historical avant-garde to have rightly eliminated beauty from the definition of art. In respect of this most abused of aesthetic properties *The Abuse of Beauty* offers a partial resuscitation. Taking on board the avant-garde's demonstration, Danto nonetheless seeks to differentiate the ways in which beauty, if and when it is present, may or may not be a significant feature of works of art. To do so Danto frames an illuminating distinction between internal and external beauty that is the centrepiece of this new book. Parsed in terms of this distinction, works such as Duchamp's *Fountain* and Warhol's *Brillo Box* turn out to be only contingently beautiful, whereas Maya Lin's *Viet Nam Veterans' Memorial* and Robert Motherwell's *Spanish Elegies* turn out to be intrinsically beautiful. In the first two cases, if someone were to say that these works were beautiful they would, according to Danto, be confusing the beauty of their material substrate (assuming these *are* beautiful), the mere real thing with which they are visually identical (a standard piece of waste plumbing and a packing carton respectively) for that of the work of art of which some of their properties form a part, but with which they are not identical. But the beauty or otherwise of this material substrate is only contingently related to the works in which it is subsumed. As such it is 'external' to these works, it is not *entailed by* these works' meaning. For Danto both works are without *any* aesthetic

⁸ For a persuasive recent attempt to think beyond the orthodoxy that aesthetic properties are perceptual (or, more generally, are perceived by means of the senses), see James Shelley 'The Problem of Non-perceptual Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 43, no. 4 (2003), pp. 363–378.

properties—construed visually—whatsoever, being entirely conceptual in nature. I have already noted my reservations about the conception of aesthetic properties that must, implicitly, underlie the claim that two such *witzig* works could conceivably possess no aesthetic properties whatsoever. I also wish to point up the slippage, contrary to Danto's stated intentions, from the observation that these works are not *beautiful* to the conclusion that they have no *aesthetic* qualities. But putting both to one side, even taken on Danto's own (essentially formal) terms, the claim that these works possess no aesthetic qualities at all is a surprising claim: is it credible?

Danto himself admits that what led him to focus on *Brillo Box* rather than any of the other boxes in Warhol's 1964 Stable Gallery show (a fact that has yet to receive the attention it deserves from either Danto or his commentators) were the dramatic visual qualities of the former in comparison to the rather drab appearance of all the others. But this, Danto wants to say, is merely a matter of good design, something extraneous to the work into which that eye-catching object has been transfigured, hence something for which James Harvey, *Brillo Box*'s designer, rather than Andy Warhol, the creator of *Brillo Box*, is responsible. But in so far as it was *Warhol* who selected these boxes to *recontextualize as art*, the fact that this box is more visually engaging may be one reason why *Brillo Box* is a more successful as a work of art than the others, because its visual qualities hold the viewer's attention long enough to engage with its meaning and significance as art rather than just good design. And if it is its visual qualities that are responsible for this fact, then it seems arbitrary to rule out their contribution to the work as well as the object. Clearly, such properties will neither serve to distinguish *Brillo Box* from *Brillo Box*, nor therefore suffice to explain what makes the former, but not the latter, a work of art. But making this one's requirement is to set the bar on what is relevant to an object's existence as art too high. For though it shows that such properties are not *sufficient* to make *Brillo Box* art—something which only the most doctrinaire aesthetic functionalist would want to maintain—it does not show that they may not be *necessary* to its existence as art nonetheless.

Conversely, consider a work the visual properties—and more specifically the beauty—of which Danto *does* take to be intrinsic to its meaning as art, Motherwell's *Spanish Elegies*. By contrast to *Brillo Box*'s design pizzazz and *Fountain*'s biomorphic grace, Danto holds that the beauty of *Spanish Elegies*, *qua* elegies, is internal to their meaning as art. That is, their beauty as art is internally (or conceptually) entailed by their meaning as works of mourning for an ideal of political organization, the Spanish Republic, prematurely lost. But what is striking about Danto's account of being pulled up short by the beauty of these paintings on first exposure, his intuitive realization that these were works that he ought to take seriously, despite knowing nothing about them or their meaning, is that this response *precedes* the knowledge he maintains is essential for their artistic beauty to be properly appreciated, that is, appreciated *as internal* to their meaning.

In the case of Motherwell's *Spanish Elegies*, Danto's response, by his own account, goes from being struck by their beauty, to realizing (feeling? intuiting?) that this beauty is not arbitrary but *meant*, and is therefore internal to interpreting these works' meaning as art. But according to his own account, this would make his having been moved by their beauty in the first instance irrelevant, because his having been so moved could only have been contingently related to their meaning as art, of which he was, by his own admission, unaware. This is because, for Danto, the entailment only holds in one direction; namely, from an understanding of the meaning of a work, to an appreciation of its beauty (if it is beautiful) as internally related to that meaning or not, and never vice versa.

This is why Danto claims the aesthetic qualities of Brillo cartons can have no bearing on the meaning of *Brillo Box* as art. Whatever aesthetic qualities Brillo Boxes possess, they possess them prior to, and hence irrespective of, the work into which Warhol transfigured their indiscernible counterparts. As such they must be properties of the object, and not the work. But the upshot of this line of argument—that appreciation of a work's artistic value always supervenes on grasping its meaning if it is to count as appreciation of it *as art*—is that Danto's own affective response to Motherwell's *Spanish Elegies* is rendered redundant to his assessment of their value as art. Yet in this case beauty was supposed to be internal, and hence relevant. The problem would dissolve were Danto willing to grant that the process can also happen in reverse (that is, from affective aesthetic response to interpretation rather than only vice versa) and still count as a legitimate response to an entity as a work of art rather than just an object. Moreover, this seems faithful to many of our encounters with art. Indeed, Danto's own response to Motherwell, and his desire to do justice to Hegel's thought that artistic beauty is 'born of mind and born again' despite being addressed to sense—that is, the thought that artistic value is conveyed, in Danto's words, 'from the artist's mind to the viewer's mind *through the senses*' (p. 121, my italics)—suggest that, at least from the point of view of a work's receiver, this is an equally likely scenario. If this is right, there seems to be no non-arbitrary way to rule the aesthetic features of Brillo boxes irrelevant to the meaning of *Brillo Box a priori*.

An analogous argument can be made about *Fountain*. Danto believes that the wit, daring, and irreverence of Duchamp's *Fountain* are 'artistic' properties of a sort distinct from, and alien to, the 'aesthetic' qualities—grace, serenity, and artistic depths—of the object that serves as their vehicle. For Danto, aesthetic qualities of this kind remain the preserve of an affective response to the urinal's visual qualities antithetical to the cognitive response required to appreciate the work's artistic properties. *Fountain* is unamenable to aesthetic analysis, on this account, for the simple reason that its artistic properties (the ones Danto maintains make *Fountain* art), are not available to aesthetic response, understood non-cognitively. But is this true? One might think, for example, that the wit of Duchamp's

readymades, and the kind of appreciation it calls for, is a quality eminently suited to aesthetic analysis, to the extent that it engages the mind in discernibly aesthetic ways. Thus the difference between *experiencing* Duchamp's wit and merely acknowledging its existence is akin to the difference between enjoying a joke and having one explained. Only experiencing first-hand the use of a perfectly banal but nonetheless—and this is important—rather sculptural piece of waste-plumbing for the purpose of artistic and moral provocation carries the affective charge for its recipient that makes *Fountain* the work that it is. Just as it was Warhol's *Brillo Box*, rather than any of the other boxes (with which it shares many of its artistic properties) in his 1964 Stable Gallery show that fired Danto's philosophical imagination, it was Duchamp's *Fountain* rather than any of his other readymades (with which it shares many of its artistic properties) that secured his place in art history. And just as I have argued that in the case of *Brillo Box* this is in part the result of what Danto would have us banish as the object's aesthetic qualities, so in the case of *Fountain* this is in part a result of the way in which what Danto would reject as the 'object's' aesthetic properties interact with the 'work's' artistic ones. The urinal's aesthetic qualities, ironically foregrounded *as sculpture* (atop a plinth), hence seemingly for their viewers' aesthetic delectation, carry an outrageously wicked and irascible echo of the polished poise of Brancusi. Duchamp dealt in Brancusi's works, and would have been aware of his marbles' status as emblems of aesthetic refinement. By using just *this* object, with its functional connotations as a metonymic 'fountain' on the one hand, and its artistic allusions and formal echoes on the other, as a mocking *anti*-aesthetic gesture, Duchamp gives his dry wit full reign (and demonstrates just how well honed his own artistic and aesthetic sensibilities were in the process). The irony is that a liminal aesthetic response to the urinal's material properties *is* required to give this work its deflationary bite, and to that extent its aesthetic qualities *are* internal to *Fountain's* meaning as art. Duchamp's artistic wit *requires* an aesthetic response to the work's sensuous properties, off of which it piggy-backs.⁹ The two aspects of the work are symbiotic, as Danto's own account of works of art as 'embodied meanings' would lead us to expect. The work must therefore be grasped in its entirety; and in its entirety it engages us both cognitively and affectively. Moreover, the way it affects us sensuously is *internal* to the way in which it engages us cognitively.

I want to suggest, in the light of this, that our responses to art may be deemed aesthetic so long as they retain an *affective dimension*. The advantage of this approach is that it makes room for the intellectual sophistication Danto rightly admires in the art of Duchamp and others, but not at the expense of their work

⁹ This is why Danto's account of the work runs the risk of appearing as one-sided as those he contests, notably George Dickie's. See Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1981), pp. 91–95 and *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1986), pp. 13–15 and 32–35.

retaining an affective claim on us in virtue of its material embodiment. To date, Danto's cognitivism has come at too high a price, suggesting that an affective response to art's material presence could be excised from an intellectual interest in its meaning, and thereby made redundant to understanding what works of art are. With *The Abuse of Beauty* this has begun to change—at least as regards those works the aesthetic properties of which Danto does take to be internal to their meaning. Nonetheless, the class of aesthetic qualities—that is, *qualities used to aesthetic affect*—is considerably broader than the one Danto is willing to grant. So too is the class of works that function, in their *mode of address* to a viewer, in recognizably aesthetic ways. To put it in Danto's terms: if a work's aesthetic qualities should now be understood as those features of the work that 'colour' our appreciation of its meaning, and a work is (by definition) an entity that embodies its meaning in material form, then that form *cannot but* impact upon our perception of the meaning it conveys. This applies to the work of Duchamp and Warhol as readily as it does to that of Motherwell. Danto should therefore grant that, on his own account, the aesthetic now counts as an irreducible feature of art.

★ ★ ★

I said at the outset that *The Abuse of Beauty* is a difficult book to review philosophically. This is because in it Danto seems to make conflicting demands on his readers. He asks in the introduction that his book be read as the last instalment of a three-part contemporary philosophy of art, the analytic of which was provided by *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, underwritten in turn by the philosophy of art history laid out in *Art after the End of Art*, and capped here with an architectonic gesture of which Kant would have been proud, by a philosophical aesthetics that completes the system. For Danto, as should always have been clear, is a systematic philosopher, believing that the problems in one philosophical domain have implications for, and hence lead naturally to, those in others. But he asks this having already abjured philosophy and scholarship strictly—or, perhaps better—narrowly speaking in the book's preface.

How, then, is one supposed to respond to a book of this kind, a book that simultaneously claims to cap an impressive philosophical itinerary and to being no more than a detective story? I have a hunch, though it is an extremely personal one. My only excuse for advancing it is that a personal response seems required, or at least permitted, by a book of this nature. To bring it out I want to return, in conclusion, to Danto's enigmatic prefatory remark that the book's 'authority, if it has any, lies elsewhere' to scholarship and philosophy, as these have come to be construed professionally. I take Danto at his word when he identifies his book in part with the tradition of philosophical confession, but I want to suggest something against the grain of what, as I imagine him, the author may himself take it to confess. To this end I will take Philip Guston's *Studio* (1969), which Danto reproduces, and Guston's autobiographical remarks with which he accompanies

it, as my key. Danto, I want to suggest, emerges from this book as the Philip Guston of the philosophy of art, though for somewhat different reasons than the author himself might recognize or espouse. Guston, whose current retrospective Danto recently reviewed for *The Nation* on its New York incarnation at the Metropolitan, famously switched in the late 1960s from a well-respected, if rather delicate, 'abstract impressionist' manner to—in the context of the then contemporary artworld—the unbelievably vulgar, clunky, and cartoonish figuration first shown in his notorious Marlborough New York exhibition in 1970. Danto cites Guston reflecting on this volte-face from lyrical abstraction to a combination of acerbic political and social commentary, gallows humour, and pitiless self-exposure in his work as follows:

What kind of man am I, sitting at home, reading magazines, going into a frustrated fury about everything—and then going into my studio to *adjust a red to a blue*. I thought there must be some way I could do something about it. I knew ahead of me a road way laying. A very crude inchoate road. I wanted to be complete again, as I was when I was a kid. (pp. 117–118)

Danto draws attention to the fact, consonant with the history sketched in *The Abuse of Beauty*, that Guston no longer found it acceptable to make beautiful paintings in the face of America's morally and politically repellant involvement in Vietnam, its racism, repression of civil rights demonstrators, and the like. That to paint beautiful pictures in an ugly world would amount to a kind 'collaboration' with the enemy, a *de facto* redemption of an ugly world with the consolations of a beautiful art (the standard charge of the radical avant-garde artist or theorist against painters like Bonnard and Matisse down the years).¹⁰

All this may be true, but I want to draw attention to the final remark. Guston wanted, he said, to make himself whole again. Guston was an avid reader of cartoons in his youth, and had experienced the wrath of the Ku Klux Klan at first hand, both as strike-breakers and as destroyers of his earliest paintings—which also depicted the Klan, albeit less comically and less disturbingly, from the outside. Danto quotes these lines alongside *The Studio*, in which a painter—by his own admission Guston—is got up in the Klansman's hood, painting a self-portrait by the light of a naked bulb. Guston painted by night, and here we see him, so to speak, trying on the hood for size, imagining himself into a world that appalled but also clearly fascinated him:

They are self-portraits. I perceive myself as being behind a hood. . . . The idea of evil fascinated me, and rather like Isaac Babel who had joined the Cossacks, lived with them and written stories about them, I almost tried to imagine that I was living with

¹⁰ The classic theoretical critique of such 'collaboration' remains Herbert Marcuse's 'On the Affirmative Character of Culture' in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. J. J. Shapiro (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1968).

the Klan. What would it be like to be evil? To plan and to plot? . . . What would they paint? They would paint each other, or paint self-portraits . . .¹¹

Danto does not cite these remarks—from a well-known talk that Guston gave at the University of Minnesota in 1978—in *The Abuse of Beauty*, though it is clear from his review in *The Nation* that he is aware of them.¹² If Danto emerges from this book as the Philip Guston of the philosophy of art, what might these remarks mean for Danto? I want to make an odd suggestion that I nonetheless believe to be true; it is that beauty, or more broadly aesthetics, now functions in Danto's philosophy of art much as the Klan did for Guston's narrative imagination. It has the allure of a kind of conceptual cross-dressing, of imaginatively identifying with one's opponent—in Danto's case conceptual, in Guston's moral and political. Danto's choice of *Studio* is a loaded gesture in more ways than one. As a *self-portrait*, it has all the connotations of colluding with the enemy canvassed above. Moreover, it is the painting that Hilton Kramer produced alongside a notoriously vitriolic *New York Times* review of Guston's 1970 Marlborough exhibition, under the title 'From Mandarin to Stumblebum'. This article, more than any other contemporary document, has preserved the sense of outrage and betrayal that these works occasioned when they were first shown. Yet it was precisely through these works that Guston sought to regain the integrity—the wholeness—of his youth.

Now, something that must have struck every attentive reader of Danto is the curious schism between his art criticism and his philosophy of art, between questions of value (which for Danto are questions of criticism) and questions of identity, ontology, and definition (which are questions for philosophy). Danto's art criticism is full of value judgements. Yet in his philosophical work Danto routinely inveighs against the discourse of taste as alien to the philosophy of art, properly construed. In line with my more general reservations about Danto's interpretation of Kant, I think this is because Danto does not give sufficient weight to the *depth* at which the idea of 'taste' (or rather the judgement thereof) functions in Kant's epistemology, far removed from its everyday sense, but I do not want to pursue this point here.¹³ What is important here is the mere fact of this separation between value and identity in Danto's work, one that he has even thematized on occasion, remarking that he would happily swap Duchamp's *Fountain* for any Chardin or Morandi, despite the significance of the former for

¹¹ *Philip Guston Paintings 1969–80*, exhibition catalogue (London: The Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1982), pp. 52–53.

¹² See Danto's review of Philip Guston's retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in *The Nation*, 277, no. 22 (29 December 2003), pp. 29–32.

¹³ I address this topic in a separate paper: 'Retrieving Kant's Aesthetics for Art Theory after Modernism', in Tony O'Connor, Francis Halsall and Julia Jansen (eds), *Re-discovering Aesthetics* (forthcoming, 2006).

his philosophy of art.¹⁴ Clearly this schism does not worry Danto, *qua* philosopher. As a philosopher, he is proud of such mental hygiene, taking it to underwrite the scope and generality of a philosophy of art that it is neither predicated upon, nor (therefore) implicitly hostage to, value judgements of any kind. But might it worry him in other ways, ways this book may indirectly—perhaps even inadvertently—allude to, with its passionate defence of the necessity of beauty for life?

Danto, we have been told in a number of frustratingly allusive autobiographical remarks over the years, began life as an artist, and his references to this prehistory of his life as a philosopher have become increasingly common. One speculates that Danto may have been a second- or third-generation abstract expressionist, because he reports that when he encountered Lichtenstein's work for the first time he realized that if one could do *that* as art, then one could do anything, and that if anything was possible there could no longer be any privileged direction in art, nor therefore any transpersonal (that is, historically mandated) reason to make one thing rather than another.¹⁵ With that realization, Danto confides, he gave up art for philosophy for good. But did he? Given this background, Danto's claim that Warhol got the question of art's definition into its 'correct philosophical form' and, in so doing, passed responsibility for art's definition to philosophy, turns out to be a way of repositioning himself as the inheritor of art's spiritual quest for self-understanding in the alienated guise of philosophy. It allows him to pursue art once more, albeit in the displaced form of philosophy.¹⁶

If the 'authority' of this book lies to one side of anything it tells us, *qua* philosophy, at the level of claim and argument, and in it Danto emerges as the Guston of the philosophy of art, then it is the authority of Guston's late paintings, their intention to testify to the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about one's impulses (gluttony, smoking in bed, drinking, solitary nights in the studio), fantasies (deluges, the end of the world, self-flagellation), and identifications (the Klan, men in overcoats bearing shoes, trash-can fights, everyday objects), no matter how clumsy and embarrassing these may be, that is here mirrored in Danto's candour about his personal responses to art and beauty, and his desire to do justice to the deep human needs that beauty fulfils in life—

¹⁴ Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, p. 35.

¹⁵ In fact, as Danto reveals in a forthcoming philosophical autobiography for the Library of Living Philosophers Series (*The Philosophy of Arthur C. Danto*, ed. Randall E. Auxier [Chicago and La Salle: Open Court Publishing]), he was predominantly a printmaker (making woodcuts) rather than a painter, and an expressive figurative artist (in the sense that de Kooning's *Women* series was figurative) rather than an Abstract Expressionist *per se*. For Danto's artistic reaction to Lichtenstein, see *After the End of Art*, p.123.

¹⁶ Danto claims Warhol did this by provoking the question 'wherein lies the difference between art and reality when they are visually indistinguishable?' rather than 'what is the essential nature of art?' See Danto, *After the End of Art*, pp. 35–37.

regardless of any stigma that may still attach to ‘beauty’ as a serious topic of debate in philosophy. In this respect *The Abuse of Beauty* is an old man’s book. This is the sort of remark that can easily be misconstrued, and I hesitate to make it for that reason. What I mean by it is that this is the kind of book that could only have been written *late*, in the same way that Guston’s last paintings could have only been painted late, being full of a pathos and sentimentality that would have struck a false note coming from a younger man. In it we witness Danto searching for a way to accommodate his revitalized appreciation of the importance of aesthetics to life within his philosophy of art, in an analogous manner to that in which Guston sought to incorporate his all too human desires and identifications into his hitherto discretely distanced—one might even say professionalised—‘artworld’ art. But *The Abuse of Beauty* is also a somewhat tragic book, if not in quite the way that Guston’s late paintings are tragic. Late in life Guston acknowledged that abstraction was not enough:

All I can say is that when I leave the studio and get back to the house and think about what I did, then I like to think that I’ve left a world of people in the studio. A world of people. . . . I wouldn’t enjoy being in the kitchen, looking out of the window at the studio . . . thinking that I had simply left a world of relationships and stripes in there.¹⁷

Danto, I think, now feels something analogous within his own domain, namely that he would be dissatisfied to leave us with nothing more sustaining than arguments in the philosophy of art, understood as a narrow, professionalized discipline. That is why the ‘authority’ of this book lies elsewhere, and the sense in which it is a late work. Having realized with the force of a kind of revelation, in the light of the shrines that sprang up around New York City after 9/11, that a life without beauty would be unbearable, Danto now wants to communicate this fact above all others. What is tragic is that the freedom to express this thought is found so late in the day. With this book Danto has subtly modified his position, or at the least the expression of his position, on beauty in the philosophy of art. He now maintains—*despite the fact that a life without beauty would not be a life worth living*—that beauty is *still* not a necessary property of art. So much the worse for art, one might think. The obvious conclusion must be, if Danto is correct, that beauty is necessary to life but art is not. In this respect Danto inherits the project of the intractable avant-garde to transfigure life in the image of art in a peculiar fashion: it is life that should possess beauty not art, for a beautiful art is a paltry consolation for a barren, morally ugly life. The only other conclusion—presumably a tragic one for a philosopher who has spent a large part of his working life seeking to ‘uncouple’ art and the aesthetic—would be that only an *aesthetic art*, an art of aesthetic merit (given a suitably generous conception of the latter), is worth

¹⁷ *Guston Paintings 1969–80*, p. 51.

bothering with at all, is important to the furtherance of a flourishing life.¹⁸ Danto, the painter who abandoned art for philosophy and eventually found his way back to art, first through the philosophy of art and, more intimately it seems, through the art criticism he has been writing for *The Nation* over the last twenty years is, I conjecture, actually aware of this fact, and now wants to say so—if only obliquely. Of course, Danto never says this himself, but nor does he have to, since it is what his text communicates nonetheless. That, finally, is what makes this book a confession.¹⁹

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¹⁸ Here it is instructive to note Kant's characterization of aesthetic judgement in the opening section of the third *Critique* as one in which the subject refers an intuition to his 'feeling of life'. See Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §1, 5:204.

¹⁹ I would like to thank Arthur Danto for his comments on this paper in draft. My reading of Danto's book is also indebted to James Conant and Cora Diamond's work on the *Tractatus*. See my "Making Sense" of Nonsense: Conant and Diamond Read Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, in Barry Stocker (ed.) *Post-Analytic Tractatus: A Reader* (Kent: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 99–125.