

THE ABUSE OF BEAUTY
AESTHETICS AND THE CONCEPT OF ART
ARTHUR C. DANTO



The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art

By Arthur C. Danto

Open Court Publishing Company, 2003.

\$19.95 US. soft cover; 167 pages.

Review by Adam Welch, artist, writer.

NO SOONER HAD BEAUTY BEEN 86'D FROM COMMON COIN THAN art historian Dave Hickey uncritically brought it back – in through the back door so to speak. This is exactly how Hickey recalls fumbling upon the idea of beauty as the future concern for contemporary artists. Just as quickly as his words waft up a magic stench they met their demise in the most bizarre exhibition to come to Washington DC, *Regarding Beauty*. While some people were seriously contemplating beauty as an ultimate value in art, Arthur C. Danto was concerned with how posthistorical artists and theorists were to negotiate their way through this ever-present, omnipotent, illusive beauty. In his new book, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*, Danto has given us a reason to revisit our aesthetic ancestors and to re-examine beauty's place within art's philosophical identity.

Danto has presented us with a fine contemporary discourse in art worthy of being labelled philosophy, or at least, philosophical. While he has made it obvious he can write philosophically impenetrable texts, this book arguably exhibits his mature and exquisitely articulated and intellectual writings. Danto prefaces his text with a summation of his career revisiting his philosophical walks of yesteryear, bringing to light some of his classics – *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* and *Art After the End of Art*. Earlier publications merit an appearance, as does his 1964 book, *Analytical Philosophy of History*.

It is not long before Danto pronounces his role in creating the contemporary consciousness of art's intellectual identity and rightfully so. In the seven chapters that follow, Danto reveals what fellow art critic and art historian Donald Kuspit might call his 'true-self' – the Good-Enough Critic. The theme of Danto's book and that which separates this text from its predecessors (both his and others) is its simplicity – his straightforward, insightful critique of aesthetics and aestheticians. Danto covers the gamut of aesthetic dialogue, from its

development in the writings of Kant (excepting Baumgarten, though who can blame him) and Hegel, up through contemporary figures. With insights into the works of such artists as Andy Warhol, James Harvey, Marcel Duchamp (of course), Henry Matisse, Robert Motherwell, Damien Hirst, Marie-Ange Guilleminot, Barbara Kruger, Barnett Newman and Phillip Guston, to name a few. In reviewing these aestheticians and quasi-contemporary artist's, Danto manages, in less than 200 pages, to recapitulate the past few hundred years of art making and the dialogue of aesthetics as they are in conversation with beauty. Simultaneously, he manages to produce a book that reads as though it were written for the layman, student, artist and philosopher.

Since Kant, or perhaps as far back as the Greeks, aestheticians have dealt specifically with the notion of beauty and its place in art discourse, while regretfully leaving by the wayside other aspects of the aesthetic. Perhaps the past 50 or so years have lacked the vigour that I can imagine plagued such legendary thinkers as Kant and Hegel. I can see them sitting at their desks, red in the face, swearing and cursing behind closed doors writing volumes and volumes about an abstracted and detached scholarly notion of beauty. Could it be that beauty has been hidden in the monsoon season of *theoria* and the latest era of post-this-or-that. Certainly, Hegel broadened the scope considerably since Kant's day; regardless, their conclusions remain in a familiar way, removed from life-world understanding and practice.

Danto sifts through the detritus of the historical concepts of art and rather eloquently forms a theory that he considers broad enough to include all practice – past, present and future. Amid the theory and concepts, he finds room to talk about beauty as it pertains to the life-world. In the ruins of past art historical theories, Danto constructs a concept of art that shows us how beauty is an option, a value in art, not essential to the work of art's meaning or the essence of art itself. As important as this may seem to the artists who seek validation in their perpetual search for beauty, this is but a shadow of Danto's truly magnificent, meaningful and revolutionary discovery – that beauty is in fact a necessary condition for life, not merely an option for it.