

FOR  
ART



The Future of Aesthetics • ARTHUR C. DANTO

## THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS

In early 2004, the American Society for Aesthetics published two “call for papers” announcements on its web-page, each for a conference on aesthetics as a neglected topic in the treatment of art. They were issued by two disciplines that do not ordinarily share a perspective - art history and philosophy. The organizers of each of the conferences appeared to agree that aesthetics is more central to art than either of their disciplines has lately recognized. Art historians, according to the first call, having lately addressed art primarily from political and social points of view, are beginning to find merit in approaching it aesthetically. And philosophers of art, said to have almost exclusively focused on “how we define a work of art and the role played by artworld institutions in that definition,” now ask if they have not lost sight of “what is valuable about art.” The question that interests me is what the impact will be if aesthetics really is restored to its alleged prior role.

By aesthetics, I shall mean: the way things show themselves, together with the reasons for preferring one way of showing itself to another. Here is a nice example. I was president of the American Society for Aesthetics when the organization turned fifty, and I offered to coax the artist, Saul Steinberg, a friend, to design a poster to celebrate the occasion. Saul agreed to take the task on as long as he did not have to work too hard. He was not entirely certain what aesthetics was, but rather than attempting to explain its meaning, I had the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* mail him a few issues, to get a sense of what aestheticians think about. That was a lot to ask of someone who did not want to work very hard, but in the end, true to his character, Saul was much more fascinated by the diphthong *Æ* on the cover of the journal than with anything between the covers – if he even read them. Friendship has its limits. He phoned one day to say he had solved the problem, and I have to say, as an aesthetician, that he got closer to the heart of the matter than anyone who works merely with words could possibly have done. He had borrowed back from the artist Jim Dine a drawing he had done for him, which showed a landscape with a house and a big blocky **E** next to it – the kind you see on the optician’s eye-chart – dreaming about a cosmetically enhanced and more elegant E than its current font allowed. This enhanced letter was displayed in a thought balloon above itself. All Saul did was replace the latter with the Journal’s diphthong, *Æ*. The blocky **E** dreamt of being a diphthong, the way the puny ninety pound weakling in the physical culture ad dreams of having the abs and biceps that make girls swoon. That was aesthetics in a nutshell. But of course it could go the other way. The diphthong in its soul of souls might wish that it had the honest modern look of the blocky **E**. It is worth pointing out that so far as how the word sounds is concerned, there is not a scrap of difference. Differences in font are mere coloration, as the logician Frege would say. Still, a written letter has to look one way rather than another, and there are always grounds for preferring one look over another. As long as there are visible differences in how things look, aesthetics is inescapable. I had 3000 posters printed, which were put on sale to members of the organization. What I found, not surprisingly, was that aestheticians were not enough interested in art to pay for it, and so far as I know, the poster is gathering dust stacked in the organization’s storeroom somewhere. My hunch is that art historians would have snapped it up, knowing the value of work by Steinberg, who has since, alas, died.

That brings me to the overall difference between the two disciplines in the present state of things. Philosophy has been almost immune to the impact of what has, since the 1970s, been called Theory - a body of largely deconstructionist strategies that has inflected nearly every other branch of the humanities – anthropology, literature, art history, film studies, and the like - all of which have been refracted through the prisms of attitudes that were scarcely visible before the 1960s and have since

flowered into academic disciplines with canons and curricula of their own, beginning with women's studies and black studies in the American university structure, and ramifying out into varieties of gender and ethnic studies - queer studies, Chicano studies, and the rest. These, I believe it fair to say, have been driven by various activist agendas, which in the case of art scholarship, criticism, and practice, have endeavored to alter social attitudes, purging them of prejudices and perhaps injustices toward this or that group. Deconstruction, after all, is taken to be a method for demonstrating the way in which society has advanced and reinforced the interests of special groups - white, for example, and male; and, along a different coordinate, western or North-American.

Against this diversified background, it is worth reflecting on what a new focus on aesthetics can mean. Will it simply become grist for these new disciplines - black aesthetics, Latino aesthetics, queer aesthetics - as such popular programs as "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" suggest, where aesthetics is taken as one of queendom's defining attributes, and where new gender attitudes are in the offing, as in the recently identified category of the Metrosexual - straight guys with aesthetical eyes? Or does it mean an abandonment of the deconstructionist reorganization of knowledge, so that art will be seen less through the activist perspectives of recent decades, and instead be addressed "for itself," as something that affords pleasure to eye and ear irrespective of what we might consider the gendered eye, the ethnic eye, the racial eye, etc? Or is the turn to aesthetics not so much an end to the social and political way of considering art, but rather a prolongation of these into what might have been neglected dimensions, namely, female aesthetics, black aesthetics, queer aesthetics, and the like? In which case the turn to aesthetics is not really a change in direction at all?

"Theory" entered academic consciousness in the early seventies. The earliest of the writings of Derrida and Foucault that form part of it date from about 1967 and 1968, that year of university uprisings throughout the world. The events and movements that give Theory its activist edge in America date mainly from the mid- to late sixties: 1964 was the Summer of Freedom in America; radical feminism emerged as a force after 1968; Stonewall, which detonated gay liberation took place in 1969; and the anti-war movement went on into the next decade. Theory was then to define the attitudes of many who entered academic life by the eighties, and it became a sort of fulcrum that tended to split departments almost on the basis of age, between traditionalists, who tended to consider art formalistically, and activists, whose interest in art was largely defined through identity politics. I know that aesthetics became politicized in art criticism by the mid-eighties. Conservative art critics insisted on stressing aesthetics as what those they perceived as left-wing critics neglected or overlooked. From the conservative perspective, the turn to aesthetics would mean the return to traditional ways. The fact that there is the call for papers on aesthetics from an art history department could be taken as good news for the conservatives. It would mean, in effect, what was called after World War I in France a *rapel a l'ordre* - a call to order - in which avant-garde artists were enjoined to put aside their experiments and represent the world in ways reassuring to those whose worlds had been torn apart by war. It would be exceedingly disillusioning to those who see things this way, then, if aesthetics itself were just a further way to think of art from the perspective of Theory. By the same token, it would hardly be thinkable that art historians whose syllabi, bibliographies, and reputations are based on political approaches to art, should all at once turn their back on these, and embrace an entirely new approach - one, moreover, that treats art as if gender, ethnicity, and the like no longer mattered. It would mean that they had finally thrown their lot in with the traditionalists. As academic and cultural life is now structured, this would be

a tremendous transformation, but hardly one likely to be made.

The situation in philosophy is entirely different. As I have already mentioned, Theory had virtually no impact on philosophy as an academic discipline in Anglo-American - nor for the matter, in Scandinavian universities. Young people who went into graduate work in philosophy emerged from the same historical matrices as those who went into art history or cultural studies, but the kinds of concerns that created factions in the other divisions of the liberal arts somehow never did this in philosophy, and philosophy departments were never polarized along the same lines as other of *les sciences humaines*. The texts that split the rest of academic life into irreconcilable factions were simply not taken seriously as philosophy by main line philosophers in Anglophone countries. In part, I think, this was because the language in which they were written was perceived as grotesquely at odds with the standards of clarity and consequence to which philosophical writing was expected to conform. These standards were monitored by the editorial boards of the main periodicals for which articles were refereed. And the principles of "publish or perish" darwinized out papers written in the giddy new idioms. And since no one but other philosophers any longer read philosophy, there were no venues other than the standard journals.

Beyond that, philosophy never really presented itself as a candidate for deconstruction. The reason for this is that most of the main movements in twentieth century philosophy already consisted of programs for the reform of the discipline. Wittgenstein had declared that "Most propositions and questions that have been written about philosophical matters, are not false but senseless. We cannot therefore, answer questions of this kind at all, but only state their senselessness." This was an extreme statement of a radical skepticism regarding traditional philosophy, the problem now being to find something philosophers could do instead. Phenomenology sought instead to describe the logical structure of conscious experience. Positivism dedicated itself to the logical clarification of the language of science. "Philosophy recovers itself," the Pragmatist John Dewey wrote, "when it ceases to be device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men." Richard Rorty proposed that philosophers engage in conversations with those in disciplines that knew what they were doing. So when Derrida or Foucault came onto the scene, philosophy had survived so many wholesale critiques that it was, for better or worse, virtually immune to their attacks. What remained was a more or less neutral method of analysis that could, had anybody been interested, have been applied to some of the major elements of Theory, such as Derrida's famous thesis that there is no "hors du texte" or Foucault's remarkable idea of *epistemes*, which define historical periods. Feminism in philosophy became a field of analytical philosophy, rather than a radical challenge to philosophy as unacceptably masculinist - and if it is true that there are ways of knowing that are inherently feminine, this might have found its way into the discussion without begging the question of whether there is a way of discussing such a charged position open to men and women alike. Most female philosophers today are feminists, I think, without this entailing that they see a need for deeply altering the nature of the discipline. It is, on the other hand, striking that that the standard third-person pronoun is "she" or "her" in the standard journals, unless the subject is specified by name.

Except in the great era of German Idealism, aesthetics has been viewed as a somewhat marginal sub-discipline in philosophy, and its issues have not been considered sufficiently important to the practice of philosophy that philosophers other than specialists have seen reason to take much interest in them.

So a reconsideration of aesthetics would have little if any impact on philosophy as currently practiced, by contrast with the impact it might have on art history. But the premise of the conference in London was that, to put it somewhat paradoxically, aesthetics seems to have disappeared from aesthetics. That is, aestheticians, according to the conference's organizers, have made aesthetics so marginal to their analysis of art that they have forgotten, or failed to recognize, how important aesthetics actually is in art and the place of art in human experience. The call for papers went out in order to rectify this situation. It was a call to bring aesthetics back into the philosophy of art in some more central way than recent practice has acknowledged.

This is where I come into the picture, since I was singled out along with Marcel Duchamp, as at least in part responsible for the way things have gone. Duchamp had indeed said that "aesthetic delectation is the danger to be avoided," and part of his intention with the famous readymades of 1913-1917 was to constitute a body of art in connection with which aesthetic considerations did not arise. Duchamp clarified this in a talk given at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1961: "A point which I want very much to establish is that the choice of these readymades was never dictated by aesthetic delectation. This 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." If all art were readymade, as Dali once imagined could happen, there would indeed be no room - or at least little room - for aesthetics. But despite Duchamp's somewhat mischievous suggestion that "since the tubes of paint used by the artist are manufactured and readymade products we must conclude that all the paintings in the world are readymades aided and also works of assemblage," it was clear that it required some special effort to identify works of art with the null degree of aesthetic interest. It was one thing to make room for art in connection with which the absence of aesthetic interest was the most interesting fact about it, quite another to claim that aesthetics has no role to play in art at all. In his dialogues with Pierre Chabanne, Duchamp makes it plain what his overall objective was, namely to modulate what he regards as the excessive importance given to what he terms "the retinal." In a way, he and the organizers of the London conference were reciprocals of one another. They were insisting that too little attention was being paid to what he felt too much was being paid. He was saying that painting had functions other than providing aesthetic gratification - "it could be religious, philosophical, moral." *They* were saying that he had gone too far. It was not really much of a disagreement.

For me, Duchamp's philosophical discovery was that art could exist, the importance of which was that it had no aesthetic distinction to speak of, at a time when it was widely believed that aesthetic delectation was what art was all about. That, so far as I was concerned, was the merit of his readymades. It cleared the philosophical air to recognize that since anaesthetic art could exist, art is philosophically independent of aesthetics. That is a discovery that means something only to those concerned, as I was, with the philosophical definition of art, namely, what are the necessary and sufficient conditions for something being a work of art.



The problem, as I saw and still see it, arose for me initially with Warhol and his Brillo Box, which was perceptually so like the workaday shipping cartons in which Brillo was shipped from factory to warehouse to supermarket, that the question of distinguishing them became acute - and this I took to be the question of distinguishing art from reality. I do not mean: distinguish them epistemologically but rather ontologically - sooner or later one would discover that one was made of plywood the other not.

The question was whether the difference between art and reality could consist in such discoverable differences. I thought not, but from the beginning my strategy was to find how there could be differences that were not perceptual differences. My thought was that there had to be a theory of art that could explain the difference. A handful of philosophers were on this track in the sixties. Richard Wollheim phrased it in terms of “minimal criteria,” which was a Wittgensteinian approach, and really did not meet the question, inasmuch as Wollheim supposed the minimal criteria would be ways of picking art out from non-art, and hence perceptual, which was to beg the question. George Dickie explicitly phrased it as one of definition, at a time when Wittgensteinians and others saw definition in art as impossible and unnecessary. I saluted Dickie for his bravura, but faulted his definition, which is institutionalist: something is an artwork if the artworld decrees it so. But how can it consistently decree *BrilloBox* an artwork, but not the cartons in which Brillo comes? My sense was that there had to be reasons for calling *Brillo Box* art - and if being art was grounded in reasons, it no longer could be, or merely be, a matter of decree.

These, I think, were the main positions, and those who drafted the call for papers are clearly right, that aesthetic qualities played no role to speak on the ensuing discussions. Dickie built into his definition that a work of art is “a candidate for appreciation,” and this could very well be aesthetic appreciation, but Dickie never wanted to be too explicit. I have said at times that if the indiscernible objects - *Brillo Box* and the Brillo cartons - were perceptually alike, they must be aesthetically alike as well, but I no longer believe this true, mainly because of having brought some better philosophy to bear on the issue. But this, as you will see, makes the issue of aesthetics more irrelevant than ever.

Let us attempt to distinguish between artworks and objects - *Brillo Box*, for example, and the particular stenciled plywood box in which any given token of the work consists. There were, perhaps, 300 such tokens done in 1964, and a hundred or so more in 1970. It somewhat complicates the indiscernability relationship that holds between these tokens and the ordinary Brillo cartons, which happen to be tokens of a different art work, namely a piece of commercial art. Warhol's boxes were fabricated in The Factory at 231 East 47th Street in Manhattan, by Gerard Malanga and various other of Warhol's assistants in 1964, as well as by Warhol himself. Meanwhile, there were many thousands of tokens of the Brillo carton, shaped and printed in various box factories (probably) in the United States over a period of time. Both the boxes, one fine and the other commercial art, are parts of visual culture, without this in any way blurring the difference between fine and commercial art. We know who the commercial artist was - James Harvey - whose identity is complicated by the fact that he was a fine artist in the Abstract Expressionist mode, who merely made his living as a free-lance package designer. Now Harvey's work was appropriated by Warhol, along with the works of various other package designers in the 1964 exhibition at the Stable Gallery - the Kellogg's Cornflake carton, the Delmonte Peach Half carton, the Heinz Tomato Juice carton, etc. But the only box that is generally remembered is *Brillo Box* - it was the star of the show and is almost as much Warhol's attribute as the Campbells Soup label. And this is because of its aesthetic excellence. Its red, white, and blue design was a knockout. As a piece of visual rhetoric, it celebrated its content, namely Brillo, as a household product used for shining aluminum. The box was about Brillo, and the aesthetics of the box was calculated to dispose viewers favorably toward Brillo. Warhol, however, gets no credit for the aesthetics for which Harvey was responsible. That is the aesthetics of the box, but whether or not that aesthetics is part of Warhol's *work* is another question altogether. It is true that Warhol *chose* the Brillo carton for *Brillo Box*. But he chose for *that same show*

five other cartons, most of which are aesthetically undistinguished. I think this was part of his deep egalitarianism, that everything is to be treated the same. The truth is, however, that I don't know what aesthetic properties if any belong to Warhol's *Brillo Box* itself. It was, though the term did not exist in 1964, a piece of conceptual art. It was also a piece of appropriation art, though this term was not to come into existence until the 1980s. Warhol's box was a piece of Pop Art, so called because it was about the images of popular culture. Harvey's box was part of popular culture, but it was not a piece of Pop Art because it was not about popular culture at all. Harvey created a design that obviously appealed to popular sensibilities. Warhol brought those sensibilities to consciousness. Warhol was a very popular artist because people felt his art was about them. But Harvey's box was not about them. It was about Brillo, which belonged to their world, since shining aluminum belonged to the aesthetics of everyday domestic existence.

An obituary of the brilliant young fashion writer, Amy Spindler, credits her with recognizing that "fashion was as important a cultural indicator as music or art." The question that leaves us with is what marks the difference, if any, between fashion and art. A dress can be a work of art as well as a cultural indicator, but wherein lies the difference, since not all dresses are works of art? Hegel drew a distinction between two kinds of what he termed spirit: objective spirit, and Absolute Spirit. Objective spirit consists of all those things and practices in which we find the mind of a culture made objective: its language, its architecture, its books and garments and cuisine, its rituals and laws - all that falls under *les sciences humaines* or what Hegel's followers called *Geisteswissenschaften*. Absolute spirit is about us, whose spirit is merely present in the things that make up our objective spirit. Harvey's boxes belong to the objective spirit of the USA circa 1960. So, in a way, do Warhol's boxes. But Warhol's boxes, being about objective spirit, are Absolute: they bring objective spirit to consciousness of itself. Self-consciousness is the great attribute of Absolute Spirit, of which, Hegel felt, fine art, philosophy, and religion are the chief and perhaps the only moments. The aesthetics of the Brillo cartons tells us a lot about the objective spirit to which it belongs. But what if anything does it tell us about Absolute Spirit?

This is enough metaphysics for the moment. I have brought it in to help explain why, until my recent book, *The Abuse of Beauty*, my work has had relatively little to say about aesthetics. The explanation is that my main philosophical concern, prompted by the state of the artworld in the 1960s, was the definition of art. In a crude way, my definition had two main components in it: something is a work of art when it has a meaning - is about something - and when that meaning is embodied in the work - which usually means: is embodied in the object in which the work of art materially consists. My theory in brief is that works of art are *embodied meanings*. Because of works like Warhol's *Brillo Box*, I could not claim that aesthetics is part of the definition of art. That is not to deny that aesthetics is part of art! It is definitely a feature of the Brillo cartons as piece of commercial art. It was because of the aesthetics of popular art that the Pop artists were so fascinated by popular imagery - commercial logos, cartoons, kitsch. But that is not to say, though I love popular imagery, that only popular art is aesthetic. That would be crazy and it would be false. But it is also false to say that aesthetics is the point of visual art. It is not at all the point of *Brillo Box*! Nor is it the point of most of the world's art. In this, in his dialogues with Pierre Cabanne, is what Duchamp more or less said. Aesthetics got to be part of the point of art with the Renaissance, and then, when aesthetics was really discovered, in the 18th century, the main players could maintain that what the point of art was the provision of visual pleasure. Since art was taken as imitation, its purpose was to bring before the eyes of viewer what was

aesthetically pleasing in the world – pretty people, scenes, objects. In Hans Belting's great book, *Kult und Bild*, he discusses the "point" of devotional images from early Christianity until the Renaissance, in which aesthetics had no role to speak of. Images were prayed to and worshipped for miracles, like the *Vierzehn Heiligen* of the German Baroque, which are incidentally aesthetically pleasing. But the cult of the *Vierzehn Heiligen* loved them for helping in difficult births, illnesses, bad fortune. Their unmistakable beauty is merely what was expected of statuary in the eighteenth century, not what the statuary was about. But if aesthetics is not the point of art, what is the point of aesthetics?

This is too swift. I don't want to deny that there may be art, the point of which is aesthetic. I'm not sure that I want to furnish examples of this yet, but I can say that most of the art being made today does not have the provision of aesthetic experience as its main goal. And I don't think that was the main goal of most of the art made in the course of art history. On the other hand, there is unmistakably an aesthetic component in much traditional and in some contemporary art. Now it would be a major transformation in artistic practice if artists were to begin making art, the point and purpose of which was aesthetic experience. That would really be a revolution. In paying attention to aesthetics, philosophers would be mistaken in believing they were paying attention to the main neglected point of art. But it may be, or rather, I think it is true that when there is an intended aesthetic component in art, it is a means to whatever the point of the art may be. And this certainly would be worth paying philosophical attention to, even if aesthetics is not part of the definition of art. And if, again, aesthetics really is an artistic means, then art history, in paying attention to it, is paying attention to how art, considered politically or economically or socially or however, achieves its goals. In brief, the reconsideration of aesthetics, whether in philosophy or in aesthetics, can tell us a great deal worth knowing about art, whatever our approach to it may be, as well as about the social world or - the world as objective spirit.

I want now to move to a rather deeper level, to a concept of aesthetics that almost certainly has some impact on how we think about art philosophically, but could have an even more significant impact on how we think about some of the central issues of philosophy itself. This is an approach to aesthetics that, because it is associated with one of the most respected names in modern philosophy, might recommend itself to philosophers inclined to be scornful of aesthetics as a minor discipline, preoccupied by frill and froth. In 1903, William James arranged for the philosophical genius, Charles Sanders Peirce, to give a series of lectures at Harvard on the meaning of Pragmatism. In the lectures, Peirce specified three normative disciplines, logic, ethics, and aesthetics - what is right in thought, in action, and in feeling - of which aesthetics was the most fundamental. Peirce believed that logic is founded on ethics, of which it is a higher development. He then says, surprisingly, in a letter to James in November, 1902, that "ethics rests in the same manner on aesthetics - by which, needless to say, I don't mean milk and water and sugar." Peirce incidentally, was unhappy with the term "aesthetics" and proposed in its stead the clearly unaesthetic word "axiagastics," which is the science that examines that which is worthy of adoration. I want to quote somewhat extensively from a passage in Lecture 5: [p.213]

"I find the task imposed upon me of defining the esthetically good. . . . I should say that an object, to be esthetically good, must have a multitude of parts so related to one another as to impart a positive simple immediate quality to their totality; and whatever does this is, in so far, esthetically good, no matter what the particular quality of the total may be. If that quality be such as to nauseate us, to scare us, or otherwise

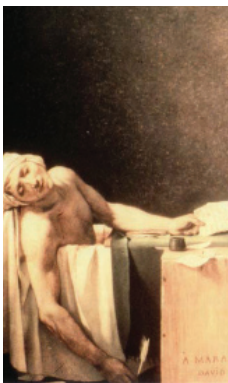


to disturb us to the point of throwing us out of the mood of esthetic enjoyment, out of the mood of simply contemplating the embodiment of the quality, - just for example, as the Alps affected the people of old times, when the state of civilization was such that an impression of great power was inseparably associated with lively apprehension and terror, - then the object remains nonetheless esthetically good, although people in our condition are incapacitated from a calm esthetic contemplation of it."

Peirce derives the consequence that "there is no such thing as positive esthetic badness...All there will be will be various esthetic qualities." He wrote to James, jocularly, that "I am inclined in my aesthetic judgments to think as the true Kentuckian about whiskey: *possibly* some may be better than others, but all are aesthetically good ."

I am not a Peirce scholar, and have no idea to what extent if any these ideas are developed in any detail elsewhere in his voluminous writings. But I have the sense that what Peirce had in mind by aesthetic qualities must have been close to what Heidegger spoke of in *Time and Being as Stimmen*, or "moods." Heidegger writes: "A mood makes manifest 'how one is, and how one is faring.'" To exist as what he calls *Dasein* - "being there" - is always to be in some mood: "The pallid, evenly balanced lack of mood, which is often persistent and which is not to be mistaken for a bad mood, is far from being nothing at all." One of moods that Heidegger famously explores is "boredom," in his 1929 essay *Was ist Metaphysik*. In Section 40 of *Sein und Zeit*, he deals with anxiety or Angst. The state of mind that Sartre explores as Nausea is yet another example. I think terror, as exploited by the Department of Homeland Security is a Stimmung - a mood in which everything is disclosed as threatening. I think what Kant designates as "Bewunderung and Ehrfurcht" before "the starry heavens above" is a mood in which sublimity is felt. There is little doubt that certain works are intended to create moods, sometimes quite powerful moods. The Nuremberg rallies of Nazism are examples of mood manipulation. The aesthetics of music, in some case of architecture, in many cases of movies, we are put into moods. Book II of Aristotle's Rhetoric, since which, according to Heidegger "scarcely one forward step worthy of mention has been made," deals with these affects in a systematic way.

What I admire in Peirce and Heidegger is that they have sought to liberate aesthetics from its traditional preoccupation with beauty, and beauty's traditional limitation to calm detachment - and at the same time to situate the beauty as part of the ontology of being human. But this would be the mood we are put into by beautiful days or beautiful settings.



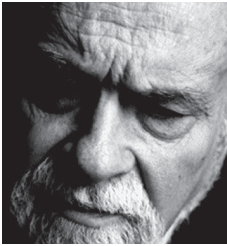
Let me consider a case where the beauty of an art work is specifically intended to put its viewers into a special mood. - Jacques-Louis David's great painting, *Marat assassiné* of 1793. One has to know something about Marat and the French Revolution to see it as a political painting, but when David painted it, everyone would have known this, and would have known the circumstances: that Marat, the fierce polemicist, had been treacherously murdered by a young woman, Charlotte Corday, who had hoped to restore order in France by killing Marat. She was the female suicide bomber of the French Revolution. David did not depict the act of killing, but the effect, through what Baudelaire describes as a visual poem. The painting looks like a descent from the Cross. Marat is holding a pen through which he was to perform an act of kindness for his assassin by signing a petition. A knife is on the floor, blood stains the sheet, which has become his shroud. Marat's body almost glows, as Christ's

body glows in the Transfiguration. His wounds are almost ornamental, as are Jesus's wounds in Renaissance descents. Only in the seventeenth century, under the influence of the Council of Trent, did it become important to show Jesus as bloody and torn. That continues in an almost excessive way with Mel Gibson. It depends upon whether we are to see Jesus as human or as divine. In David's painting, one is to see Marat as Jesus, dead but transfigured, and be moved by pity to identify with his cause and his sacrifice. We know the feelings we are intended to have, but we today don't quite have those feelings since we are not part of the reality of the painting's moment. We cannot translate into action the feelings we have, but the actions the painting is intended to arouse are political, as the feelings themselves are, and if we can do little more than look at the painting, that does not mean that the feelings and the intentions they enjoin do not belong to the experience. It was meant to arouse, and that power is still felt. As a philosopher, what strikes me is that visual beauty is, in this work, internal to its political effect. The beauty underwrites the metaphor between Christ and Marat, and validates his suffering. He died for you. So what are you going to do to demonstrate he did not die in vain? *Allons enfants de la patrie!* I don't think we ourselves can be put into the mood of revolutionary indignation that David's audience felt, or were intended to feel. We simply recognize and analyze it, and note how it contributes to the work's meaning.

Now I think the rediscovery of aesthetics is best understood as the rediscovery of the role that aesthetic qualities play in the use of art to present meanings by visual means. Ontologically, aesthetics is not essential to art - but rhetorically, it is central. The artist uses aesthetics to transform or confirm attitudes. That is not the same as putting us in the mood of calm aesthetic contemplations - which has tended to hijack the concept of aesthetics. I don't say it is unimportant, but it is not the only important role aesthetics plays in art.

Returning to the two calls for papers, I would say that the rediscovery of aesthetics means an enrichment rather than a transforation of current art historical practice. It show how, in the domain of objective spirit, art has played an important role in society. So far as philosophy is concerned, it is probably a good thing for philosophers to be liberated from the ontological preoccupations that obsessed me and my contemporaries. It is to address art now pragmatically, from the perspective of life.

## ABOUT ARTHUR DANTO



Arthur C. Danto was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1924, and grew up in Detroit. After spending two years in the Army, Danto studied art and history at Wayne University (now Wayne State University) and then at Columbia University.

From 1949 to 1950, Danto studied in Paris on a Fulbright scholarship, and in 1951 returned to teach at Columbia, where he is currently Johnsonian Professor of Philosophy.

Since 1984, he has been art critic for *The Nation*, and in addition to his many books on philosophical subjects, he has published several collections of art criticism, including *Encounters and Reflections: Art in the Historical Present* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990), which won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism; *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992); *Playing With the Edge: The Photographic Achievement of Robert Mapplethorpe* (University of California, 1995); and, most recently, *The Madonna of the Future: Essays in a Pluralistic Art World* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000). He lives in New York City.