

BLESSED WITH AWARENESS: WOLTERSTORFF, DANTO AND HORNBY ON
RESPONDING TO ART

In a refreshing moment of sweeping historical examination, Nicholas Wolterstorff has recently accused the aestheticians of the last two and a half centuries of ignoring an especially precious category of art. Wolterstorff maintains that intense and healing reactions occur in the “memorial and commemorative uses of art?”¹ To illustrate his theme, Wolterstorff uses the examples of two concerts by the Vienna Philharmonic in New York in 2002, one at Carnegie Hall and the other at St. Patrick’s Cathedral, and the famous *Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial* of Maya Lin on the Mall in Washington D.C. He cites the reviews of the two concerts in the New York Times as evidence of his judgment of the myopia of aestheticians of the past 250 years, maintaining that both Anglo-American and Continental Aestheticians have been afflicted with this disability. The Times critic assessed the Carnegie Hall concert by careful description of “textured chords” and “dynamically fluid string playing,” but the review of the St. Patrick’s concert, a free memorial program to honor the victims of September 11, mentions the “healing” character of the music and quotes the orchestra’s president as having made remarks at the event on the effectiveness of music to provide a “sense of eternity and with it an idea of the fulfillment of our desire for peace and harmony,” and later of referring to Mozart, whose “*Ave Verum Corpus*” ended the concert with no applause from audience members who were holding lighted candles, as a “gift of God.”

Wolterstorff opines that none of the sorts of remarks made about the emotional effects of the St. Patrick’s concert would likely make it into any review of a planned concert in Carnegie Hall whose program was chosen for aesthetic rather than political

reasons. Indeed, he even suggests how distant the two concert worlds are from one another by quoting the reviewer of the political concert's out-of-place aesthetic remarks.

Here is how Wolterstorff reports it:

The reviewer of the cathedral concert observed, "amplification in echoey acoustics made it hard to judge tone quality"; he was willing, though, to give the benefit of the doubt to the players. And he noted that the fact "that the audience extended well beyond the orchestra's usual following at Carnegie Hall, a wonderful thing in itself, was evident from the applause between movements of the Haydn and even during one movement. A shame," he added, "for although such enthusiasm should in most cases not be discouraged (and no one thought to do so here), the intense mood of this piece does not wear interruption or celebration well."²

Though Wolterstorff makes little comment about these observations, we can infer that he thinks they are at least irrelevant to the world of this memorial concert, if not boorishly impolite. Wolterstorff thinks this incommensurability mirrors the purification of the realm of the aesthetic that he believes developed in the 18th century and has become the taken for granted starting point for aestheticians ever since.³

Wolterstorff also reminds us of the typical behavior of the crowds that go to the Vietnam Memorial—the hushed reverence, the touching or the rubbings done of the names of loved ones, the tears—and concludes: "Our philosophers of art of the past two and a half centuries have not talked about touching and kissing as ways of engaging art;

they have not talked about tears in the presence of a sculpture—real tears, I mean. They have talked about art tears.”⁴

Wolterstorff concludes his essay by offering a “way forward.” He says “we must free ourselves from the assumption that the contemplative interaction with the aesthetic qualities of a work automatically makes a more important contribution to our flourishing than any other mode of engagement. Once we have taken these steps, we will have broken the hegemony of the aesthetic. We will then be free at last to theorize both about what was going on when the Vienna Philharmonic played its memorial concert in the cathedral, and what was going on when it played its regular concert in Carnegie Hall.”⁵

But one wonders if this “addition” of the category of memorial and commemorative art is really much of an advance. In the first place, do we not have to wonder what is it about such concerts and sculptures that enables the outpouring of emotion that is so transforming to occur? Suppose the St. Patrick’s concert were performed by a not too well rehearsed middle school band from Flatbush. Suppose political interests got so far into the mix of the Vietnam Memorial that another, more overtly political, entry had been chosen. Would the commemorative art have been as successful? On the one hand, Wolterstorff might want to respond that it is just such “social practices” that have to be taken in to account to explain the success of memorials and commemorations, but I keep thinking that there are many aesthetic considerations that are ingredient in determining the reactions as well. Moreover, as the institutional theory of art suggests, perhaps some social practices are likewise involved in the aesthetic excellence that has been the focus of attention in the philosophy of art for the last 250 years. If so, perhaps dividing the pie between “aesthetic” and “memorial” art will also be

too compartmentalizing, too modernist. The Vienna Philharmonic performance and Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial have exceptional aesthetic qualities, and if they did not have these qualities they could not play their roles in the commemorations. Maybe we need to ask ourselves why there is so little kissing, touching and crying in Carnegie Hall or at MOMA?

Arthur Danto's Carus Lectures, *The Abuse of Beauty*, can help us see the point more clearly. Though Wolterstorff hopes for a future that might break "the hegemony of the aesthetic," Danto argues that this has already been done in the art of the 20th century, paradigmatically in the visual arts. Danto persuasively presents a story in which the aestheticians of the 18th century, particularly Kant, whose later influence is so strong, assumed that the aesthetic quality of beauty was the key feature of art and the understanding of beauty was precisely the target aim of modern "aesthetics." However, the artists of the 20th century, beginning already with Marcel Duchamp in the second decade of the century, had consciously and systematically destroyed the importance of beauty and even tried mightily to eliminate it from their art. Instructively, the Dadaists even eliminated beauty for "politico-cultural" reasons, producing an "art" that presumably had a categorical, if qualitatively opposite, similarity to Wolterstorff's commemorative art. Audiences were supposed to be disgusted, outraged, offended and wounded by dada rather than healed.⁶ The reminder of this episode in the history of art suggests immediately that Wolterstorff is thinking too exclusively about "beautiful" political art, and not enough about how "political," in the sense of "affecting," all art aims to be.

When Danto had his own epiphany about the destruction of “hegemony of the aesthetic” in the experience of Andy Warhol’s “Brillo Box,” in the mid-1960s, even the philosophers began to acknowledge the non-aesthetic basis of art. This was 40 years ago. With the shift from new criticism to “theory” in literary studies, politics enters there as well. Architects have been “learning from Las Vegas” for a couple of generations now and, as time goes on, there seems to be a need for the intellectual establishment to talk about “postmodernity.” All of a sudden, it becomes difficult to see what Wolterstorff means by “the hegemony of the aesthetic” as a contemporary force in the theory of the arts.

Danto’s last chapter in *The Abuse of Beauty* can perhaps secure a tighter hold on what Wolterstorff’s complaint is about. In that chapter, Danto connects the famous Kantian distinction between the beautiful and the sublime with a movement in abstract art initiated by Barnett Newman. Traditionally, a painting was beautiful if it had a beautiful subject and was rendered with tolerable mimetic accuracy. With abstract art, the idea of a subject had been jettisoned. True enough, formalists, like Clive Bell and Roger Fry had been able to hang on to beauty in painting by analyzing it into “form,” a move not far removed from Kant’s explanation of beauty. But artists for most of the last century had been painting pictures that were not beautiful, and eventually everyone had to admit that beauty was not the key feature of art works, however disillusioning this was to formalist theoreticians. Expression theory, which did not require a reliance on beauty, had actually been rivaling formalism since the beginning of the nineteenth century. But expression theory itself depended on a result in the audience that permitted the other half of the Kantian division, sublimity, to emerge as a new focus of attention in art. Barnett

Newman seized this idea with clarity and deliberateness. His pictures left beauty behind once and for all in favor of sublimity.

Danto maintains that a key feature of sublimity is that it is not picturable. “Since sublimity is internally related to size, indeed to vastness, it cannot be pictured,” Danto says.⁷ If we generalize this to all the arts, it means that what is special or important about the arts is not wholly contained in the work itself. If that is so, it is hard to see where else we could place it than in the audience. But this just shows that Wolterstorff’s concern for memorial art is really central to all art. It is not just an interesting category of art that requires an acknowledgement of the deeply moving and transformative experience, it is a question of whether this transformation is the key feature in the concept of art as Danto is trying to articulate it. Even if we acknowledge that “dynamically fluid string playing” is a feature of a concert in Carnegie Hall, the question remains as to whether this concert was successful or a good work of art. Aesthetic features alone can not give a final answer to this.

It is interesting that one of the books to which Wolterstorff pays tribute for opening his eyes to the narrowness of aestheticism, is M.H. Abrams’ *The Mirror and the Lamp*. In that book, Abrams codifies approaches to art into four kinds and he is particularly interested in the attack that Expressionism had upon Mimetic Theory at the beginning of the 19th century. Formalism of course grows up at the same time and does dominate the philosophical theory of art from the mid-19th century till today (if you read your history the way Wolterstorff does). But the fourth approach, the “Pragmatic” approach to art (as Abrams calls it) seems to have little hegemony on art theory at any historical period. Nevertheless, Abrams candidly admits: “Measured either by its

duration or the number of its adherents, therefore, the pragmatic view, broadly conceived, has been the principal aesthetic attitude of the Western world.”⁸ In short, Art has been extraordinarily important to all cultures quite simply because of the effects it has on its audiences. And when we think about Duchamp, the Dadaists, the surrealists, Warhol and others who have produced either so called “anti-aesthetic”⁹ or “anesthetic” works of art in the twentieth century, we have to realize that even sublimity is an insufficient alternative to beauty. Indeed, sublimity is to the pragmatic understanding of art as beauty is to the formalist understanding. But the move to sublimity might put us on the trail of prioritizing the various approaches to art so nicely set out by Abrams, and help heal Wolterstorff’s division between aesthetic and memorial art.

Like Wolterstorff, Danto also brings up the example of Maya Lin’s *Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial* in *The Abuse of Beauty* in a section of chapter 6 entitled “Art’s Transformative Power.”¹⁰ Like Wolterstorff, Danto admits that “the *Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial* stands as a challenge to the entire complex of attitudes toward artworks, with which I began. More than this, I think, the *Memorial* emblemizes the role that art plays in most of our lives, even if we happen to be members of the cognitive art establishment.”¹¹ In Danto’s case, he acknowledges that this transformation is the role that all art, not just memorial art, plays in our lives. He robustly acknowledges his own “Pragmatic” theoretical position in talking about beauty and politics. He says, “My sense is that artistic excellence is connected with what the art is supposed to do, what effect it is intended to have.”¹²

But what effect is an art work supposed to have? It is clearly not contained in the experience of beauty alone. If it is to be transformative, and we acknowledge that the

experience of beauty itself can be transformative, what about the experience of an anaesthetic or anti-aesthetic work? What about the art works that Danto describes that can be intended to disgust or bore or outrage and be successful at it?

Well, in the case of the Dadaist project, the disgust of the art was to stimulate a consciousness critical of the seductive values of the traditional culture, and perhaps even beauty primarily. Anyone who moved from the consciousness of a well socialized citizen to the consciousness of a Dadaist would certainly have been transformed. So Danto bravely suggests that the political art of the last half of the 20th century stands for him as worthy of its aesthetic classification. But since Danto accepts anaesthetic and anti-aesthetic objects as works of art provided they accomplish the effect they are “intended to have,” it is difficult to see how any political manifesto or even religious movement (as drama) could be refused laurels as great art works so long as they had their intended effects. We immediately realize the headaches this entails as we march inevitably toward making art so broad a concept that artistic excellence could be had by almost anyone who could think of how others might be disgusted by something and then produce that something. We might be able to see how some conception of “the artworld” could save us from this slippery slope. But I wonder if we can’t appeal to the aesthetic and the transformational to cooperate more to help us out.

For further meditation on this possibility I elicit a recent Op-Ed piece in the New York Times by the novelist and music critic, Nick Hornby.¹³ Hornby is eulogizing a contemporary rock band called Marah. Marah has been around awhile, but hasn’t made it big despite the appearance of the two core members of the band on stage to jam with Bruce Springsteen at his concert at Giants Stadium. Hornby catches up with Marah in a

little town north of London where they invite a pick up drummer with an incomplete set of drums to aid them and pass the hat when the playing is finished. Hornby informs us that “He’s not Marah’s drummer (the band is temporarily without) but he’s a drummer, and he owns most of a drum kit, and his appearance allows the band to make an even more glorious and urgent racket than they had managed hitherto. The show ends triumphantly, as Marah shows tend to do, with Serge lying on the floor amid the feet of his public, wailing away on his harmonica.”¹⁴

Hornby is trying to praise Marah, not to bury it. Moreover, the point of the piece is to decry the “overcommercialized,” and savvy productions of most contemporary rock musicians and to reconcile himself to a certain commitment to some fairly “unbeautiful” aspects of rock and roll at an age and sophistication level by which the culture expects him to have abandoned it. How does Hornby know to make this criticism and commit to this reconciliation? He acknowledges that he is transformed. At 47, Hornby realizes he is the target of the criticism: “most rock music is made by the young, for the young, about being young, and if you’re not young and you still listen to it, then you should be ashamed of yourself.”¹⁵ His answer to this barb is “Youth is a quality not unlike health: it’s found in greater abundance among the young, but we all need access to it...I’m talking about the energy, the wistful yearning, the inexplicable exhilaration, the sporadic sense of invincibility, the hope that stings like chlorine. When I was younger rock music articulated these feelings, and now that I’m older it stimulates them, but either way, rock ‘n’ roll was and remains necessary because: who doesn’t need exhilaration and a sense of invincibility, even if it’s only now and again?”¹⁶

I think it would be unfair to subject Hornby's defense of this to a strenuous moral and logical criticism. He is talking about a certain sort of transformation of the spirit that is familiar to most Americans living today who have been surrounded by rock music for many years. At the same time, Hornby's intense training and experience with rock (and other sorts of popular music) finds the source of the transformation in a very complicated but familiar set of aesthetic properties that provide it. It is not that those properties have a simple "quality" that could be thought of as aesthetic in a mechanical sense that is, able to be ascertained by a machine. They may require certain social contexts and even certain intentional states on the part of the performers (and maybe even the audience for that matter). But they can't actually have their authentic effect without those properties. Thus the transformation that is the criteria of "artistic excellence" can only be effected by the "fit" between the meaning or intended effect of the production and the aesthetic properties that embody that meaning or intended effect. It is this "fit" rather than the transformation that formalists have turned into the specifically "aesthetic experience" (the "art tears" that Wolterstorff contrasts to "real" tears), but it is also this "fit" that can put a break on the slide of our slippery slope as to what is going to count as art by making aesthetic properties count.

Additionally, the transformation has to be carefully described. Although the transformation by art has to be thought of as a real transformation of real human beings, it can be neither a superficial psychological ride nor an ordinary sense of political change of mind. The first makes the art into something to "experience" rather than to absorb. The second suggests practical plans for arranging the furniture of the world. Of course neither experience nor political commitments is excluded from the transformation by art.

But experience is only a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for transformation; and politics is only a possible, not a necessary, consequence of the transformation. The transformation is closer to being moral than anything else, where we think of moral as involving the character, or the being, or the soul of a person. Yet the transformation is not driven by the agency of moral self-improvement, but rather bestowed by the lucky blessing of the art—Mozart as a “gift of God.”

Of course this way of talking might have cogency for what we might call “high end” transformations—Wolterstorff’s visit to the *Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial*, Danto’s reading of Proust—but what about “ordinary” dealings with art? To make this extend to the myriad ways we interact with art, sometimes profound no doubt, but often quite shallow, we might need to say something about the condition in which the transformation results. Is it a new resolution to live with sorrow but without bitterness? An acceptance of the sacrificial death of soldiers in a lost war? A feeling of youthful exuberance? All of these are going to be too specific for the philosophical understanding we are reaching for.

At the end of *The Abuse of Beauty*, Danto quotes Nobokov approvingly for a formula that comes close. When asked by an interviewer if he was surprised by anything in life, Nobokov responded: “The marvel of consciousness—that sudden window swinging open on the sunlit landscape amid the night of non-being.”¹⁷ While Danto finds Nobokov’s answer sublime, even he is uneasy about some of its details, in particular that the “sunlit landscape” brings us back again to a standard of beauty beyond which Danto believes we have progressed. But philosophically speaking, I think the “sunlit landscape” is a fitting metaphor even if the scene is ashes, as it is for Clov in Samuel Beckett’s play, *Endgame*.

Though Clov is represented in the play in a kind of despair, Beckett's play is a sunlit landscape for those sensitive to its aesthetic. *Endgame* is transforming as an artwork whose vision about the human condition opens a window. It is the feeling that the window is opening that constitutes the transformation. Of course the windows open with all sorts of degrees of feeling. Sometimes it is the accumulation of a lot of small openings that allows us to become aware that a transformation has taken place. I am transformed as a feeling about my awareness. I am blessed with awareness.

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¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Why Philosophy of Art Cannot Handle Kissing, Touching, and Crying," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 61 (2003): 18.

² *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁶ See particularly chapter 5, "Beauty and Politics" in Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*, (Open Court, 2003).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁸ M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, (W.W. Norton and Company, 1958) p. 21.

⁹ An excellent anthology discussing this issue was produced over twenty years ago. See Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, (Bay Press, 1983).

¹⁰ Danto had earlier in the book given a more direct account of the wall's artistic success.

¹¹ Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*, p. 132.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹³ Nick Hornby, "Rock of Ages," *New York Times*, May 21, 2004.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ As quoted in Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*, p. 159.