

Feminist Criticism: On Disturbatory Art and Beauty

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Arthur C. Danto – great philosopher, good friend, and feminist role model when few could be found within the ranks of philosophical aesthetics and male philosophers in general – was a paradigm of provocative thought about contemporary art. Beginning in the 1980s, Danto offered interpretations of artworks by a wide array of artists, including Eva Hesse, Judy Chicago, and Cindy Sherman, whose “disturbatory” works were either ignored or denounced by mainstream critics at the time. Danto’s championing of feminist art was deliberate and delightful; he openly endorsed the Guerrilla Girls! He was eager to promote what he saw as a revolutionary movement. His words were especially appreciated in my early years in graduate school: studying aesthetics after completing a master’s program in studio art. My reflections here honor the openness and rigor that Danto brought to his many experiences of art as he perused the galleries and museums of New York City and shared his recollections with devoted readers of *The Nation*. He approached fresh feminist works within the context of newly emerging feminist art criticism that ultimately shaped the early development of what has come to be known as “feminist aesthetics.” I begin with Danto’s appreciation of women’s unique contributions to art, including those of his beloved wife, Barbara Westman Danto. I then highlight the role of female artists in his developing vocabulary of feminist art criticism and finally note his transition to feminist aesthetics. Particularly interesting to Danto were the many forms of defiance by female artists who sought to reclaim agency and expression of the female body. He revived interest in the neglected topic of beauty while simultaneously advancing radical political goals within the artworld. His call to arms urged art viewers to experience the new – what he often called “art on the edge and over” – wherein, “The experience of art becomes a moral adventure rather than merely an aesthetic interlude” (Danto 1996, 16).

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1 Appreciating Women in Art

Now that we can look back upon his multifaceted career as philosopher, critic, and artist, Danto's feminist writings are highly relevant. He began as a philosopher of action theory and metaphysics, returning later to the writings of Hegel on the end of art, in addition to his many books and articles on philosophical aesthetics and ground-breaking work in the philosophy of art. In addition, he was well known from 1984 to 2009 as the art critic for the distinguished publication, *The Nation*, and the winner of many awards. As a practicing artist, he specialized in woodcuts, a "hands on" medium. His capacious range of intellectual interests – from the core of analytic philosophy to its feminist fringes – refined and focused his point of view on the artist, her intentions, and ultimately, deep meanings of her work. Creating his own art, particularly within the exciting postwar years of Abstract Expressionism in New York City, must have been a heady endeavor. In addition to the stimulation of an ever-present active art scene and academic colleagues were the contributions of Barbara Westman Danto, also an accomplished artist.

Consider Westman Danto's colorful and lively painting entitled "Family Portrait."



Sitting comfortably and relaxed on a small sofa, life seems to emanate from the couple as green ferns grow up and tan squiggles flow down. The stripes of shirts and couch and the dots of Barbara's socks add to the frenzy of lines and energy. The sitters, anchored in blue and linked by their two attentive dogs, "pop" against the cadmium yellow of the wall. At the center of the universe in their living room, they are comfortably at home with their pets in a "family" setting. Arthur's left hand rests affectionately on Barbara's shoulder. There is respect as he looks at her and intimacy as we too are allowed into the space. On Arthur's lap lie two of his books: *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981) topped by *What Philosophy Is: A Guide to the Elements* (1968). Barbara's atypical "family of four" casts Arthur as a deep yet approachable scholar: a dog lover relaxed in his home environment.



A photo taken of the couple seated in front of the painting hanging in their residence accompanied an article in *The New York Times Magazine* written by Elizabeth Frank entitled, “Art’s Off-the-Wall Critic” (1989). In short order, Danto had become quite a sensation in the local art scene. He had praised Andy Warhol’s “Brillo Boxes” after first seeing them at the Stable Gallery in 1964 and promoted his “end of art” theorizing, baffling many New Yorkers. In spite of his “outsider,” that is, philosopher’s, status as art critic, he was favorably compared to both Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg. Adopting a decidedly idiosyncratic turn, one author wrote, “They look every inch the picture of that sort of soaringly accomplished yet eccentric Manhattan couple, so blending the highbrow with the bohemian ...” (Hennessey 2016).

Within the 1989 feature, Elizabeth Frank described Danto as “one of the most vocal and controversial art critics today ... lucid and amusing, detached and disinterested... . Reveling in a kind of dandyish pedantry,” who was clearly seen to be having a great deal of fun with serious New York art: “When you walk through an exhibition with him you feel you are in the company of an updated 18th-century amateur who is interested in everything and rules nothing out.” She clearly enjoyed his style: “He is the art world’s great flaneur, strolling the boulevards with a cheerful whistle, stopping to peer in a shop window when something catches his eye.” And she sought to differentiate him as an atypical critic: “The live-and-let-live attitude carries over into the criticism. Danto readily admits to being non-confrontational and uncurmudgeonly” (1989). Another author, writing a review in 2000 of Danto’s *The Madonna of the Future: Essays in a Pluralistic Art World* (2000b), described him as “a pluralistic critic, willing to see anything as art ... There is no one like Danto for making sense of a wad of pink clay that looks like chewed bubble gum. There is no one else who can confidently say that Damien Hirst’s dead lamb is better than his dead pig... . He’s unbeatable at what he does” (Boxer 2000, 9).

Who wouldn’t enjoy reading Danto’s reviews and reliving his impressions of art? I return to the role of Barbara Westman Danto and her artistic accomplishments – covers

for *The New Yorker* and numerous book illustrations – because of Arthur’s love for her as his female and feminist companion-in-art. He mentioned her often: “Life in the art world is filled with adventure and astonishments, and I am beyond expression happy to have been able to share it with my high-spirited and affectionate sidekick and wife, the artist Barbara Westman. There is no such thing as drabness or dreariness when she comes along, and I hope the cocktail effervescence of her company is somehow communicated in the livelier passages and pages of this work” (Danto 1994, xvi). Later he added: “My marvelous wife and companion, the artist Barbara Westman, blesses my life. Her unfailing cheerfulness, humor, love, and high spirits are the elixir that explains my happiness and productivity” (Danto 2003, xxii). Not only did they view art together, but he empathized with how she felt to be an artist, to create. I suggest that his attention to women in art was due in part to his relationship with Barbara, whereby women posed no threat or aberration from the established canon of creativity and craft. Not only did Barbara ground his art criticism and philosophy in artistic practice, but she also reminded him, daily, that artists can be women too.

Frank’s article concluded with the inaccurate statement, “He’s not interested in esthetics or in making judgments about esthetic quality” (1989). When Danto explained the meaning of a work of art, he automatically judged it worthy of our shared attention and possible admiration. Indeed, his ongoing attempts to define “art” were testament to the fact that – unlike most art critics – he was a philosopher first and critic second. Let us consider some of the women whose work he came to appreciate – a veritable history of the feminist movement of the 1980s and following – as he ultimately returned to the topic of beauty, around the turn of the millennium, to provide one type of model for feminist aesthetics.

2 Female Artists and Feminist Art Criticism

The year 1987 was pivotal for what Danto considered a feminist revolution in art. He found the work of Lee Krasner, student of Hans Hoffman, less interesting than her working relationship with her husband Jackson Pollock’s “genius” (Danto 1987, 35). However, he judged Jennifer Bartlett’s early work “rich and demanding” but “difficult,” eventually becoming “one of her enthusiasts” (Danto 1987, 165, 166, 170). In writing about Cindy Sherman in August of 1987, Danto explained that photography was not her medium; rather, it was “a means to her artistic ends” whereby “Her medium is herself” (Danto 1990, 120). In her early black and white film stills, she photographed herself as an actress in various roles “subject to cosmetic modifications that are the right of Western women: lipstick, eye shadow, hair coloring and of course the semiotics of feminine dress” (Danto 1990, 121). We are unable to fully enter the illusion created by the artist because she functioned as a type of performance artist whose “genius consists in the discovery that one can be disturbing through photography... . She has found a way of penetrating the consciousness of her viewers, and in this way obliterating the insulating distances between her self and our selves” (Danto 1990, 123). “Disturbatory” was a label that would be applied to many female and feminist artists. Years later, after her explosive color photography, Danto would write that Sherman’s early stills served

“as a fulcrum for raising the deepest questions of what it meant to be a woman in America in the late twentieth century” (Danto 1997, 148).

In November 1987, Danto shared some revelatory thoughts in a review of four large-scale paintings of colorful, nested squares of the 1974 *Diderot* series by Frank Stella: “The first word that entered my mind when I initially saw these pieces was ‘feminist.’ With all due regard to the image of athletic machismo the artist projects through his obsession with fast cars and competitive sports, these extraordinary works suggest to me that a certain feminist sensibility has conquered artistic consciousness today” (Danto 1990, 147). Clearly, Danto saw “a certain feminist sensibility” as liberating: “The regimented squares express the regulative imperatives of the masculine will. The vibrant colors, the enveloping space, the sensuous and teasing dilations that draw us in, belong to the feminine side. Certain events in the art world of the 1970s and 1980s enabled this other side to emerge” (Danto 1990, 147).

Danto was openly acknowledging that a feminist sensibility – “an idiom that was very much on the periphery of the art world of the 1970s” – was already being copied in the artworld; it “has infiltrated it to the point of now being available as a salon style, and accessible to artists of whatever gender” (Danto 1990, 147). Stella, like other male artists who witnessed the feminist revolution in art, had tapped into his feminine side. But feminist artists soon radicalized their own style. “Women artists, in the name of women’s art, aimed at a kind of impurity instead, messy, often shocking, with an openness to rejected materials and crazy forms and provocative juxtapositions and illogical sequences. It was as if they refused to be tidy, demure, tasteful, dainty, clean, which after all were attributes of an imprisoning femininity. At the same time, they were not anxious to preempt the attributes of masculinity” (Danto 1990, 147–8).

Like his characterization of Cindy Sherman, Danto saw many women seeking to destabilize accepted categories and disrespect borders through performance art. Even when feminist creations “celebrated specifically female forms,” he wrote, “my sense is that the deep impulses of feminism consisted in eloquent, if often angry, repudiations... . feminists pioneered media that would sooner or later be appealing to those who may not have shared their ideology” (Danto 1990, 148). Danto not only saw the art world renewed by their oppositional and subversive creativity, he suggested that it – and Stella in particular – owed feminists a debt of gratitude. The revolution had begun, and his new category of disturbational objects proved useful in explaining the power of feminist art: “Disturbational objects are intended to bruise sensibilities, to offend good taste, to jeer and sneer and trash the consciousness of viewers formed by the very values disturbance regards as oppressive. Its aim is to transform moral consciousness, not to gratify the sense of beauty that implies privilege and position and inequalities of every order” (Danto 1990, 274).

In a 1989 essay entitled “Bad Aesthetic Times,” the formation of Danto’s feminist art criticism was nearly complete. He cited Linda Nochlin’s ground-breaking 1971 essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” as the new strain of “feminist art theory” revealing the elusive nature of the concept of “greatness” based on white male privilege that had routinely excluded women and minorities (Nochlin 1988). These were not bad aesthetic times, he argued, but rather quite extraordinary and even good aesthetic times given the feminist upheaval of traditional norms: “the feminist artist is

encouraged to identify herself with certain exceedingly primitivistic artistic postures, using herself, often, as the medium and vehicle of her art, employing feathers and body paint, even, drawing, like Carolee Schneeman, a text she held concealed in her vagina – as if giving birth to art. She is like a priestess or a sorceress, and aspires to a powerful relationship to her audience. Polemically, she repudiates a tradition of aesthetically defined fine art widely institutionalized in our culture” (Danto 1990, 301).

Danto’s categorization of disturbing art was thus exemplified by feminist performance artists whose work “can be pretty scary” in its “frontal nudity, blood, menstrual fluids” but which “also makes clear why traditional aesthetic categories will not apply to it. It is not meant to be beautiful, symmetrical, composed, tasteful, let alone pretty or elegant or perfect” (Danto 1990, 300–1). For Danto, feminist artists were leading the way in unprecedented ways: “And the question is whether, exactly a century later [after the birth of Modernism], we stand at the beginning of a new era whose pioneers are the feminist artists who repudiate a tradition that, from a long perspective, we can now see that Van Gogh and Gauguin really were continuing rather than disrupting” (Danto 1990, 302). Danto predicted that with the success of this revolutionary art, “something extraordinary will have been achieved,” that is, the “redemptive, finally hopeful, politically sublime” (Danto 1990, 301): “To be a feminist, after all, is not just to want to paint some pictures that will get accepted and get you accepted as a woman artist: it is to want to change the world in ways that matter to you most, politically and in ways we hardly can imagine from where we are now” (Danto 1990, 300).

In reviewing, again in 1989, an exhibit titled, “Making Their Mark: Women Artists Move into the Mainstream, 1970–85,” in which all eighty-seven artists were female, he saw Miriam Schapiro as “the paradigm figure” whose work, such as *Wonderland* of 1983 was made of “traditionally feminine items – frilled aprons, doilies, a sampler” (Danto 1994, 58). He noted the scripted work of Nancy Spero, the appropriations (of Walker Evans photographs) of Sherrie Levine, the subversive gender inversions painted by Sylvia Sleigh, the nude photographs of Hannah Wilke with “her skin covered with tiny vulvas (made, one reads, of chewing gum)” as well as the “new language of sculpture” invented by Eva Hesse: all a “rebuke to aestheticism” (Danto 1994, 59). Indeed, Danto’s candor was on full display when he added, “It is work that would have failed had I, as a male, not felt myself under assault” (Danto 1994, 59).

Finally, in 1989, he invoked “an old-fashioned word” – beauty – to describe a 1952 Helen Frankenthaler painting, *Mountains and Sea*, that revealed his joy in explaining the messy process of staining a canvas with paint: “The string of drips in the upper right corner, for example, allow an archipelago of vibrant dots to form, the brush having discharged its delicate load and then, perhaps, descended to make the streak of pale blue in which the archipelago reappears, faintly, as a dot and then another paler dot. That is as beautiful as painting gets” (Danto 1994, 29). It was not until 1991, however, when he noticed the play on gender in the work of the young German conceptual artist Rosemarie Trockel – particularly her reference to the female identity of Marcel Duchamp, Rose Sélavy – that Danto began to write explicitly about connections of “male and female, art with politics, feminism with revolution” (Danto 1994, 215). And by 1996, in a volume that introduced us to examples of “art on the edge and over,” Danto announced two major changes that had clearly taken place since the mid-1960s that had left most “viewers” unprepared for what he called the “intractably avant-garde

... the abandonment of painting as the central form of artistic expression” and increased political work devoted to social change (Danto 1996, 15).

With the influence of feminism rising, “the experience of art becomes a moral adventure rather than merely an aesthetic interlude” (Danto 1996, 15). But a dilemma remained for feminist artists who seemed to reject the mainstream while still seeking its approval. In 1995 he commented upon “the somewhat paradoxical character of the Guerrilla Girls” – the group of anonymous activists that picketed New York art museums for under-representing women artists – in *After the End of Art*: “The group has been exceedingly radical in its means and in its spirit.

And the art of this superordinate entity is certainly a form of direct action: its members plaster the walls of Soho with brilliant, biting posters” (Danto 1997, 147). Their oppression and exclusion, however, moved them toward acceptance and inclusion; Danto voiced a complaint that could only be raised by a feminist from the inside: “But the message of the posters is that not enough women are represented in museums, in major shows, in important galleries. So it envisages artistic success in the traditional, let us say, using their concept, white male terms. Its means are radical and deconstructive, but its goals are altogether conservative” (Danto 1997, 147). Thus Danto comfortably noted the feminists’ dilemma, having described and categorized their art. He was now poised to move forward with a revolutionary feminist agenda of his own within aesthetics itself.

3 Feminist Aesthetics

Three notable events mark the change from Danto as feminist art critic to feminist aesthetician. First, Danto noted substantive theoretical changes in the creation and reception of feminist art and art criticism into mainstream philosophy, particularly with the work of Judy Chicago. In a 2002 review titled “The Feminine Mystique,” Danto called Chicago “one of the founders of the Feminist Art Movement” (Danto 2002, 32) and referred to her monumental 1980 project, *The Dinner Party*, as “one of the major artistic monuments of the second half of the twentieth century” (Danto 2002, 34). The title “Feminine Mystique,” of course, referred to Betty Friedan’s 1963 ground-breaking exposé of “the problem that had no name” – the malaise experienced by supposedly happy women in the late 1950s and 1960s. Danto had cited Friedan earlier, in 1997, when defending his claim that 1964 was a pivotal year in American politics in a Munich talk entitled “Thirty Years After the End of Art.” “In 1964 a congressional committee on women’s rights released its findings, giving support to the tremendous feminist movement detonated with the publication of Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique* of 1963” (Danto 1997, 126). Titling his review of Chicago’s work after Friedan’s well-known phrase paid tribute to both as “founding mothers.” He explained the impact of Chicago’s uniquely creative strategy, starting with her early work in abstraction, produced when she felt severely marginalized as a woman in a man’s art world: “instead of merely fitting in, she invented a whole new history, something entirely unexpected, in which she transformed resentments into a movement of art by, for and of women, and was carried into fame through historical urgencies themselves barely visible in the later 1960s” (Danto 2002, 32, 34).

Danto saw Chicago as creating a new “feminine content” and hence, a “new feminist philosophy” by which both artist and viewer were re-directed into “perceiving a work under the perspective of gender” instead of under traditional aesthetic categories (Danto 2002, 34). For example, Chicago’s *Pasadena Lifesavers – Red Series #4* of 1969–70 could be read in formalist terms as simply circles but were clearly intended by the artist “to be read as vaginal openings.” Quoting Chicago: “I was never thinking about the cunt as only the vulva. I was thinking about the cunt in a metaphysical way... Like what does it mean to be organized around a center core?” (Danto 2002, 34). Danto concluded, “Feminist art is not a movement defined by a single style, as most movements have been, but by a philosophy of what it means to be in the world as a woman” (Danto 2002, 34). Even as early as 2002, he astutely viewed the entire body of Chicago’s work as part of the feminist “revolution” in art, criticism, theory, and by extension, feminist philosophy.

Second, Danto published “Beauty and Beautification” that identified a separate, Hegelian, aesthetic Third Realm of beauty beyond natural beauty and artistic beauty: one that played an inevitable role on a daily basis in our own human lives (Danto 2000a). Once Danto focused on the “enhancement” of the body that included ornament and decoration, makeup and hairstyles, garments and tattoos, he was immersed in a new way of identifying and appreciating beauty that included beautiful people as well as the rituals in which they partook to beautify themselves and their worlds. Third Realm beauty was no longer about how beauty operated within art but rather *was* art. A paradigm example was a wedding dress deemed art entitled, “Le Mariage de Saint Mauer à Saint Gallen” (1994) on display at the Kunsthhaus in Zurich that was worn by the French artist Marie-Ange Guilleminot “in a somewhat disturbing performance work,” based on several kilos of lead sewn into the dress under the skirt (Danto 2000a, 68). A wedding dress could certainly be considered a work of art in terms of its craftsmanship; a bride wearing a wedding dress could look “like a work of art;” but in this case, the embodied meaning of the dress was its use as a work of art: its whiteness symbolizing purity disguising the hidden weight and burden of marriage (Danto 2000a, 68, 70). Like the 1964 “Brillo Box” by Andy Warhol, indiscernible from its real counterpart, the wedding dress gains its status as art through its “aboutness” or meaning.

Danto’s focus on the beautification of the human body came to include the street performances of Adrian Piper – a black woman passing as white – as well as the plastic surgery of ORLAN – a French woman who underwent bodily alterations to resemble depictions of beautiful women created by male artists. As in earlier writing about feminist art, Danto saw “a deep connection between the aesthetics of the Third Realm and the realm of ethics” that resulted in an endorsement of woman’s freedom to “appear as she cares to” rather than how she thought she should, that is, she was “no longer under the imperatives of attractiveness” that bring men pleasure: “Feminine beauty is thus connected with the power to arouse and excite” but Danto prioritized women’s happiness over men’s pleasure (Danto 2000a, 81). He predicted “a brave new world” where Third Realm aesthetics would become “less and less frivolous every day” (Danto 2000a, 82).

Third, Danto delivered the Paul Carus lectures at the 2001 American Philosophical Association meeting that more than sufficiently answered the question he had posed back in 1992, “What Ever Happened to Beauty?” (Danto 1994) The lectures, under the collective title, “The Revolt Against Beauty,” became the foundation of his 2003 publication, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*, that soundly redirected the

trajectory of both art criticism and aesthetics by not only reviving a full treatment of beauty but also injecting a new, gendered life into the topic of beautification (Danto 2003). Danto's conceptualization of a *revolt* against beauty became an *abuse* of beauty, particularly with examples such as Picasso's "perverse" depiction of beautiful women who are portrayed as suffering (Danto 2003, 114) and Matisse's depiction in *Woman with Hat* (1905) of the power of female beauty by means of a woman who was not beautiful at all (Danto 2003, 87–88). Most emphatic was his insistence that he had not considered resurrecting an old-fashioned topic like beauty until he had witnessed "its abuse at the hands of the art of the Intractable Avant-Garde" (Danto 2003, 80): "Protected by what I have learned, I can begin once again to pick up, with the long forceps of analytical philosophy, such toxic properties as beauty, sublimity, and the like" (Danto 2003, xix).

The most revealing example Danto provides is brief yet powerful: the "innovative sculptor" Eva Hesse, based on an interview before her untimely death at age 34 in 1970. Known for her conceptual, performance, and abstracted sculptural work, she vehemently rejected "prettiness" and beauty in art but revealed in her diaries a preoccupation with her own beauty (Danto 2003, 78–9). Danto interpreted this dissonance as a complication of the lived experiences of women in the late 1960s who were routinely judged by their looks after internalizing a male gaze. Her work was conflated with her self-image: "The search for her artistic path was further complicated by the questions women were then beginning to ask about their identity, though feminism as a movement had not yet emerged" (Danto 2006, 32–3). Writing in general, Danto observed, "Women sought – and by the evidence of the literature they still seek – to define female beauty as men are perceived to define it, and hence become what men want them to be" (Danto 2003, 77). Danto cast the new-found freedom of women unbound to beauty-as-mandated-by-men – the product of the women's liberation movement since the 1970s – as unattainable for Hesse in the late 1960s, in spite of her sophisticated aesthetic principles and artistic accomplishments. Danto was able to discern these aesthetic inconsistencies between Hesse's work and her sense of self and female identity *because* he was a man with a feminist consciousness and sensitivity. Even today, his insights continue to provide us with an understanding of beauty on many levels.

4 Feminist Conclusions

Arthur Danto's vast array of feminist writings in art criticism and aesthetics remain virtually untapped in contemporary philosophy of art. Scholars are encouraged to focus on his analyses of gender, race, sex, and sexuality within the social context of artistic creativity since he was one of the first among us – in addition to female aestheticians doing feminist analyses – to rise to the challenge. Notions such as disturbatory art and Third Realm beauty (not to mention the sublime) promise untold, indeed, *unlimited* possibilities for exploring controversial art in the twenty-first century: art in which the ethical seems to routinely trespass upon the aesthetical. To know what Danto wrote about the conk hairstyle of Malcolm X or a self-portrait of sixteenth-century Italian Renaissance painter Sofonisba Anguissola or the exquisitely phallic photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe can only enlighten and enrich our probing into "art" as we seek

greater exposure to and knowledge of under-represented artists who led the way in an artistic revolution in the previous century that has carried over to the present day. With the erosion of the art-historical canon, his inclusivity was a refreshing model of aesthetic writing; his verve and wit served to entice and entertain as well as educate. For those who will forever think and write and create artworks about beauty – and for all of us who enjoy our daily rituals of beautification – let us ponder and enjoy the last words of Danto's text, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*: "Beauty is an option for art and not a necessary condition. But it is not an option for life. It is a necessary condition for life as we would want to live it. That is why beauty, unlike the other aesthetic qualities, the sublime included, is a value" (Danto 2003, 160).

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