

MUST ART BE BEAUTIFUL?



INQUIRY INTO THE AVANT GARDE

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February 2025

WITHIN THE FIELD OF AESTHETICS—THAT WHICH CONCERNS ITSELF WITH THE STUDY OF BEAUTY, TASTE, AND ART—THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN BEAUTY AND ART HAS NATURALLY EMERGED AS A FOUNDATIONAL, HIGHLY EXAMINED SUBJECT OF INTEREST. WHERE SOME, LIKE DAVID HUME, ARGUE THAT AFFILIATION WITH ART AND BEAUTY IS MORE DYNAMIC THAT IT MAY, AT TIMES, BE ABSENT ALTOGETHER. MOREOVER, GIVEN THE SUBJECTIVITY THAT LENDS ITSELF TO THE DEFINITIONS OF BOTH BEAUTY AND ART, THE COMPLEXITY SURROUNDING THE DISCOURSE HAS BIRTH NUMEROUS DIVERSE ACCOUNTS ON THE SUBJECT MATTER. THUS, THE OVERARCHING QUESTION BECOMES: WHAT IS BEAUTIFUL AND MUST ART BE BEAUTIFUL? TO ADDRESS THE QUESTION, THIS ESSAY SETS OUT TO EXPLORE THE PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERSTANDING OF BEAUTY AND ART BY REFERENCING TEXTS BY ALBERT DANTO, CHARLES BAUDELAIRE, AND CLEMENT GREENBERG. MOREOVER, BY PLACING THIS ANALYSIS IN CONVERSATION WITH THE CONTEMPORARY ASSEMBLAGE *MY BED* BY TRACEY EMIN, THE TEXT WILL SET OUT TO ILLUSTRATE THE POSTULATION THAT BEAUTY—THOUGH NOT ALWAYS SELF-EVIDENT—IS AN ESSENTIAL, THOUGH SUBJECTIVE, COMPONENT OF ART. OFTEN CHALLENGING TRADITIONAL NOTIONS AND ENCOURAGING A BROADER, MORE INCLUSIVE UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT CONSTITUTES ARTISTIC VALUE.

BEFORE DEFINING BEAUTY, THE DEFINITION OF ART MUST BE ADDRESSED AS WE EXPLORE BEAUTY AS AN AESTHETIC QUALITY OF ART. CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDINGS OF ART HAVE MOVED AWAY FROM THE EARLIER NOTIONS WHICH HELD THAT ART IS INHERENTLY MIMETIC—OR AN IMITATION OF REALITY—TOWARD PERSPECTIVE THAT RECOGNIZES THAT WHILE SOME ART MIGHT HAVE MIMETIC CHARACTERISTICS, IT IS THE THEORY BEHIND THE WORK WHICH MAKES IT ART. AS POSED BY ALFRED DANTO 'ARTISTIC THEORIES MAKE THE ARTWORLD AND ART POSSIBLE' SO THAT ART IS A RESULT OF THE INSTITUTIONS OF DISCOURSE WITHIN THE ATMOSPHERE OF THE CULTURE AT A GIVEN POINT IN TIME. THIS PERSPECTIVE ACKNOWLEDGES THAT ART IS NOT SOLELY ABOUT MIMESIS, BUT RATHER IT IS SHAPED BY THE INTELLECTUAL, SOCIAL, AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS IN WHICH IT IS CREATED AND RECEIVED. THUS, ART'S MEANING AND VALUE ARE CONTINGENT UPON THE CONTEXT IN WHICH IT IS PRODUCED AND THE INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORKS THAT SURROUND IT.

JUST AS THE DEFINITION OF ART HAS BEEN SUBJECT TO EVOLUTION AND DEBATE, SO TOO HAS THE DEFINITION OF BEAUTY. WHERE THE MORE TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF BEAUTY RELIED UPON FIXED RATIOS, HARMONIOUS PROPORTIONS, AND CLASSICAL TECHNIQUES, CONTEMPORARY NOTIONS ON THE MATTER ALLOW FOR A BROADER, MORE SUBJECTIVE INTERPRETATION OF BEAUTY. ON THE SUBJECT OF CONTEMPORARY BEAUTY, CHARLES BAUDELAIRE SUGGESTS A DUAL COMPOSITION, DESCRIBING 'BEAUTY (AS BEING) MADE UP OF AN ETERNAL INVARIABLE ELEMENT, AND OF A RELATIVE, CIRCUMSTANTIAL ELEMENT'. THE FIRST AND ETERNAL ELEMENT REPRESENTS THE TIMELESS, UNIVERSAL ASPECTS OF BEAUTY THAT SURPASS ANY PARTICULAR ERA OR LOCATION. THIS FACET OF BEAUTY REMAINS STEADY AND IS OFTEN CONNECTED TO DEEP EMOTIONAL RESONANCE, FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN EXPERIENCE, AND PRINCIPLES THAT ENDURE ACROSS CULTURES AND HISTORY. THE LATTER ELEMENT, THE PERCEPTION OF SPECIFIC, FLEETING ASPECTS OF BEAUTY THAT ARISE FROM THE CONDITIONS AND CONTEXT IN WHICH THE ARTWORK IS CREATED SUCH AS THE SOCIAL CIRCUMSTANCES AND THE TRENDS OF THE TIME.

BAUDELAIRE EXPLAINS THAT THE DUALITY OF ART IS A REFLECTION OF HUMANITY'S DUAL NATURE WHICH HE EXPLAINS IS SHAPED BY THE SYNTHESIS OF THE ETERNAL AND THE TEMPORAL. HE EMPHASIZES THIS DISTINCTION ANTHROPOMORPHISING ART BY DESCRIBING 'THE ETERNALLY SUBSISTING PORTIONS AS THE SOUL OF ART, AND THE VARIABLE ELEMENT ITS BODY'. WHERE THE SOUL IS UNDERSTOOD AS THE TRANSCENDENT ESSENCE THAT BRINGS ABOUT AN ABSTRACT UNIVERSALITY TO HUMANITY, THE BODY—BEING SHAPED BY TIME, ENVIRONMENT, AND CIRCUMSTANCES—GROUNDS THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE IN THE PRESENT MOMENT. THIS CONNECTION BETWEEN THE SOUL AND THE BODY ALSO REFLECTS BAUDELAIRE'S IDEA THAT EVERYTHING MATERIAL, OR THE BODILY EXPRESSION, ULTIMATELY MIRRORS THE SPIRITUAL REALITY FROM WHICH IT DERIVES. JUST AS THE BODY REFLECTS THE SOUL, THE MATERIAL WORLD REFLECTS A DEEPER, MORE ETERNAL TRUTH, EVEN IF THAT TRUTH IS NOT IMMEDIATELY APPARENT. IN THIS SENSE, THE MATERIAL ASPECTS OF BEAUTY ARE ALWAYS INEXTRICABLY LINKED TO A SPIRITUAL OR TRANSCENDENT ESSENCE, EVEN IF THAT ESSENCE IS OBSERVED BY TIME, PLACE, OR CONTEXT. THROUGH THIS METAPHOR, THE VARIABLE ELEMENT CAN BE UNDERSTOOD AS THAT WHICH EMBELLSHES THE ETERNAL IN A CONSUMABLE, HISTORICALLY DEPENDENT MANNER THAT GRANTS BEAUTY ITS IMMEDIACY. THEREFORE, BEAUTY EMERGES AS THE FLUID PRODUCT OF TWO QUALITIES: ONE WHICH CAN BE UNDERSTOOD THROUGH THE CONTEXT OF ITS CREATION AND ONE WHICH IS RATHER INTANGIBLE. THE ELEMENTS ARE THUS MARRIED IN A SINGULAR IMPRESSION RESULTING IN A UNIFIED EXPERIENCE FOR THE ART'S BEHOLDER, ONE WHICH IS HIGHLY SUBJECTIVE AND DEEPLY PERSONAL; AND THAT IS BEAUTY.

IN DRAWING PARALLELS BETWEEN DANTO AND BAUDELAIRE'S PHILOSOPHIES, ONE MAY COME TO UNDERSTAND THE CIRCUMSTANTIAL QUALITY OF BEAUTY AS A PRODUCT OF DANTO'S ARTWORLD WHICH IS SIMILARLY SHAPED BY THE CULTURAL, INTELLECTUAL, AND SOCIAL FRAMEWORKS THAT GOVERN ART AT A GIVEN TIME. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ARTWORLD AND BEAUTY RELATIONSHIP MAY COME TO BE UNDERSTOOD AS BIDIRECTIONAL—THE ARTWORLD SHAPES THE PERCEPTION OF BEAUTY, AND BEAUTY, IN TURN, SHAPES THE WAY ART IS UNDERSTOOD WITHIN THAT SAME WORLD. TO THAT EFFECT, THE ARTWORLD PLAYS A ROLE IN DETERMINING WHAT MIGHT CONSTITUTE A BEAUTIFUL WORK OF ART, BUT IT NONETHELESS REMAINS LIMITED IN ITS ABILITY TO FULLY DEFINE THE NATURE OF BEAUTY. IT DOES, HOWEVER, PLAY A ROLE IN ADDRESSING THE QUESTION: *MUST ART BE BEAUTIFUL?*

TO EXPLORE THIS INQUIRY WE TURN TO TRACEY EMIN'S PROVOCATIVE INSTALLATION *MY BED*, WHICH CHALLENGES THE NOTIONS OF BOTH ART AND BEAUTY. THE PIECE WAS FIRST DISPLAYED AT THE TATE GALLERY IN 1999, BRINGING ABOUT A POLARIZING AND CONTROVERSIAL RESPONSE AMONG SPECTATORS AND THE MEDIA AT LARGE. THE PIECE WAS BORN OUT OF A DEPRESSIVE EPISODE DURING WHICH EMIN SPENT SEVERAL DAYS IN BED AS INSPIRATION EMERGED FROM THE ARTIST'S STRUGGLE. THE INSTALLATION, CONSISTING OF A DISHEVELED BED SURROUNDED BY PERSONAL OBJECTS, INCLUDING DISCARDED CONDOMS, ALCOHOL BOTTLES, AND STAINED SHEETS, CONFRONTED THE VIEWER WITH THE ARTIST'S PRIVATE WORLD AND MADE PUBLIC WHAT IS TYPICALLY SEEN AS INTIMATE AND SHAMEFUL. IT IS A RAW, UNFILTERED REPRESENTATION OF EMIN'S PERSONAL LIFE AND MENTAL STATE AT THE TIME. THE BED ITSELF, OFTEN A SYMBOL OF REST AND RECOVERY, BECOMES A SITE OF EMOTIONAL RUPTURE AND CHAOS, AND THROUGH THE DISHEVELED STATE OF THE INSTALLATION, EMIN DISRUPTS OUR CONVENTIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE HOME AS A PLACE OF SANCTUARY. THE ITEMS AROUND THE BED REPRESENT THE FRAGMENTED ASPECTS OF EMIN'S EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL STATE. EACH OBJECT SERVING AS A MARKER OF HER INNER TURMOIL. THE WORK CALLS ATTENTION TO THE FRAGILITY OF THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE, MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE AND ALLOWING THE VIEWER TO EXPERIENCE, FOR A BRIEF MOMENT, THE WEIGHT OF THE ARTIST'S EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL STATE.



THE WORK IS BY NO MEANS EXEMPLAR OF TRADITIONAL BEAUTY, SEEMINGLY LACKING ANY SIMILARITY TO CLASSICAL WORKS OF ART. THE WORK IS BETTER DESCRIBED AS CHAOTIC, CONFRONTING, AND AT TIMES UNCOMFORTABLE. IN BAUDELAIRE'S TERMS, THE 'SOUL' OF *MY BED* LIES IN THE EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL RESONANCE OF THE WORK, WHILE THE 'BODY' MAY BE MESSY AND DISCOMFORTING. THE ESSENCE OF THE PIECE COMMUNICATES A UNIVERSAL HUMAN EXPERIENCE OF VULNERABILITY, SUFFERING, AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING AMID PERSONAL TURMOIL. THE 'BODY' OF THE ARTWORK—THE DISHEVELED BED, THE DISCARDED ITEMS—MIRRORS THIS INTERNAL STRUGGLE, GROUNDING THE EMOTIONAL ESSENCE IN THE PRESENT MOMENT. JUST AS BAUDELAIRE ARGUES THAT THE MATERIAL WORLD REFLECTS A DEEPER, TRANSCENDENT TRUTH, *MY BED* REFLECTS THE INTERNAL, SPIRITUAL REALITY OF ITS CREATOR, MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE. THE EXPERIENCE OF ENCOUNTERING THE WORK THUS BECOMES A DEEPLY PERSONAL AND SUBJECTIVE ONE, WHERE THE VIEWER MUST NAVIGATE BOTH THE DISCOMFORT OF THE PHYSICAL REPRESENTATION AND THE EMOTIONAL RESONANCE OF THE DEEPER TRUTH IT REVEALS. THE WORK IS NOT BEAUTIFUL IN THE TRADITIONAL SENSE, BUT IT HOLDS A BEAUTY OF A DIFFERENT KIND—A BEAUTY ROOTED IN EMOTIONAL TRUTH, VULNERABILITY, AND THE POWER OF ART TO MAKE VISIBLE THE OFTEN UNSEEN ASPECTS OF THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE. IN THIS WAY, *MY BED* EXEMPLIFIES THE SHIFTING, SUBJECTIVE NATURE OF BEAUTY, REINFORCING THE IDEA THAT BEAUTY IN ART IS NOT ALWAYS ABOUT HARMONY OR VISUAL APPEAL, BUT CAN EMERGE FROM THE RAW AND UNCOMFORTABLE ASPECTS OF LIFE, REVEALING A DEEPER, MORE COMPLEX BEAUTY.

IN IMPORTANCE TO THE QUESTION AT HAND, IT IS IMPORTANT TO CONSIDER THE ROLE OF THE INSTITUTIONS OF THE ARTWORLD IN PLACING A PIECE WITHIN THE BROADER CONTEXT OF POSTMODERN BEAUTY. THE ARTWORLD PROVIDES THE PIECE WITH A PLATFORM TO BE ENGAGED CRITICALLY, AND THE CONTEXT IN WHICH IT IS PRESENTED CAN ELEVATE IT TO THE STATUS OF HIGH ART. THESE INSTITUTIONS—GALLERIES, CRITIC MUSEUMS, AND TURBOCHARGED JURY—CHALLENGE CONVENTIONAL IDEAS OF BEAUTY AND ARTISTIC VALUE. THIS ENGAGEMENT ALIGNS WITH CLEMENT GREENBERG'S NOTION THAT 'THE AVANT-GARDE, DEPENDS ON—THE RICH AND CULTIVATED'. THIS SUGGESTS THAT AVANT-GARDE ART, LIKE *MY BED*, IS NOT EASILY ACCESSIBLE OR UNDERSTOOD BY ALL, BUT INSTEAD CALLS UPON A MORE SOPHISTICATED, INTELLECTUAL VIEWER WHO CAN ENGAGE WITH THE WORK ON A DEEPER LEVEL. IT DEMANDS A CRITICAL APPROACH, ONE THAT GOES BEYOND MERE VISUAL PLEASURE, AND CHALLENGES THE VIEWER TO REFLECT ON COMPLEX THEMES SUCH AS MENTAL HEALTH, PERSONAL TRAUMA, AND THE FRAGILITY OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE. THIS IDEA IS FURTHER SUPPORTED BY ALFRED DANTO'S STATEMENT THAT 'HE WILL BE LIKE A CHILD WHO SEES STICKS AS STICKS', EMPHASIZING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SEEING ART IN A SUPERFICIAL, LITERAL WAY AND UNDERSTANDING IT WITHIN A MORE PROFOUND CULTURAL AND INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT. THOSE WHO VIEW *MY BED* AS A MERE COLLECTION OF OBJECTS MIGHT MISS ITS DEEPER SIGNIFICANCE, REDUCING IT TO A DISTURBING DISPLAY OF PERSONAL ITEMS. HOWEVER, THOSE ATTUNED TO THE ARTWORLD'S INTELLECTUAL DISCOURSE WILL RECOGNIZE THAT THE PIECE REFLECTS BROADER HUMAN EXPERIENCES.

THEREFORE, IN ADDRESSING THE QUESTION, 'MUST ART BE BEAUTIFUL?' ONE POSSIBLE ANSWER IS THAT ELEVATED, HIGH ART MUST BE BEAUTIFUL. AS EMIN'S *MY BED* IS CHALLENGING AND DISCOMFORTING, BUT IT IS BEAUTIFUL IN THE SENSE OF THE ELEVATED, HIGH ART. THE CIRCUMSTANTIAL ELEMENTS, KITSCH, ON THE OTHER HAND, EMBODIES ONLY THE CIRCUMSTANTIAL ELEMENT AND THUS FAILS TO ENCAPSULATE THE FULL, MULTIFACETED EXPERIENCE OF BEAUTY. THE AVANT-GARDE IS THUS NOT ONLY INTELLECTUALLY ENGAGING BUT ALSO CARRIES A DEEPER BEAUTY, SHAPED BY ITS CULTURAL RELEVANCE AND CONCEPTUAL DEPTH. IN CONTRAST, KITSCH, AS GREENBERG POSITS, CAPTURES THIS DEPTH AND FULLNESS OF THE CIRCUMSTANTIAL ELEMENT, OFFERING IMMEDIATE CONSUMABLE BEAUTY WITHOUT CHALLENGING THE VIEWER OR ENGAGING WITH A DEEPER TRUTH. BY THIS LOGIC, THE AVANT-GARDE'S INCLUSION OF BOTH THE ETERNAL AND CIRCUMSTANTIAL ASPECTS OF BEAUTY ELEVATES IT TO A MORE PROFOUND AND ENDURING FORM OF ART, WHEREAS KITSCH, RESTRICTED TO FLEETING BEAUTY, ULTIMATELY LACKS THE SAME ARTISTIC VALUE. THEREFORE, ELEVATED, HIGH ART DOES NOT NECESSARILY NEED TO BE BEAUTIFUL IN A CONVENTIONAL SENSE. RATHER, IT IS BEAUTIFUL IN ITS CAPACITY TO PROVOKE THOUGHT, CHALLENGE PERCEPTIONS, AND MAKE VISIBLE THE DEEPER, OFTEN UNCOMFORTABLE, TRUTHS ABOUT HUMAN EXISTENCE.

A COUNTER-ARGUMENT TO THE POSITION THAT ELEVATED, HIGH ART MUST BE BEAUTIFUL COULD FOCUS ON THE SUBJECTIVE NATURE OF BEAUTY ITSELF. CRITICS MIGHT ARGUE THAT BEAUTY IN ART IS ENTIRELY RELATIVE AND SUBJECTIVE, VARYING GREATLY FROM ONE INDIVIDUAL TO ANOTHER BASED ON CULTURAL BACKGROUND, PERSONAL PREFERENCES, AND EMOTIONAL STATE. FROM THIS PERSPECTIVE, WHAT IS CONSIDERED BEAUTIFUL OR VALUABLE IN ART CANNOT BE UNIVERSALLY DEFINED. MOREOVER, SOME MIGHT ASSERT THAT THE CONCEPT OF 'HIGH ART' ITSELF IS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT, SHAPED BY THE INSTITUTIONS AND GATEKEEPERS OF THE ARTWORLD, RATHER THAN AN INHERENT QUALITY OF THE ARTWORK ITSELF. THIS ARGUMENT WOULD SUGGEST THAT BEAUTY IS NOT NECESSARILY A REQUIREMENT FOR ART TO BE MEANINGFUL OR IMPACTFUL. IN FACT, THERE ARE INSTANCES IN WHICH DISCOMFORT, CHALLENGE, OR EVEN UNPLEASANTY IN ART CAN PROVOKE DEEPER EMOTIONAL RESPONSES AND CRITICAL THINKING. UNDER THIS VIEW, BEAUTY BECOMES A SECONDARY CONSIDERATION, WHILE THE ABILITY OF THE ARTWORK TO EVOKE REFLECTION, DIALOGUE, OR EMOTIONAL RESPONSE BECOMES THE PRIMARY MEASURE OF ITS ARTISTIC WORTH.

HOWEVER, WHILE BEAUTY MAY INDEED BE SUBJECTIVE, IT IS ESSENTIAL TO RECOGNIZE THAT ART'S CAPACITY TO PROVOKE THOUGHT, CHALLENGE PERCEPTIONS, AND REFLECT DEEPER TRUTHS IS PRECISELY WHAT MAKES IT BEAUTIFUL IN THE POSTMODERN SENSE. THE DEFINITION OF BEAUTY CAN BE FLUID, ENCOMPASSING NOT JUST VISUAL HARMONY BUT ALSO INTELLECTUAL, EMOTIONAL, AND CULTURAL RESONANCE. AS EMIN'S *MY BED* DEMONSTRATES THROUGH *MY BED*, THE TRADITIONAL NOTION OF BEAUTY AS SOMETHING HARMONIOUS AND AESTHETICALLY PLEASING IS EXPANDED IN POSTMODERN ART TO INCLUDE THOSE MOMENTS OF RUPTURE AND DISSONANCE THAT SPEAK TO THE COMPLEXITY OF HUMAN EXISTENCE. THIS ALIGNS WITH THE ARGUMENT THAT BEAUTY, IN ITS BROADER, MORE INCLUSIVE SENSE, IS STILL AN ESSENTIAL, THOUGH SUBJECTIVE, COMPONENT OF ART. THEREFORE, BEAUTY IN ART IS NOT MERELY ABOUT VISUAL APPEAL; IT IS ABOUT THE EMOTIONAL, INTELLECTUAL, AND CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT THAT THE ARTWORK STIMULATES, WHICH IN TURN MAKES IT BEAUTIFUL IN A WAY THAT TRANSCENDS TRADITIONAL DEFINITIONS.