



## Beyond Beauty and Ugliness

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### Abstract

In this essay, I outline a way to see the history of art as movement beyond the aesthetic distinction between beauty and ugliness. In this way, dualities are transcended. Modern art and in particular, the abstract involves the move away from mimetic reality or traditional extra-aesthetic concerns, toward a new aesthetic which one could argue continued in the work of Conceptual art and the very dematerialization of art. This, together with the rise of the post modern led to the argument that art and life are a continuum, that life itself may be experienced as art provided one has a certain awareness which is described in brief in the foregoing.

**Keywords:** beauty; aesthetic; modernism; post modernism; conceptual; art and life

## INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I will argue that the apparent dichotomy between beauty and ugliness, terms I shall not explicitly define in relation to both art and life, is in fact an illusion. I shall offer reasons why this is so. If such an argument is sound, then to find reality, rather than illusion, one must transcend such a duality, and this would lead to a certain liberation, freedom, and transcendence. In art, I will argue, this is the movement towards abstraction and abstract art. The logical extension and “end point” of abstract art is Conceptual art. Yet Conceptual art is a breakdown of the very form that art is said to express / convey / present. This in turn leads to the destruction of art only so that life itself – in all its forms and in none of its forms – can become a grand design, an artwork. Then consciousness and awareness would have fulfilled its function.

### 1) Beauty and ugliness in life and art: Dark and Light

Visually, the power of attraction or repulsion is particularly strong. While standards of beauty do change and vary, and the aesthetic sense, as Kant observed, is subjective, in each case there is a form (or body) that is said to be beautiful in stark contrast to one that is not. This is not to say a withering flower is any less beautiful than one in full bloom; in fact, both may be beautiful, but at some point, something will be deemed beautiful while another not so, but ugly. This is not denying that this is not subject to change as time marches on or as individuals and society mores change.

For the great majority of artistic output in both the West and the East, the North and the South, art has been concerned with form (body) and while this has not necessarily taken the Classical form established by the Greeks or naturalism and realism in its full expression to be the ultimate reference point, some recognizable imagery, even if there are symbols and non-representational elements, is concerned with some objective recognizable form (body).

Art is considered the quintessence of aesthetic experiences and for the most part has been defined as the expression of beauty. While with the breakdown of past standards with the rise of Modernism and then the complete overhaul in post modernism, where such aspects as the abject, the other and pastiche elements (post historical quoting of self through history, rather than developing a totally new aesthetic in itself) have done away with hierarchies and traditional standards or notions of beauty.

Of course, the great majority are not aware of such historical artistic shifts in style, motif, and functions within society, generally still think of art in mimetic, Classical terms, and simplistic notions of beauty. For those trained in the

arts, however, the debate ensues and for the most part the art world today is focused on gender issues. Identity politics; social structures. memory...while auction houses and larger museums still carry a modernist flag of the genius artist and the masterpiece.

Postmodernist theory and the project of deconstruction is precisely the reevaluation of standards of beauty as the definition thereof is created through valorizing one end of the polarity and silencing an other. In this sense, dualities are reevaluated, and the “shadow” confronted, and new knowledge can emerge as the dielectric expands, rather than stunted by a narrow definition and “killing” its opposition. Beauty then is not necessarily what one so sees and ugliness one bearing illness and decay. While health is better than illness, more beautiful, more life-affirming, sickness and death are also natural states. Human culture may fight this, and that is good, but ultimately death will gain victory and form will wither and pass away, and what was once beautiful will be ugly and yet, intuitively we have built many stories about the place beyond, and the return to beauty, to an even better life of the spirit shawm of the vessel (body). However, we do not know for sure what awaits after death, yet it has embraced human culture universally as a subject of art and source of consolation.

Fixating on form (the body) in a single moment of time does not consider the whole process from birth to death and an isolated moment of visual, external beauty cannot be the full story, the truth. Therefore, to call that entity “beautiful” misses the point as it will change and transform over time. The artwork is a frozen moment in time and therefore solidifies the flux, ignores the process, and stills that which is really moving and changing. Such a moment then is a contrived beauty and devoid of truth, which is characterized by flux and the movements of life towards the final curtain, whether inanimate or animate. In this sense, post modernism does well to call into question art of the past and the extra-aesthetic ideologies it was said to correspond with and promulgate throughout history, and rather problematize boundaries, creating hybrids, reevaluating a fixed identity, and meaning and truth. In this sense, it points to a non-dualistic sort of thinking (i.e., there is not a higher in relation to a lower) and an inherent unity of apparent opposites (in art, in life...). Of course, this is not entirely true as the argument against a universal as established by the privileged leads to an alignment and assertion of “other” identities that also now maintains a powerful foothold or is merely coopted by those in power (political institutions; religious institutions; industrial leaders; corporations; educational institutions and so on...) for their own nefarious ends. However, in principle there has at least been some progress in a critical reassessment of the past, though I do not think any generation can maintain the moral high ground.

## 2) Beyond dualities: Transcendence

The consequence of a reevaluation of history, what might be termed self-awareness, shifts the paradigm from the reductive to the holistic and from the specialized toward the interdisciplinary. The sculpture on a pedestal in all its glory; the impressive ionic columns; the metaphysical aloofness of a Christ fresco; the searing pain of Goya’s monsters; the striking perspective of Raphael’s School of Athens; the sublime solitude of a romantic painting – the practice of art and its increasing secularization has led to the conquering of form through technique and optical illusion – and the expression of beauty through this single work of art through such technical prowess. I say technical as it is not clear how much art was actually original or just a sign of its times or even if it is art in the modern sense and not something fulfilling a function at a certain time and place for historical, economic, and political reasons, even if for much of its history art was simply the arm of religion.

The point is that in the fixation on form, a dualism was immediately set up. If Michelangelo’s David is considered beautiful then a deformed dwarf is not. If the School of Athens is beautiful then say a prison or dungeon is not. If the light of the Virgin Mary is beautiful, then a witch is not. And so on. Yet art was increasingly interested in the other; art is inherently rebellious, and this came to the fore as art itself emerged in the modern sense and the individuality of the artist assumed significance: Duchamp pokes fun at the aesthetic norm; Surrealist artists distort and conjure often scary worlds; Romantic artists often focused on the grotesque and Modern art can be simplified as precisely a rejection of traditional techniques and traditional motifs.

Thus, the very history of art is a history of destroying dualities and redefining “beauty”. This manifests culturally and a critical point is reached: a new culture or lifeworld is formed, the causes unknown to the vast majority who is little more than automaton, just as in times of the pharaoh; the great enslaved mass. Cultural paradigms and shifts are thus felt (expressed) in art before emerging as popular culture. Is the end to strict dualities and new cultural paradigm a loss of the concept of beauty eventually, since there is no way to claim that classical music is better than rap?

It is at this point that one has to recoil from perceptible reality – visuality or sound and so on – and contrast all forms with all emptiness (not form) and all sound of whatever variety with silence. Now form is predicated on space (physical emptiness) and sounds (especially the ordered variety of language and music) with that of the “space” of silence. There cannot be one without the other. They are complementary, not contradictory. Dualism is surmounted. And just as language might create a perfectly meaningful structure – a sentence – or form may evoke a sense of order, so the imperceptible idea. The sense of the sentence; the feeling of the music, or the line of whatever form – rap and classical

alike, realism or expressionism alike – emerges through the interplay of the duality (matter and form; space and form; silence and sound etc.) and transcends it, just as in superb “bodily” performance in say sports, where excellence of form is achieved with and through the body, rather than in tension with it. Transcendence occurs where opposites exist in a harmonious relationship, in which case the duality was in the first place an illusion.

### 3) Abstract art: Pure Art - beyond attachment (identity) and form (body)

The triumph of abstraction and the abstract in art was the movement from perceptible reality, the empirical world, into the realm of the imperceptible, much like a set of certain kinds of birds can correspond with an abstract entity such as a number, the cardinality of that set. Abstraction sees beyond form at least on a surface level. It still, however, contains traces of its provenance as is the case with abstraction, but abstract art creates its own internal and external reality, devoid of the sensible world.

No more narratives of history, religion, politics, no more endless nudes, still-lives and landscapes, no longer alternative worlds, fantastical worlds; no heaven and hell; no kings and queens...only the very elements of art themselves; possibly symbols; possibly references to something although it is unclear and ambiguous. Art is not a picture of...it is no longer simply mimetic or a story of some kind.

Abstract art does not create an illusion, it is not a slavish servant to the external world. It cannot be easily identified or named and therefore it defies categories, literalness, and fixed identities. The great pioneers: Kandinsky; Picasso; Malevich; Miro; Klee; Mondrian and the Abstract Expressionists in general developed a new language, an aesthetic that reached new levels of extra-aesthetic depth, beyond the formalist argument that abstract art is simply the formal logical consequence of former art down the ages but reaches into the inner world without the props of history, the traditional modes of religion, politics, and economics.

Yet the project failed: today abstract art is just another style, expunged of its metaphysics. Pop art reduced the artist to an automaton and denied the mark of the artist and deep content in favor of superficiality, repetition, emptiness and without an underlying principle of unity. This is largely the contemporary world exemplified in contemporary arts and culture in general. The master narrative is one of the unabated progresses of science and technology and art is simply entertainment – at best. There is no longer artist-seers, but digital images conjured without a human process; enter the rise of AI, artificial intelligence.

Abstract art may have begun a shift toward the spiritual, but subsequent to two world wars, the transcendence of form and the lack of attachment to an identity, has morphed in the post modern era to a materialist base, so that the transcendence of form is little more than an extreme attachment (to have more money; to have more experiences) and an even stauncher attachment to identity (self) amidst a refusal to accept any identity. It is extreme logic in the movement of science and technology, and it is a refusal to accept logic in the realm of belief and ethics.

Yet art is not a monolithic structure, and the narrative of art also deviates in various tributaries and so Pop art also saw the rise of Conceptual art which in some sense continued the mantle of the work and purpose of abstract art. It led away from the empirical, beyond the old debate and narrative of the hierarchical distinction of beauty, the valorized term, and ugliness, the other, into a world of mind, that which does not assume form as such but deals with thought and language and ascends, as a Rothko or Newman, to the world of ideas. Conceptual art thus took the abstract conception of reorganizing and simplifying external reality into basic marks and forms to an extreme: the dematerialization of matter, so that art exists not as perceptible form (although Conceptualists still present some object in most cases), dematerializing matter, undoing the very project of aesthetics, and emerging on the other side simply with an idea, an invisible substrate.

So, for example Kosuth’s work “One and three chairs” (1965) where he exhibits a real chair, a printout of a dictionary definition of a chair and a fabricated chair somewhat stuck on a wall, questions the very notion of a physical object and the distinction between the material embodiment of something and its presentation, or the distinction between the use of something and its function as art. In a sense, such work becomes philosophical, perhaps even metaphysical and transcends the whole notion of art as simply an aesthetic that is said to then correspond with certain definite extra-aesthetic ideas. Such a dualism evaporates, so that what is left is not art as such but a way of doing philosophy. It is not so much the character of whether something is beautiful or ugly, but the meaning “vested in” the well-considered intellectual presentation.

Just as abstract art inexorably led to Reinhardt’s “pure art” or Ryman’s all-white works or Cage’s “4 minutes 33 second” silence and so on, so Conceptual took that further, denying the very fine arts as the defining category of art, and the “physical presentation” – what the senses sense – is no longer that crucial. Nor is the expressive mark of the artist and thus the artist’ style and technique. Art is in the service of the mind, not the hand and eye and the blank images and silences of abstract art reached a zenith and “go no further” and emerged in the conceptual realm of ideas. It also opened

up the possibility, already intuited by Duchamp with his ready-mades that any object, event or form might be art, and yet not in terms of its aesthetic quality, but as a catalyst to thinking, dreaming, and perhaps even understanding. This is a far cry from art as mimetic and its strict identification of form and attachment to an aesthetic (a lifeworld or fashion embodying extra-aesthetic ideas aka. social conditioning).

#### 4) Life as art: Awareness

I speculate that the erosion of aesthetic value and the endpoint reached in abstract art which then may have manifested in the guise of Conceptual art, leads to the curious position wherein anything can be art. The far-reaching result is that life itself is art if the requisite awareness is present, much as an object declared as art is so. Intention then is critical.

What then does this “intention” entail? I conjecture that what is required is not only an aesthetic impulse that might embrace even the quotidian rather than reserved only for high culture, but the ability to “pierce matter”, to see laws of nature as in the sciences; to think metaphorically and imaginatively transforming lived experience into fiction, theatre; film, music and art and living such experiences as art whether or not one reflects and shapes them through an artistic medium. It requires slowing the whole train of life: The critical point is to be aware. Aware of one’s breathing; of the life of even the inanimate, the plant, the animal and one’s fellow humans and the life that courses through their innards and veins and arteries.

In this sense life and art are experienced as fluid states of consciousness, rather than things, institutions, professions, power-mongering, fame and the like. It is a return to the innocence of the joy of living, without regard for making art perse and yet in the very living one will invariably desire to create shapes and patterns or to think conceptually and imaginatively. Life as a creative act, life as the flow of self. Of course, the precondition for this would be a society less materialistic, less concerned with dualities: rich and poor, ugly and beautiful, true and false and so on – and more in tune with that which transcends binaries. In that sense, there is just life and the various ripples on the surface that now emerge as what we call science or as art or as sport and so – but part of the very same fabric in which case such distinctions are facile.

## CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have argued that the traditional demarcation between beauty and ugliness, where the former is a particularly poignant aesthetic experience, one said to be aesthetic, while the latter is not, is superficial and simplistic. In fact, the formal and intellectual shift in consciousness down the ages in the arts is precisely a movement towards redefining what is aesthetic i.e.. Beautiful and in the process in fact does away with such notions. The innovation of abstract art is particularly significant in this regard, undoing premodern art, and developing the modern conception of the artist and definition of art. This itself was critiqued with post modernism and the questioning of the “high seriousness” of art which led further to the pervasiveness of aesthetic experience, even one not motivated by visual presentation or sensory pleasure as in conceptual art, though one could argue for its clinical and “clean” look, a certain sterile and neat aesthetic, having expunged the expressive impulse. Regardless, it still points to art being “of mind” and also one that exists “in” any form or formal relationships, objects, or bodies, and thus encompassing life as a whole. This, it was proposed, could be the case, should the attitude of right intention be present, and a certain awareness cultivated. Then we enter the realm of the meditative, the attention to the lived experience as a sentient being. It is at this point that life can become art. The question as to the “reality” of life if this is the case – art being a contrived game of sorts, a magical refuge – is a topic for another discussion.

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