

## Lower Sixth Essay Competition

### **"To what extent do you agree that beauty has no place in contemporary art?"**

Beauty still holds a place within contemporary art because a.) the ability for art to elicit an aesthetic experience in the viewer that provides a pleasurable experience to the senses, acts as a source of comfort, joy and remedy to existential hopelessness, something that contemporary art, in its anti-aesthetic drive, fails to do b.) beauty's function is not exclusively constraint to aesthetic experience, for it can offers aid to the contemporary artist preoccupied with social, political and environmental activism by providing an effective way to transmit non-aesthetical messages to a wider and more diversified audience and c.) beauty within art has a practical function in that it ensures sustainability and durability.

Beauty is vague, indeterminate, and difficult to pin down and define precisely. The Oxford Dictionary defines beauty as "A combination of qualities, such as shape, colour, or form, that pleases the aesthetic senses, especially the sight." Beauty is a means by which a person experiences an aesthetic experience, therefore beauty creates aesthetic pleasure. The Western classical conception of beauty, whose representatives ranged from Plato to Aquinas, believes in beauty's objectivity: "Beauty consists of an arrangement of integral parts into a coherent whole, according to proportion, harmony, symmetry, and similar notions." (Stanf. encycl. philos. 2024). Questioners of beauty's objectivity have been David Hume, who argued that the perception of beauty is subjective: "Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty." (Hume 1757)

Art has now a multifaceted purpose that is not exclusively limited to aesthetical experience. The 20th century was marked by the displacement of beauty's centrality within art by the Avant-Gardistes, which included the French artist Marcel Duchamp. With his now iconic urinal, titled "La Fontaine", he paved the way for conceptual art, which emphasises conceptual ideas at the expense of visual appeal. Whereas art and beauty was once deemed inseparable, the Avant-Gardistes challenged traditional conceptions surrounding beauty and the function of art. An artwork need no longer be aesthetically pleasing, but rather a means by which the artist can convey his emotions and ideas (Castrogiovanni 2024). The role of art, the Avant-Gardistes argued, is "not to please, but rather to provoke, unsettle or alienate the audience, or to prompt reflection." (Huemer & Vendrell Ferran 2019) This argument, whilst understandable in contemporary circumstances, is no longer applicable today. In a world mired by conflict, pain, suffering and violence, aesthetic beauty has the ability to comfort us, and in the case of aesthetic value, make sense of the pain around us (Cochrane 2022). Just because contemporary art is currently under a zeitgeist fashion to disregard the beautiful, that by no means justify a call to exclude beauty from contemporary art.

Contemporary art, according to the Tate definition is "A loosely used term to refer to art of the present day and recent past that is innovative or avant-garde in nature." Whilst it certainly has

inherited the Avant-Gardiste's rejection of aesthetic in favour of the conceptual, it has also differentiated itself from its predecessors. Many contemporary artists today have placed greater emphasis on "social and political responsibility as a fundamental element of their production" (Andina 2017) They have branded themselves as social, political and environmental activists, whose artworks are a means by which to effectuate change in society. (Castrogiovanni 2024) This trend is an inheritor of materialist aesthetics, which states that "What makes art important for human practice is not its beauty, but its social, practical, moral, and political dimensions, as well as its potential to change human lives and society." (Huemer & Vendrell Ferran 2019). In such a context, aesthetic beauty, which requires Kantian contemplation and aesthetic pleasure, seems to have been brushed aside. It is viewed as incompatible with the contemporary artist-turned-activist. Some artists have gone so far as to purposefully practice what Arthur Danto calls Kalliphobia, which consists of deliberately creating an artwork that is purposefully "as unappealing to the senses as possible so as to focus exclusively on the message they wish to convey to their audience (Asavei 2015).

The argument that aesthetic beauty is incompatible with politically charged artworks is deeply flawed. Art is multifaceted, of which beauty is merely a side equally as legitimate as any other, such as the conceptual or the symbolic. Combining multiple facets of art, such as aesthetical beauty with, for example, an environmental message, can be highly effective in transmitting a non-aesthetical message to the audience. More so than a kalliphobic or anti-aesthetic artwork, which have much higher chances to alienate an audience, whereas beauty within an artwork has the ability to emotionally connect with the viewer and make them more receptive to the idea that the artist has wished to propagate. Aesthetic beauty ceases to be anti-utilitarian, but becomes of practical use, a means by which the contemporary artist that is engaged in environmental, political or social activism, can utilise contemporary art to further their message.

My final argument is a personal proposition of my own: aesthetic beauty within art enables greater sustainability and durability. Having established that it can serve a practical use that is relevant and helpful for contemporary artists, there is another advantage, albeit speculative so far, to be used: current non-beautiful artworks may lose their appeal in a decade or two, whereas aesthetical beauty enables artworks to live longer. Aesthetical meaning has a practical purpose, the principles often do not change for centuries, and as such works of art with aesthetical beauty will outlast artworks that solely exist for a certain group of people a certain message at a particular time and place. Artworks that reflect the multifaceted purpose of art, say it carries both aesthetical beauty and a political message, aesthetic beauty will continue to be accessible for future generations, thereby its durability, whereas the political message may firstly, either lose its significance and therefore be lacking interest for the future viewer, or secondly, be so subtle that the message is lost. In either scenario, aesthetic beauty remains. Regardless of outcome, it is clear that aesthetic beauty still holds a place within contemporary art.

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Stowe 1.12.2024

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