
Diary

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IN LATE JANUARY, inspired by ‘The Abuse of Beauty’, a series of lectures by the American philosopher Arthur Danto, Domenico de Clario — one of Australia’s foremost artists and Head of the School of Visual Arts at Edith Cowan University — invited artists, writers and theorists to gather in Albany to discuss the idea of beauty in contemporary culture. In the cosy Spectrum Theatre near the harbour, art historian Charles Green gave the keynote address on the return of beauty in recent art. At one point, I was startled by the ugly images projected to one side of Green: a photograph by Cindy Sherman of a doll-crone, part Bellmer, part Bosch. *Yes, when last had contemporary art been beautiful?* Later, Green cited the German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen’s now infamous statement that September 11 was the greatest work of art of our time — a disturbing and provocative notion.

From the Spectrum Theatre, we travelled by means of Love’s Bus Service to a vast, empty woolstore on the dockside, a low building twice the size of the MCG and suggestive of the open country of Western Australia. The Melburnians in the group were astonished to find a mobile coffee shop serving ‘the real thing’.

Nearby, de Clario read us ‘Beauty and the Definition of Art’, the first of Danto’s three lectures, a task he had only been permitted to undertake after sending the philosopher a recording of his voice. Architecture theorist Linda Marie Walker gave an evocative paper that considered beauty and ruins in the light of her recent stay in Cyprus, and the young Perth composer Hannah Clemen spoke on the ambiguity of beauty in music.

WE WERE LATE getting to Quaranup Quarantine Station, the site of the second day’s discussions. The station was a distance from Albany down a lonely dirt track. The buildings looked out over a bay that amazed us with its bright blue. Inside the main building, de Clario had already begun reading ‘The Intractable Avant-garde’, Danto’s second lecture. Following the lecture, the Adelaide artist Ian North, drawing on cognitive science and his own experience as an artist, considered the difficulty of defining beauty. He showed slides of his own work along with some images of paintings by Charles Green and his partner, Lyndell Brown, who was also at the gathering.

Having been impressed by the fine day, Julian Goddard insisted on presenting his paper on the pragmatist John Dewey while walking. The delegates donned hats and applied copious amounts of sunscreen, then followed Goddard who

went on speaking while slowly walking backwards down dune paths. He led us down to the most wonderful beach I have ever seen, and artfully concluded just before we reached the water.

I presented my paper after lunch. On the lawn facing the water, flanked on both sides by delegates clinging to the shadows of the buildings, I spoke on obsession and beauty in Mishima’s novel *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, and concluded with a new poem that I wrote last year in Kyoto. Out in the sun, Andrew Taylor read poems from a sequence about a marsh hidden near the heart of Perth. The Aboriginal artist Brenda L. Croft took us back inside to give a brief, projected survey of her work. Then we all went down to gather on the rocks near the pier, where John Henzell, an art therapist, gave a skilled and moving account of his experiences.

I had made my way up the hill to the small morgue where de Clario was lying naked on the marble slab surrounded by blue fluorescent light in his performance ‘Learning to be Dead’. It was already becoming dark outside, and the bush around the Quarantine Station radiated its haunting calm.

ON A WIND FARM beside the Southern Ocean, Nien Schwartz, seated at a table in the shadow of a windmill, read the final Danto lecture, ‘Internal and External Beauty’. De Clario’s own paper on beauty and sport was, like his performances, a synthesis of the mystical and the mundane, his descriptions of sporting events as graceful as the windmill slowly revolving over our heads.

In the closing session at Gorepani Gallery, after many of us had participated in a sound meditation workshop conducted by Hannah Clemen, Edward Colless used vampirism to illustrate the difficulty of discriminating conceptually between the eater and the eaten, and reflected on the beauty that resides in that ambiguity, while artist Anne Walton’s paper took as its background, literally, two video works: the first of a flea struggling against being crushed; the other showing wriggling maggots.

During the closing remarks, with everyone sitting on the sloping lawn that looks back towards Albany, de Clario revealed that he had intended that the locations of the symposium take us further and further from the centre of Albany, moving us out in an invisible spiral, to facilitate a similarly gentle, centrifugal movement in our discussions about beauty. One of the participants remarked — and many of us agreed — that this made her feel as if we all had become part of a simple, yet mysterious evolving de Clario work of art.