

THE ART OF DETERMINING ART

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Enclosed in a heavy carved frame and hung on the unimposing plain wall of the gallery, the painting takes the spotlight. There is, of course, little question over how it came to be defined as art. We do not reach this conclusion through deliberate analysis but somehow, often collectively, we know. Perhaps we know from the fine skill that produced each stroke of color, or because it is aesthetically pleasing, or only because other people have determined it as art and have placed it in this museum. However, when faced with something that has not been predetermined as art in such a way, we cannot fall back on the easy concept of simply knowing. This is the case with Pernkopf's *Atlas*, a collection of detailed anatomical drawings of the human body. Behind the drawings is not the unobtrusive wall of the gallery that attempts to minimize distraction from the artwork; instead, there is the complex and terrifying context of World War II that never quite goes away. More importantly, the drawings were never really intended as art but as science. Nevertheless, in Michael Paterniti's essay "The Most Dangerous Beauty," artist and professor David Williams is able to perceive these paintings as art, as something beyond mere representations of the human body. This unconventional viewpoint challenges us to consider an explanation for this divergence in opinion. How do we determine what art really is?

Williams's controversial opinion of these anatomical drawings arises from the fact that he finds beauty in them—Paterniti's essay title establishes that. It is an attraction to something deemed dangerous. This perception of beauty sets Williams's view of the *Atlas* apart from the majority. These eerie paintings attempt to capture the delicacy of each vein, of each section of a disassembled human body. They suggest a simple replication of these body parts, from reality to paper. But there is something more than the accuracy of each drawing that determines its allure—"the paintings must look like living tissue, even *more* alive than living tissue" (738). There is some aspect to these drawings that makes "the art of medical illustration veer so close to that

of fine art itself" (738). It is hinted that this something may be beauty, though Paterniti never quite defines what this beauty is.

Beauty, as even Paterniti seems to agree, is often synonymous with art. Perhaps the way to define art, then, is to first examine beauty. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a novel that also grapples with ideas of art, beauty, and morality, Oscar Wilde claims that "[a]n artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them . . . men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty" (8). Art is first supposed to be beautiful; as a well-known advocate of aestheticism, Wilde often supported the idea of simply appreciating art for its beauty alone. The paradoxical idea that Williams can find beauty in the unsettling subject of dead bodies can be explained by the concept of the sublime. According to Gene Ray in the article "History, Sublime, Terror," the sublime is something that is terrifyingly beautiful—what he says Immanuel Kant defines as the "power of raw nature to overwhelm and render helpless our faculty of imagination" (165). In this way, Williams's fascination with the paintings is not as unnatural as it seems; he is only appreciating the capacity of nature, being awestruck by what is described as "stunning, bombastic, surreal . . . evidence" of how our being is nothing more than "first and finally a biological process" by depicting the intricacies of our very own bodies as an "incomprehensible and terrifying . . . landscape" (Williams 741).

On the other hand, there must be a complication to this notion. The world questions the morality of the paintings not for their terrifying reminder of nature but because of the human atrocities that produced them. When the question of morality is put in place, the danger in "The Most Dangerous Beauty" is obvious. The Nazi party's rise to power and resulting executions provided the dead bodies from which these drawings could be created. Such danger in the context of beauty is explained further by what Ray terms as the sublime of "second nature," a concept developed by Theodor Adorno (165). This concept of second nature was fittingly revealed through "the trauma of the Second World War," in which the source of fascinating terror is not nature but "human power and capacity for organized violence" (165). This still fits within the category of the sublime, Ray seems to argue, but he also recognizes how the concept could be problematic for others. For example, Ray brings attention to Adorno's claim that "after Auschwitz, to

write a poem is barbaric . . . it has become impossible to write poetry today” (166-7). Likewise, criticism of the origin of the anatomical map labels any association with it “sin” (Paterniti 736). In his series of rhetorical questions asking whether the “beauty [of the *Atlas*] diminish[es] with these facts or the political beliefs of its general and foot soldiers,” Paterniti also seems to acknowledge a similar problem (741).

Regardless of the seeming immorality of seeing this second nature of the sublime, it is undeniable that Williams still perceives beauty in the anatomical paintings. The reader is almost forced to share this view through the passionate descriptions of “eyes . . . that [are] the gaze of poetry itself . . . liver the color of a blood orange, a brigade of soulful brains” (Paterniti 741). This issue of how beauty can still be perceived within the shadow of human destruction can be resolved by Ray’s idea that the terrifying can be beautiful because “to contemplate such scenes from a position of relative safety renders the feeling of terror somehow delightful” and that “terror [is] mediated by a certain physical or temporal distance” (165). Williams is also obsessed with the anatomical drawings. He sees charm in them, being distanced both temporally and physically from the terrors of World War II.

It is quite striking that the whole essay starts off with the details of Williams’s utterly ordinary suburban life; he drives the family Nissan, wears “the same style of round tortoise shell glasses for thirty years . . . drinks a cup of chai every afternoon of his well-plotted life” and even when facing death, comically finds his need to mow the lawn his top priority (735). Despite this stark contrast between his life and the controversial context of the drawings, it is suggested that the beauty within an artwork is not limited by differences in time or personal beliefs. Art is also shown to go beyond the limits of language in the instant connection Williams feels when he meets the last surviving artist of Pernkopf’s *Atlas*, Franz Batke. Williams himself describes the act of painting as liberating from the ties of this world. When he draws, “when he puts that brush to paper, he becomes invisible . . . He has no history, no scars” (Paterniti 739). Art is not about an “autobiography,” as Wilde says, an embodiment of history or its origins, but is something “abstract.” Fittingly, the distance is breached as Williams sees the dead body of his own brother: “there was no longer anything beautiful about him . . . a lifeless slab in place of his animated body” (743). His admiration of the human body is facilitated

by personal distance from it and its being safely unfamiliar. There seems to be a logical reasoning of abstract beauty to be found in the *Atlas*; like Plato's theory of Forms, an overarching form of pure beauty exceeds our human and often false perceptions of it. Art is an abstract ideal that has the potential to captivate regardless of context or biography. It transcends all else but its own beauty.

However, it seems that human subjectivity makes the idea of an abstract sense of beauty difficult or even impossible. Though there seems to be resignation to objective beauty at the end of Paterniti's "A Most Dangerous Beauty," where Williams's disillusionment with Batke's status as "a common Nazi, a Jew hater" still cannot force him to take down the paintings "on the wall of [his] desk at home," there must be purpose to Paterniti's convoluted exploration of the biographies of those who affected or are affected by these anatomical drawings (749). Paterniti traces snippets of the lives of Pernkopf, Batke, even a Jewish man named Hans Hoff, and of course Williams, whose calm, suburban life at first seems irrelevant in the darker context of these works. Despite what Oscar Wilde claims about autobiography in art, Paterniti seems determined that his subjects' lives are significant to the drawings. Paterniti asks through his stylistic series of rhetorical questions: what is the meaning of these lives? How is it possible for "each painting [to contain] its own genius" (741)? One can also see from the public criticism that the *Atlas* receives that the historical origins of the paintings cannot be completely ignored. Beauty as art seems like a narrow definition, failing to take in the complexities of the works themselves. A beautiful flower or person is not, most would agree, art. Even if Pernkopf's *Atlas* has sound reason to be perceived as beautiful, does this mean it has to be perceived as art?

Context *must* support the artwork for it to be reckoned with. Looking at written works as art, Jim W. Corder refutes the idea that writing is simply what Susan Stewart calls a "still life," a factual representation of something, in his essay "Aching for a Self" (139). A piece of writing shouldn't be taken for itself. There is context to be seen, but Corder does not focus on the *factual*. What is trying to be presented is whatever can be "rendered by errant perception, failed memory, and faltering hand" (140). Likewise, instead of only focusing on the facts that have been written down in history for all to remember, like the numbers of the dead or the specific policies of the Nazi

party, Paterniti seems to demand a change in the understanding of history. Taking the moments in which Batke, the last surviving artist of the anatomical paintings, “shows so many little kindnesses” to Williams, Paterniti questions whether there isn’t “something to be said for these moments” and whether “they [are] a part of this man and this Book’s history, too” (744). Though the word “too” suggests that historical facts are important, there is a call for attention to something beyond what is written in history textbooks.

What is beyond the simple factual context of an artwork, Paterniti seems to believe, can be accessed by examining the personal lives of those relevant to the piece. Returning to Corder, writing is an author’s attempt to communicate, as difficult as such an attempt may be, to the rest of the world. Each work, Corder argues, consists of fragments of the writer’s soul. While Pernkopf’s *Atlas* is supposed to be a “still life” of the human body, there is also surely some ‘soul’ in the paintings separate from historical facts and ideologies, a mark made by the artists themselves. The artwork seems to stem from within the artist when it is described: “the dead have no color. His power is that he gives them color” (Paterniti 737). What Corder refers to as the fragments of the soul must lie in feeling and emotion: the rush of power, the almost maniacal dedication and attention to detail that produced these drawings. Batke’s artistic soul, not his worldly ideologies, resound in the work.

Beyond the soul of the artist, and what art is (a form of beauty), what is most pressing is how art is received. In the case of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the character of Basil Hallward is reluctant to share his artwork, claiming, “I really can’t exhibit it. I have put too much of myself into it” (2). This is shown to be illogical, as Lord Henry convinces him, and ironically it is the titular Dorian Gray who invests too much in a portrait of himself made by Basil, selling his soul away as a result. The viewer’s investment in a piece of art is no less than that of the artist, for arguably the purpose of art is to be seen. Though distance is seemingly necessary to perceive sublime beauty, at the same time the artwork should hold some personal relevance to the beholder to have a truly profound effect. Williams also glimpses his own soul. Something inside him is reflected in the anatomical drawings, allowing him to engage with them as more than scientific. Williams sees a “glint of self-recognition” and “his own future” the first time he comes across the *Atlas*,

despite his removal from the historical context of violence in his life of relative safety (740).

The importance of the beholder can be furthered by Corder's claim that try as a writer might, his voice can be rendered nonexistent by the reader and that "what goes on is what's taken, not what you give" (141). He compares the relationship between the writer and reader to a type of dialogue in which the reader—or in the case of art, the viewer—has the dominant role in how something is perceived. Overall, he argues that the world tries to take interpretations of a written work as a "collective essay" (Corder 143). That is to say that readers, or viewers, try to impose a collective understanding on an artwork when there should be different perspectives. The 'collective understanding' does hold Pernkopf's *Atlas* as foremost a "Nazi text," which labels Williams as a "Nazi apologist" (746). However, there are other approaches to be found. The drawings are neither a stain on history nor art but a matter of practicality that allow surgeons to "save human lives," enabling "act[s] of salvation" (742). Williams's understanding of the drawings and his ability to see beauty in them is simply a voice within an anthology of voices. It may not be agreed upon, but it must be acknowledged and respected.

Ultimately, there are no set criteria to determine what art is. The value of art depends on so many factors—the artist, the artwork, and the viewer—so the only real conclusion to be drawn is that art is subjective. Some may be able to perceive the beauty within a work, the soul of the artist, and any relevance the art piece has to their lives. In the eyes of Williams, the *Atlas* is art. In the eyes of others who only see factual context—which is understandable, for we can't help but let reality affect our perceptions—Pernkopf's *Atlas* is an atrocity. It is beauty to some and horror to others, the latter possibly applicable to victims of atrocities unable to perceive beauty or find connections to themselves in certain historical contexts. There is no overarching definition of art—if any definition is to be found. It is up to each art piece to be examined and up to each individual to examine it. Such an approach seems to be advocated by Paterniti himself, who follows no linear progression but chooses to explore different perspectives throughout his essay. Despite the ambiguity at the end of his essay, where Williams "can't say why" he has a framed painting by Batke in his office, it is interesting to note that there is "an old portrait of Eduard Pernkopf" nearby (749). This seems to hint that the

context can never be completely removed from the art, and perhaps it is a reminder that it would be doing the artwork an injustice to ignore a certain aspect of its being—in this case, its history, in which Paterniti includes personal history. There needs to be a careful and balanced consideration of all the angles before the individual can draw a conclusion, and this may be why Paterniti does not explicitly conclude that the anatomical atlas is art but only suggest that this is the case for Williams alone. Each reader must make his or her own carefully weighed decision. Art is not art because it simply *is*—it is art because someone determines it to be.

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