

✓ Dave Hickey

Enter the Dragon: On the Vernacular of Beauty//1993

It would be nice if sometime a man would come up to me on the street and say, 'Hello, I'm the information man, and you have not said the word *yours* for thirteen minutes. You have not said the word *praise* for eighteen days, three hours and nineteen minutes.'
– Edward Ruscha, *Information Man*

I was drifting, daydreaming really, through the waning moments of a panel discussion on the subject of 'What's Happening Now', drawing cartoon daggers on a yellow pad and vaguely formulating strategies for avoiding punch and cookies, when I realized that I was being addressed from the audience. A lanky graduate student had risen to his feet and was soliciting my opinion as to what 'the issue of the nineties' would be. Snatched from my reverie, I said, 'Beauty', and then, more firmly, 'The issue of the nineties will be beauty' – a total improvisatory goof – an off-the-wall, jump-start, free association that rose unbidden to my lips from God knows where. Or perhaps I was being ironic, wishing it so but not believing it likely? I don't know, but the total, uncomprehending silence that greeted this modest proposal lent it immediate credence for me. My interlocutor plopped back into his seat, exuding dismay, and, out of sheer perversity, I resolved to follow beauty where it led into the silence. Improvising, I began updating Walter Pater; I insisted that beauty is not a *thing* – 'the beautiful' is a thing. In images, I intoned, beauty is the agency that causes visual pleasure in the beholder; and any theory of images that is not grounded in the pleasure of the beholder begs the question of their efficacy and dooms itself to inconsequence. This sounded provocative to me, but the audience continued to sit there, unprovoked, and *beauty* just hovered there as well, a word without a language, quiet, amazing and alien in that sleek, institutional space – like a pre-Raphaelite dragon aloft on its leather wings.

'If images don't *do* anything in this culture', I said, plunging on, 'if they haven't *done* anything, then why are we sitting here in the twilight of the twentieth century talking about them? And if they only do things after we have talked about them, then *they* aren't doing them, *we* are. Therefore, if our criticism aspires to anything beyond soft-science, the efficacy of images must be the cause of criticism, and not its consequence – the subject of criticism and not its object. And this', I concluded rather grandly, 'is why I direct your attention to the language of visual affect – to the rhetoric of how things look – to the iconography of desire – in a word, to *beauty!*'

I made a *voilà* gesture for punctuation, but to no avail. People were quietly filing out. My fellow panellists gazed into the dark reaches of the balcony or examined their cuticles. I was genuinely surprised. Admittedly, it was a goof. Beauty? Pleasure? Efficacy? Issues of the nineties? Admittedly outrageous. But it was an outrage worthy of a rejoinder – of a question or two, a nod, or at least a giggle. I had wandered into this *dead zone*, this silent abyss. I wasn't ready to leave it at that, but the moderator of our panel tapped on her microphone and said, 'Well, I guess that's it, kids.' So I never got off my parting shot. As we began breaking up, shuffling papers and patting our pockets, I felt a little sulky. (Swallowing a pithy allusion to Roland Barthes can do that.) And yet, I had no sooner walked out of the building and into the autumn evening than I was overcome by this strange Sherlock Holmesian elation. The game was afoot.

I had discovered something; or rather, I had put out my hand and discovered nothing – this vacancy that I needed to understand. I had assumed that from the beginning of the sixteenth century until just last week artists had been persistently and effectively employing the rough vernacular of pleasure and beauty to interrogate our totalizing concepts 'the good' and 'the beautiful'; and now this was over? Evidently. At any rate, its critical vocabulary seemed to have evaporated overnight, and I found myself muttering detective questions like: Who wins? Who loses? *Qui bono?* – although I thought I knew the answer. Even so, for the next year or so, I assiduously trotted out 'beauty' wherever I happened to be, with whomever I happened to be speaking. I canvassed artists and students, critics and curators, in public and in private – just to see what they would say. The results were disturbingly consistent, and not at all what I would have liked.

Simply put, if you broached the issue of beauty in the American art world of 1988, you could not incite a conversation about rhetoric – or efficacy, or pleasure, or politics, or even Bellini. You ignited a conversation about the market. That, at the time was the 'signified' of beauty. If you said 'beauty', they would say, 'The corruption of the market', and I would say, 'The corruption of the *market?!*'. After thirty years of frenetic empowerment, during which the venues for contemporary art in the United States had evolved from a tiny network of private galleries in New York into this vast, transcontinental sprawl of publicly funded, postmodern iceboxes? During which time the ranks of 'art professionals' had swollen from a handful of dilettantes on the East Side of Manhattan into this massive civil service of Ph.Ds and MFAs who administered a monolithic system of interlocking patronage, which, in its constituents, resembled nothing so much as that of France in the early nineteenth century? While powerful corporate, governmental, cultural and academic constituencies vied for power and tax-free dollars, each with its own self-perpetuating agenda and none with any vested interest in the subversive potential of visual pleasure? Under *these* cultural

conditions, artists across this nation were obsessing about the market? – fretting about a handful of picture merchants nibbling canapés on the Concorde? – blaming them for any work of art that did not incorporate raw plywood?

Under these cultural conditions, I would suggest, saying that 'the market is corrupt' is like saying that the cancer patient has a hangnail. Yet the manifestations of this pervasive *idée fixe* remain everywhere present today, not least of all in the sudden evanescence of the market itself after thirty years of scorn for the intimacy of its transactions, but also in the radical discontinuity between serious criticism of contemporary art and that of historical art. At a time when easily 60 per cent of historical criticism concerns itself with the influence of taste, patronage and the canons of acceptability upon the images that a culture produces, the bulk of contemporary criticism, in a miasma of hallucinatory denial, resolutely ignores the possibility that every form of refuge has its price, and satisfies itself with grousing about 'the corruption of the market'. The transactions of value enacted under the patronage of our new 'non-profit' institutions are exempted from this cultural critique, presumed to be untainted, redemptive, disinterested, taste free, and politically benign. Yeah, right.

During my informal canvass, I discovered that the 'reasoning' behind this presumption is that art dealers 'only care about how it looks', while the art professionals employed by our new institutions 'really care about what it means'. Which is easy enough to say. And yet, if this is, indeed, the case (and I think it is), I can't imagine any but the most demented naïf giddily abandoning an autocrat who monitors appearances for a bureaucrat who monitors desire. Nor can Michel Foucault, who makes a variation of this point in *Surveiller et punir*, and poses for us the choice that is really at issue here, between bureaucratic surveillance and autocratic punishment. Foucault opens his book with a grisly, antique text describing the lengthy public torture and ultimate execution of Damiens, the regicide; he then juxtaposes this cautionary spectacle of royal justice with the theory of reformatory incarceration propounded by Jeremy Bentham in his 'Panopticon'.

Bentham's agenda, in contrast to the king's public savagery, is ostensibly benign. It reifies the benevolent passion for secret control that informs Chardin's pictorial practice, and, like Chardin, Bentham *cares*. He has no wish to punish the offender, merely to reconstitute the offender's desire under the sheltering discipline of perpetual, covert, societal surveillance in the paternal hope that, like a child, the offender will ultimately internalize that surveillance as a 'conscience' and start controlling himself as a good citizen should. However, regardless of Bentham's ostensible benignity (and, in fact, because of it), Foucault argues that the king's cruel justice is ultimately more just – because the king does not care what we *mean*. The king demands from us the appearance of

loyalty, the rituals of fealty, and, if these are not forthcoming, he destroys our bodies, leaving us our convictions to die with. Bentham's warden, on the other hand, demands our *souls*, and on the off chance that they are not forthcoming, or *cannot* come forth into social normality, he knows that we will punish ourselves, that we will have internalized his relentless surveillance in the form of self-destructive guilt.

These are the options that Foucault presents to us; and I would suggest that, within the art community, the weight of the culture is so heavily on Bentham's side that we are unable to see them as equally tainted. We are, I think, such obedient children of the Panopticon, so devoted to care, and surveillance, and the irredeemable *souls* of things, that we have translated this complex, contemporary option between the king's savage justice and Bentham's bureaucratic discipline into a progressive, utopian choice between the 'corrupt old market' and the 'brave new institution'. Thus beauty has become associated with the 'corrupt old market' because art dealers, like Foucault's king, traffic in objects and appearances. They value images that promise pleasure and excitement. Those that keep their promise are admitted into the presence of the court; those that fail are subject to the 'king's justice', which can be very cruel and autocratic indeed. But there is another side to this coin, since art dealers are also like Foucault's king in that they do not care 'what it means'. Thus radical content has traditionally flourished under the auspices of this profound disinterest.

The liberal institution, however, is not so cavalier about appearances as the market is about meaning. Like Jeremy Bentham's benevolent warden, the institution's curators hold a public trust. They must look carefully and genuinely care about what artists 'really' mean – and therefore they must, almost of necessity, distrust appearances – distrust the very idea of appearances, and distrust most of all the appearance of images that, by virtue of the pleasure they give, are efficacious in their own right. The appeal of these images amounts to a kind of ingratitude, since the entire project of the new institution has been to lift the cruel burden of efficacy from the work of art and make it possible for artists to practise that 'plain honesty' of which no great artist has yet been capable, nor ever wished to be. Yet, if we would expose the inner soul of things to extended public scrutiny, 'sincere' appearance is everything, and beauty is the *bête noire* of this agenda, the snake in the garden. It steals the institution's power, seduces its congregation, and, in every case, elicits the dismay of artists who have committed themselves to plain honesty and the efficacy of the institution.

The arguments these artists mount to the detraction of beauty come down to one simple gripe: *Beauty sells*, and although their complaints usually are couched in the language of academic radicalism, they do not differ greatly from my grandmother's *haut bourgeois* prejudices against people 'in trade' who get

their names 'in the newspaper'. Beautiful art *sells*. If it sells itself, it is an idolatrous commodity; if it sells anything else, it is a seductive advertisement. Art is not idolatry, they say, nor is it advertising, and I would agree – with the caveat that idolatry and advertising are, indeed, art, and that the greatest works of art are always and inevitably a bit of both.

Finally, there are issues worth advancing in images worth admiring; and the truth is never 'plain', nor appearances ever 'sincere'. To try to make them so is to neutralize the primary, gorgeous eccentricity of imagery in Western culture since the Reformation: the fact that it cannot be trusted, that imagery is always presumed to be proposing something contestable and controversial. This is the sheer, ebullient, slithering, dangerous fun of it. No image is presumed inviolable in our dance hall of visual politics, and all images are potentially powerful. Bad graphics topple good governments and occlude good ideas; good graphics sustain bad ones. The fluid nuancing of pleasure, power and beauty is a serious, ongoing business in this culture and has been since the sixteenth century, when the dazzling rhetorical innovations of Renaissance picture making enabled artists to make speculative images of such authority that power might be successfully bestowed upon them, privately, by their beholders, rather than (or at least prior to) its being assigned by the institutions of church and state.

At this point, for the first time in history, the power of priestly and governmental bureaucracies to assign meaning to images began to erode, and the private encounter between the image and its beholder took on the potential of changing the public character of institutions. Images became mobile at this point, and irrevocably political – and henceforth, for more than four centuries subsequent to the rise of easel painting, images *argued*, for things – for doctrines, rights, privileges, ideologies, territories and reputations. For the duration of this period, a loose, protean collection of tropes and figures signifying 'beauty' functioned as the *pathos* that recommended the *logos* and *ethos* of visual argumentation to our attention. It provided the image's single claim to being looked at – and to being believed. The task of these figures of beauty was to enfranchise the audience and acknowledge its power – to designate a territory of shared values between the image and its beholder and, then, in this territory, to argue the argument by valorizing the picture's problematic content. Without the urgent intention of reconstructing the beholder's view of things, the image had no reason to exist, nor any reason to be beautiful. Thus, the comfort of the familiar always bore with it the frisson of the exotic, and the effect of this conflation, ideally, was persuasive excitement – visual pleasure. As Baudelaire says, 'the beautiful is always strange', by which he means, of course, that it is always strangely familiar.

Thus Caravaggio, at the behest of his masters, would deploy the exquisite

hieratic drama of the *Madonna of the Rosary* to lend visual appeal and corporeal authority to the embattled concept of the intercession of the priesthood – and would demonstrably succeed, not only in pleading his masters' case, but in imposing the urbane glamour of his own argument onto that doctrine. So today, as we stand before the *Madonna of the Rosary* in Vienna, we pay homage to a spectacular souvenir of successful visual litigation – an old warhorse put out to pasture – in this case, a thoroughbred. The image is quiet now; its argumentative frisson has been neutralized, and the issue itself drained of ideological urgency, leaving only the cosmetic superstructure of that antique argument just visible enough to be worshipped under the frayed pennants of 'humane realism' and 'transcendent formal values' by the proponents of visual repose.

Before we genuflect, however, we must ask ourselves if Caravaggio's 'realism' would have been so trenchant, or his formal accomplishment so delicately spectacular, had his contemporary political agenda, under the critical pressure of a rival church, not seemed so urgent? And we must ask ourselves further if the painting would have even survived until Rubens bought it, had it not somehow expedited that agenda? I doubt it. We are a litigious civilization and we do not like losers. The history of beauty, like all history, tells the winner's tale; and that tale is told in the great mausoleums where images like Caravaggio's, having done their work in the world, are entombed – and where, even hanging in state, they provide us with a ravishing and poignant visual experience. One wonders, however, whether our standards for the pleasures of art are well founded in the glamorous *tristesse* we feel in the presence of these institutionalized warhorses, and whether contemporary images are really enhanced by being institutionalized in their infancy, whether there might be work in the world for them to do, as well.

For more than four centuries, the idea of 'making it beautiful' has been the keystone of our cultural vernacular – the lover's machine gun and the prisoner's joy – the last redoubt of the disenfranchised and the single direct route from the image to the individual without a detour through church or state. Now, it seems, that lost generosity, like Banquo's ghost, is doomed to haunt our discourse about contemporary art – no longer required to recommend images to our attention or to insinuate them into the vernacular, and no longer even welcome to try. The route from the image to the beholder now detours through an alternate institution ostensibly distinct from church and state. Even so, it is not hard to detect the aroma of Caravaggio's priests as one treads its grey wool carpets or cools one's heels in its arctic waiting rooms. One must suspect, I think, that we are being denied any direct appeal to beauty, for much the same reason that Caravaggio's supplicants were denied appeal to the Virgin: to sustain the jobs of bureaucrats. Caravaggio, at least, *shows* us the Virgin, in all her gorgeous

autonomy, before instructing us not to look at her and redirecting our guilty eyes to that string of wooden beads hanging from the priest's fingers. The priests of the new church are not so generous. Beauty, in their domain, is altogether elsewhere, and we are left counting the beads and muttering the texts of academic sincerity.

As luck would have it, while I was in the midst of my informal survey, the noisy controversy over exhibiting Robert Mapplethorpe's erotic photographs in public venues provided me with a set-piece demonstration of the issues – and, at first, I was optimistic, even enthusiastic. This uproar seemed to be one of those magic occasions when the private visual litigation that good art conducts might expand into the more efficacious litigation of public politics – and challenge some of the statutory restrictions on the conduct that Mapplethorpe's images celebrate. I was wrong. The American art community, at the apogee of its power and privilege, chose to play the ravaged virgin, to fling itself prostrate across the front pages of America and fairly dare the fascist heel to crush its outraged innocence.

Moreover, this community chose to ignore the specific issues raised by Mapplethorpe's photographs in favour of the 'higher politics'. It came out strenuously in defence of the status quo and all the perks and privileges it had acquired over the last thirty years, and did so under the tattered banner of 'free expression' – a catchphrase that I presumed to have been largely discredited (and rightly so) by the feminist critique of images. After all, once a community acquiesces in the assumption that *some* images are certifiably toxic, this, more or less, 'opens the door', as they say in the land of litigation.

And finally, hardly anyone considered for a moment what an incredible rhetorical *triumph* the entire affair signified. A single artist with a single group of images had somehow managed to overcome the aura of moral isolation, gentrification and mystification that surrounds the practice of contemporary art in this nation and directly threaten those in actual power with his celebration of marginality. It was a fine moment, I thought, and all the more so because it was the *celebration* and not the marginality that made these images dangerous. Simply, it was their rhetorical acuity, their direct enfranchisement of the secular beholder. It was, exactly, their beauty that had lit the charge – and, in this area, I think, you have to credit Senator Jesse Helms, who, in his antediluvian innocence, at least saw what was there, understood what Mapplethorpe was proposing, and took it, correctly, as a direct challenge to everything he believed in. The senator may not know anything about art, but rhetoric is his business, and he did not hesitate to respond to the challenge. As, one would hope, he had a right to. Art is either a democratic political instrument, or it is not.

So, it was not that men were making it in Mapplethorpe's images. At that

time they were regularly portrayed doing so on the walls of private galleries and publicly funded 'alternative' spaces all over the country. On account of the cult of plain honesty and sincere appearance, however, they were not portrayed as doing it *so persuasively*. It was not that men were making it, then, but that Mapplethorpe was 'making it beautiful'. More precisely, he was appropriating a baroque vernacular of beauty that predated and, clearly, outperformed the puritanical canon of visual appeal espoused by the therapeutic institution. This canon presumes that we will look at art, however banal, because looking at art is, somehow, 'good' for us, regardless and, ultimately, in spite of whatever specific 'good' the individual work or artist might urgently propose to us.

This habit of subordinating the artist's 'good' to the 'higher politics of expression' of course, makes perfect sense in the mausoleums of antiquity, where it was born, and where we can hardly do otherwise – where it is, perhaps, 'good' for us to look at the *Madonna of the Rosary* without blanching at its Counter-Reformation politics, because those politics are dead – and where it may be 'good' for us, as well, to look at a Sir Thomas Lawrence portrait and 'understand' his identification of romantic heroism with landed aristocracy. It is insane and morally ignorant, however, to confront the work of a living (and, at that time, dying) artist as we would the artefacts of lost Atlantis, with forgiving connoisseurship – to 'appreciate' his passionate, partisan and political celebrations of the American margin – and in so doing, refuse to engage their 'content' or argue the arguments that deal so intimately with trust, pain, love and the giving up of the self.

Yet this is exactly what was expected and desired, not by the government, but by the art establishment. It was a matter of 'free expression', and thus, the defence of the museum director prosecuted for exhibiting the images was conducted almost completely in terms of the redemptive nature of formal beauty and the critical nature of surveillance. The 'sophisticated' beholder, the jury was told, responded to the elegance of the form regardless of the subject matter. Yet this beholder must be 'brave' enough to look at 'reality' and 'understand' the sources of that formal beauty in the artist's tortured private pathology. If this sounds like the old patriarchal do-dah about transcendent formal values and humane realism, it is, with the additional fillip that, in the courts of Ohio, the sources of beauty are now taken to be, not the corruption of the market, but the corruption of the artist. So, clearly, all this litigation to establish Robert Mapplethorpe's 'corruption' would have been unnecessary had his images somehow *acknowledged* that corruption, and thus qualified him for our forgiveness. But they did not.

There is no better proof of this, I think, than the fact that, while the Mapplethorpe controversy was raging, Francis Bacon's retrospective was

packing them in at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Joel-Peter Witkin was exhibiting in institutional serenity – because Bacon's and Witkin's images speak a language of symptoms that is profoundly tolerable to the status quo. They mystify Mapplethorpe's content, aestheticize it, personalize it, and ultimately further marginalize it as 'artistic behaviour', with signifiers that denote angst, guilt and despair. It is not portrayal that destabilizes, it is *praise*. Nor is it criticism of centrality that changes the world. Critique of the mainstream ennobles the therapeutic institution's ostensible role as shadow government and disguises its unacknowledged mandate to neutralize dissent by first ghettoizing it, and then mystifying it. Confronted by images like Mapplethorpe's that, by virtue of their direct appeal to the beholder, disdain its umbrella of 'care', the therapeutic institution is immediately disclosed for what it is: the moral junkyard of a pluralistic civilization.

Yet the vernacular of beauty, in its democratic appeal, remains a potent instrument for change in this civilization. Mapplethorpe uses it, as does Warhol, as does Ruscha, to engage individuals within and without the cultural ghetto in arguments about what is good and what is beautiful. And they do so without benefit of clergy, out in the street, out on the margin, where we might, if we are lucky, confront that information man with his reminder that we have not used the word *praise* for eighteen days, three hours, and nineteen minutes.

Dave Hickey, 'Enter the Dragon: On the Vernacular of Beauty', in *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993) 15–24.

Kathleen Marie Higgins Whatever Happened to Beauty? A Response to Danto//1996

Whatever happened to beauty? In 'Beauty and Morality' (1994),¹ Arthur C. Danto meditates on the relative scarcity of beauty in recent art. He seeks the explanation in our attitudes about the appropriate use of beauty. Following Kant to a point, he contends that beauty casts a universalized light upon a phenomenon, reminding us that what is presented beautifully is an inherent part of human experience. Beauty is appropriate as a means of marking the loss of a loved one, for it reminds us that the pain of loss is a universal human experience. 'It is as though beauty were a kind of catalyst, transforming raw grief into tranquil sadness', Danto observes (page 364).

Appropriate as beauty's healing influence seems when one is faced with personal loss, it seems far from apt in the face of political defeat for a cause that is a matter of moral urgency. Beauty seems wrong in such cases, 'wrong because one is called upon to act ... and not to philosophize' (365). Danto elaborates this point by considering the category of artworks that display what he calls 'internal beauty'. Beauty is internal to a work of art when it is 'internally connected with the reference and the mood' (366). For such a work, beauty is part of the work's content. Accordingly, Danto contends, 'it can be a criticism of a work that it is beautiful when it is inappropriate for it to be so' (370).

Judgements that beauty is inappropriate underlie the decision to forego beauty in much contemporary art. 'Ours ... is an age of moral indignation', Danto reminds us (374). He seems to concur with artistic abstinence from beauty in many instances. To find beauty in images of suffering, to seek aesthetic satisfaction where injustice prevails is, in his view, a moral failing. Our societal aversion to beauty, accordingly, has to do with our heightened moral sensitivity. We cannot in good conscience close our eyes and ears to the troubles of our world, but beauty threatens to conceal them.

Yet Danto takes a mixed view of the activist art that has largely supplanted art that is beautiful. Too often, he contends, political activists have failed in their efforts to 'enlist art as an ally in their campaign' (374). The problem, as he sees it, is that when art designed to inspire moral response fails *as art*, it also 'fails morally, extenuated only by the good intentions of the artist' (375). He concludes that 'the lesson is that art has its limits as a moral arm. There are things it can do and things it cannot. It can do what philosophy can do, and what beauty can do. But that may mean that philosophy too has its limits as a moral arm' (374). Our age has yet to learn this lesson, however. Moral indignation continues to hold

✓ Suzanne Perling Hudson
Beauty and the Status of Contemporary Criticism//2003

Beauty is a power we should reinvest with our own purpose.
– Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 1994

In December 1994, the veteran *New Yorker* dance critic Arlene Croce published a polemical piece of criticism that assumed the form of a non-review, an essay-length argument marked by a spectrally present – if otherwise unilaterally refused – object of enquiry at its core. In her 'Discussing the Undiscussable', Croce details her refusal to attend the recent work of the black, gay, HIV-positive choreographer Bill T. Jones on the grounds that his *Still/Here* (performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on 2 December 1994) was in fact little more than an instance of the rapidly proliferating 'victim art' – replete, as it was, with video and audiotapes of 'real' terminally ill cancer and AIDS patients juxtaposed with live performance by other sick dancers.¹ The dance's invocation of a kind of unmediated experience of death and suffering thus rendered questions of theatre and form essentially moot for Croce, while the dance itself was decried as 'beyond criticism'. The dancers, here described as 'dissed blacks, abused women or disenfranchised homosexuals', clearly fared no better than the context in which their inauspicious performances were articulated, as they too remained resolutely beyond the pale for Croce, and thereby outside the discursive framework she motivates.

Pathology is certainly at issue here, although to no greater extent than the status of criticism per se, put under pressure, as it is, in the wake of multiculturalism and identity politics, not to mention the AIDS crisis and the 'culture wars' promulgated in response to the funding decisions proffered by the National Endowment for the Arts. The problem thus becomes one of criticism's – or the critic's – agency and viability, or to put the matter slightly differently, its triviality and inconsequence in relation to its seemingly welcomed obsolescence in the face of new aesthetic and cultural forms. And as critics can stubbornly and piously refuse to engage with art at all, a certain modality of contemporary criticism has, indeed, arrived at its terminus. [...]

It strikes one that in the wake of the long, episodic line of NEA fiascos – those enacted over Andres Serrano's 1989 *Piss Christ* (a Cibachrome print depicting a crucifix submerged in a ravishing pool of the artist's urine), Robert Mapplethorpe's questionably 'pornographic' photography, the work of the controversial performance artist Karen Finley, the Museum of Contemporary Art

in San Diego's 1993 distribution of ten-dollar bills to undocumented Mexican workers, or the Brooklyn Museum of Art's 1999 'Sensation' show easily come to mind – the status of the critic *should* be at its apogee. And yet, we are now witnessing the waning of a historical moment in which criticism might have had real social and political purchase. Instead of entering a public sphere of discourse, artistic production and institutionalization, most critics of late have chosen to retreat into academic solipsism and abstruse theoretical models, further marginalizing their attempts at appraisal in favour of jargon-laden rhetorical gymnastics, or, alternately, offering the market congratulatory and blithely affirmative pieces. Croce's text might have been hyperbolically inflammatory, although its wager must have been its implicit proposal for a mode of intervention. That such a move is required – on the right or the left – to provoke a critical outpouring sadly points to the real bankruptcy of criticism.² We might profitably ask what, at present, is recoupable for criticism and the advanced art it should, seemingly, be equipped to discuss.

One answer to this impasse seems to be that of the return of the aesthetic and its attendant mode of exegesis, belles-lettres. Certainly a form of compensation given the terrain that I have, thus far, summarily sketched out, a return to beauty and ideas of taste and morality reads symptomatically as a desire to move beyond the abject and the victimized, to repress the AIDS crisis and its representations, and to shore up culture in the face of identity-politic relativism. Beauty, that most conciliatory of philosophical rubrics and justifications, is back with a vengeance, while beautiful writing about beautiful objects and their beautiful makers additionally denotes the triumph of academic philosophy as well as the democratization of the no-longer autonomous and privileged realm of the aesthetic. [...]

The rise of beauty, as I will suggest, has everything to do with the crisis of criticism of which the Croce run-in is but an emblematic and explicitly catalytic example. Beauty represents the other side of the coin, as it were, that which can fill the spaces left vacant in the evacuation of strident critical activity, and that which can operate in exactly those interstices otherwise deterritorialized and thus rendered mute. In short, beauty too often serves to placate an anxious public, operating in the service of the maintenance of the status quo. This is not to suggest that beauty cannot be invested with other purposes, or even that it is insufficient as a productive aesthetic term in its own right, but rather that its ubiquity at present can be explained, at least in part, by its unparalleled ability to mollify and appease, in short, to reconcile. [...]

Even the 2002 Museum of Modern Art, New York, retrospective of Gerhard Richter unleashed a fury of praise couched in terms of beauty and aesthetic primacy. Robert Storr, the exhibition's chief curator and the author of two MoMA

Richter publications, appeared on the PBS programme *Charlie Rose* pronouncing and reiterating the beauty of Richter's paintings (candles and landscapes rated high in this context), while Peter Schjeldahl's review of the show for *The New Yorker* said that the 1988 'Vermeeresque' painting of Richter's daughter, *Betty*, 'seems to me the single sharpest blow struck in recent art-world debates about the value of aesthetic pleasure. It is a one-punch knockout for the revival of beauty'.³ When read against Schjeldahl's assenting 1994 'Notes on Beauty' (first published in *Art issues*, and reprinted in the anthology *Uncontrollable Beauty*, New York, 1998), this comment is to be expected, even if he does note therein: 'I do not discuss beauty with curators. It would only discomfit them and embarrass me.' Moreover, he writes, 'Beauty ... is always mixed up with something else, some other quality or value – or story, even, in rudimentary forms of allegory, "moral" or "sentiment".' 'Beauty entails a sense of the sacred.' 'There is something crazy about a culture in which the value of beauty becomes controversial.'⁴

Of late, Hal Foster too has come down on the question of beauty in Richter, arguing against this kind of conciliatory position for beauty as represented by Schjeldahl as much as by Kant or Schiller or, above all, Stendhal. He writes:

Such reconciliation is not possible for postwar artists like Richter, for whom art, beauty and semblance are all transformed not only by mass media but by the historical traumas of world war and the Holocaust. Richter does deliver beauty, to be sure, but when it is credible it is beauty with a traumatic core, a 'wounded' beauty that works over (but not through) its own loss – as beautiful painting, as great tradition, as resplendent semblance.⁵

Beauty here is operable only in so far as it entails a certain implacability, so that it holds tensions in play rather than wistfully papering them over or simply and improbably wishing them away. I think that this is a right assessment given the historical circumstances Foster invokes, as well as the previously suggested situation made legible by means of the AIDS crisis and the concomitant NEA debates. For artists such as Richter and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, beauty – as a deliberate, strategic mode of aesthetic presentation and performance – opens onto questions of the political and loss quite specifically. Beauty, then, in its most apposite contemporary manifestations has everything to do with Foster's notion of credibility, or to put the matter somewhat differently, its timeliness and its utter and unsettled self-consciousness.

Dave Hickey's seminal if highly fraught *The Invisible Dragon* has much to say in this regard. His book was the first to take up the condition of beauty in the present, and it is rife with anecdotes and even endorsements – we find none other than Schjeldahl on the back cover saying: 'Dave Hickey is my hero and the

best-kept secret in art criticism, a great mind driven not by necessity but by desire – erudite, generous, free. If this book of shocking intelligence and moral hope is read widely and above all well, word for word, it will help the world.' Circulating here is an appeal to the implicit connection between ethics and aesthetics to which Scarry similarly has recourse, as well as a suggestion that the real nature of Hickey's interest lies in his position as an unknown outsider 'driven not by necessity but by desire'. The latter claim is fictive to be sure – in fact, Hickey is positioned within the academy, teaching at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and he has additionally owned and directed an art gallery, curated SITE Santa Fe's Fourth Biennial (2001), and even won the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship (also in 2001) – although the point is that Hickey's reputation turns on precisely such rhetoric. When compounded with Hickey's consummate skill as a writer, his market-driven democratic aesthetic becomes invidious, as his prodigious claims are too often taken up by a suite of like-minded critics eager to appease the directives of their publication venues and, importantly, their audiences. However, I do not mean wholly to dismiss Hickey's work either; indeed, his argument is at times seductive, especially when he contextualizes the stakes of beauty in the late eighties.

Hickey is particularly good on the question of the role of the market and beauty's function within it. In this vein he writes, 'if you broached the issue of beauty in the American art world of 1988, you could not incite a conversation about rhetoric – or efficacy – or pleasure – or politics – or even Bellini. You ignited a conversation about the market.'⁶ In short, beauty signified merely 'how something looks' as opposed to the more highly valued 'what something means', thus framing the debate in terms of the bifurcation of appearance and content as if the two terms were mutually exclusive.

Of course, much has changed in the past decade. Such a transformation of the status of beauty from an index of art's market conditions to the very stuff of which art gets made and through which it gets discussed has, I contend, everything to do with the culture wars and the place of the public for contemporary American art. Accordingly, Mapplethorpe figures prominently in Hickey's account (both in terms of his actual project and its public and critical reception), as he well should, given the enormous implications and consequence of his photography's presumed cultural defamation: a Mapplethorpe retrospective organized by the University of Pennsylvania's Institute of Contemporary Art in 1989 – ironically the twentieth anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion – had received \$30,000 in NEA funding. It was scheduled to open at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., when Dick Armey, a Republican congressman from Texas, mounted a campaign culminating in a letter signed by a hundred other members of Congress threatening to cut the

agency's budget in an attempt to end its sponsorship of 'morally reprehensible trash'.⁷ This is precisely what happened, although it did not stop there: more conservative members were appointed to the NEA's governing body, grant decisions were overturned, and right-wing politicians called the populace to arms, a moral charge such politicians meant Americans to take seriously. [...]

At the centre of such debates – and here the Croce situation returns as both epigraph and coda – is an anxiety about the body and disease. More broadly, however, the debate is, as always, a matter of public culture and who constitutes the body politic. Moreover it is a matter of the place of art's activism or the conditions of possibility for praxis, whether in terms of the responsibility and interest of the artist or the critic. So, to return once more to the Mapplethorpe phenomenon, Hickey encapsulates his reading of the situation as follows:

This uproar seemed to be one of those magic occasions when the private visual litigation that good art conducts might expand into the more efficacious litigation of public politics – and challenge some of the statutory restrictions on the conduct Robert's images celebrate. I was wrong. The American art community, at the apogee of its power and privilege, chose to play the ravaged virgin, to fling itself prostrate across the front pages of America and fairly dare the fascist heel to crush its outraged innocence.⁸

Hickey is rightly disappointed and openly aggrieved by the art world's placating brand of politics, although his claims are later interestingly and rather baldly grounded in the context of beauty. In short, the problem with Mapplethorpe's work was 'not that men were making it, then, but that Robert was "making it beautiful"'. Hickey continues in a citation worth repeating at length:

It was, exactly, [Mapplethorpe's 'X' Portfolio's] beauty that had lit the charge – and, in this area, I think, you have to credit Senator Jesse Helms, who, in his antediluvian innocence, at least saw what was there, understood what Robert was proposing, and took it, correctly, as a direct challenge to everything he believed in. The senator may not know anything about art, but rhetoric is his business and he did not hesitate to respond to the challenge. As one would hope, he had a right to. Art is either a democratic political instrument, or it is not.⁹

This question of art as democratic or even populist is, in a word, what underlies Hickey's critical project. In this regard, the question of exhibition practice and the criticism it engenders acquires an important meaning as a means of social (again read democratic) participation and form of cultural and discursive legitimacy. And while I am sympathetic to Hickey's impassioned recognition of

an art public to be addressed at all, I think that it is precisely the failure of the democratic model that he invokes that ultimately franchises the return of beauty and conciliatory aesthetics yoked to consensual politics.

Indeed, Hickey's own curatorial work on the 2001 SITE Santa Fe Biennial 'Beau Monde: Toward a Redeemed Cosmopolitanism' attests to the ways in which popular gestures end up as mechanisms of cultural consolidation. Here, under the aegis of beauty and a contingent recourse to design, 'Beau Monde' offered regional identities and discrete projects as just so many pretty rooms. As stated in SITE Santa Fe's press release, Hickey conceived of this situation as 'a melting pot in which nothing melts'. This seems to be precisely what the organizers of the exhibition explicitly required, as Louis Grachos, the SITE Santa Fe director, commented that choosing Hickey was the unequivocal antidote to the overtly political biennial mounted by curator Rosa Martínez in 1999. Her show had provoked protests 'from residents who thought their town was being desecrated by radical artists'.¹⁰ 'Hickey', as Grachos demurred, 'brings us back indoors'.¹¹

Nevertheless, Hickey's earlier intuition vis-à-vis Mapplethorpe – that beauty is political when wielded in certain knowing ways,¹² and when it is applied to particular, contentious subjects – is useful in so far as it recuperates the aesthetic as a rhetorical strategy. So, by way of a rather protracted conclusion, I would like to propose a kind of counter-model to that of Mapplethorpe as understood by Hickey. At the time when Mapplethorpe was throwing beautiful scenes of homosexual *frisson* in the face of a maligned public and Congress, Felix Gonzalez-Torres was working with piles of candy, stacks of paper, jigsaw puzzles, billboards, mirrors and strings of light. It was not that his work was not political – his work is nothing if not political – or did not address sexual politics in the wake of AIDS, but rather that it did not unreservedly flaunt this fact. In his reworking of the tropes of Minimalism and conceptual art, installation and institutional critique, Gonzalez-Torres' project counters notions of absence, longing and loss with the kind of 'wounded' and self-critical beauty outlined above. His use of past artistic languages that contest normative aesthetics (and, importantly, are devoid of visual pleasure) works to undermine the autonomy of art, even as his contemporary use of such precedents registers their implicit, if paradoxical, status as political and aesthetic in equal measure.

Gonzalez-Torres' mode, then, is one of infiltration, one that he alternately, and significantly, likens to being in drag,¹³ or to a virus.¹⁴ Meaning or content is implicit in most pieces, remaining latent without becoming peripheral, while beauty is neither the means for redemption (be it aesthetic or personal), nor contestation per se. It is instead a *strategy* of aesthetic production capable of veiling and communicating claims for art and its function within a community.¹⁵ [...]

Premised on ideal heights and weights and determined, in part, by the

particularities of each installation site, the stacks dwindle over the course of an exhibition, as viewers are encouraged to take sheets away. Further, the owner or the institution exhibiting the work is not obligated to maintain the ideal height – the stacks can either be constantly replenished or the floor space can be left empty after the last sheet has been taken, which allows the owner or curator a great deal of flexibility and interpretive freedom. The stacks mimic the solidity of sculpture from a distance, only to disintegrate one sheet at a time. The paper might be understood as an antidote to institutional possessiveness, becoming a kind of gift or souvenir for the viewer, all the while resisting a move into the strictly conceptual as analogue to a kind of dematerialized aesthetic withdrawal. And yet, the sheets also undermine the status of the autonomous art object, instancing, if dissolving, the boundaries between object and image or sculpture and photography, additionally staging a self-reflexive dispersal of sculpture beyond the walls of the institution. Likewise, the integrity of a stable and unitary work is thereby renounced, as the structure of the work quite literally (formally) enacts the absence upon which its wounded beauty is premised, encouraging the viewer to meditate on the participatory space the work engenders. [...]

Take, for example, the memento mori of 1991, entitled *Untitled* (*Perfect Lovers*). This piece is characteristic in that it is evocative, not illustrative; two synchronized clocks hung side by side mark off the passage of time. While the piece is clearly 'about' Gonzalez-Torres and his partner, it is also about any lovers, be they homosexual or heterosexual, and the reality of impermanence and the threat and fear of imminent loss.

When contrasted with Nayland Blake's *Every 12 Minutes* (also from 1991), the role of beauty becomes clear. Where Gonzalez-Torres' clocks have blank faces, Blake's comes replete with text ('One AIDS Death/STOP IT'), thereby exhibiting the artist's ideological underpinnings and political aspirations. The point of this comparison is not a matter of aesthetics, but rather the ways in which activism is, or refuses to be, pictured. As Simon Watney reminds us, that 'there can be no single approach or strategy for representing AIDS adequately or appropriately', these different modes are precisely just that.¹⁶ And yet, I would argue that Gonzalez-Torres' piece is the more successful of the two, in that it circulates – read infiltrates – art and other spaces and discourses that Blake's, by virtue of its heavy-handedness and its blatant desire for propagandistic transgressiveness, never could.¹⁷ As Gonzalez-Torres puts it:

Two clocks side by side are much more threatening to the powers that be than an image of two guys sucking each other's dicks, because they cannot use me as a rallying point in their battle to erase meaning. It is going to be very difficult for members of Congress to tell their constituents that money is being expended for

the promotion of homosexual art when all they have to show are two plugs side by side, or two mirrors side by side, or two lightbulbs side by side.¹⁸

A turn towards abstraction and poetics here provides a strategy with real political efficacy for an artist caught between the hostile government and the placating institution. Beauty is, in this way and context, a kind of Trojan horse, capable of smuggling disruptive ideas and concerns into otherwise disinterested institutional spaces. [...]

Gonzalez-Torres turned his experience as a supposedly marginalized gay, HIV-positive, Cuban-American man into a mode of artmaking that does not reconcile so much as play an elaborate and subtle game of infiltration and critique. Here beauty – at once motivated and self-differing – preserves its 'traumatic' and credible core, as it stands as counter-measure to the formulaic recourse to beauty we have witnessed in the last few years. Gonzalez-Torres repeatedly remarked in interviews that his work rehearsed his fears of having his lover disappear (Ross died of AIDS-related complications in 1991). Beauty then serves as a way to work over, if not through, loss and the mourning of a community, its inequities, and, even more generally, the power of art to redeem the experience of suffering or death. 'The meaning is really just there', Gonzalez-Torres explained, 'one only has to look'.¹⁹ [...]

- 1 Arlene Croce, 'Discussing the Undiscussable', *The New Yorker* (26 December 1994 – 2 January 1995) 54–60.
- 2 [footnote 6 in source] I am here dealing with a particular kind of critic who, by means of public reputation or institutional affiliation, would actually be heard in the context of larger discussions of art and culture.
- 3 [7] Peter Schjeldahl, 'The Good German', *The New Yorker* (4 March 2002) 84–5.
- 4 [8] Peter Schjeldahl, 'Notes on Beauty', *Uncontrollable Beauty: Toward a New Aesthetics*, ed. Bill Beckley with David Shapiro (New York: Allworth Press, 1998) 53–9.
- 5 [9] Hal Foster, 'Semblance According to Gerhard Richter', *Raritan*, no. 3 (Winter 2003) 175.
- 6 [10] Dave Hickey, 'Enter the Dragon', *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993) 13.
- 7 [11] As quoted in Carol S. Vance, 'The War on Culture', *Don't Leave Me This Way: Art in the Age of AIDS*, ed. Ted Gott (Melbourne: Thames & Hudson, 1994) 94.
- 8 [14] Hickey, op. cit., 21.
- 9 [16] Michael Rush, 'In Santa Fe, Searching for the Meaning of Beauty', *New York Times*, section 2 (8 July 2001) 31.
- 10 [17] Ibid. [...]
- 11 [18] To be clear, I mean to suggest that beauty becomes political at the determinate moment when the credibility of 'beauty' as a value or quality is brought into question, forcing the critic

or viewer into a difficult confrontation with – and an altogether uncertain relation before – the contradictory work at issue.

- 12 [19] Tim Rollins, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: A.R.T., 1993) 14.
- 13 [20] 'I want to be like a virus that belongs to the institution. All the ideological apparatuses are ... replicating themselves, because that's the way culture works. So if I function as a virus, an impostor, an infiltrator, I will always replicate myself together with those institutions.' Gonzalez-Torres, in *Ad Reinhardt, Joseph Kosuth, Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Symptoms of Interference, Conditions of Possibility* (London: Camden Arts Centre, 1994) 76.
- 14 [21] Gonzalez-Torres' billboard projects – importantly sited outside the gallery or museum context – make especially clear the depth of his engagement with questions of the public and a public for his practice. [...]
- 15 [24] Simon Watney, 'Art from the Pit: Some Reflections on Monuments, Memory and AIDS', *Don't Look Now*, op. cit., 61.
- 16 [25] As Hal Foster has suggested, as is the case with much late eighties art, such transgression often effectively served to strengthen the law rather than profitably to break it. See his *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996) 153–68.
- 17 [26] As cited in Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of Art, 1995) 73.
- 18 [27] *Ibid.*
- 19 [29] *Ibid.*, 75.

Suzanne Perling Hudson, extracts from 'Beauty and the Status of Contemporary Criticism', *October*, no. 104 (Spring 2003) 115–30 [Some footnotes abbreviated].

Saul Ostrow

The Eternal Problem of Beauty's Return//2003

[...] Beauty, which had once been considered the supreme good, has come to be identified as a source of oppression and discrimination. Since the late 1800s, avant-garde intellectual and artistic circles had repeatedly disparaged beauty as an objective. By the early 1950s it seemed finally to have exited the scene. First, it had been traded in for the sublime, and then in the 1960s, as artists turned to aestheticizing industrial and abject materials, standardized forms, common objects and processes, the sublime was desublimated. The irony is that just at that moment the subject of beauty was being reinvented as a political and cultural issue. In the early 1960s Stokely Carmichael, chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), declared, 'Black is Beautiful'. This slogan of self-affirmation was meant to counter among peoples of colour the self-hatred that resulted from beauty's WASP ['White Anglo-Saxon Protestant'] norm. Likewise, the women's movement, by condemning the exploitation of both beauty and sex, sought to contest the influence of the media and the fashion industry on women's self-conceptions. Many feminists held that beauty was not only a source of envy and antagonism among women, but also reduced them to mere objects in the eyes of men. This account of denigration and control has haunted our conception of beauty ever since. [...]

It is in this context that beauty comes to be reconceived as a node in a complex network, connecting our concepts of aesthetic judgement to truth, purity, art, the political, etc., rather than as a thing in itself. Given the irreconcilable nature of the opposing visions of beauty, many writers and artists who now promote an anti-aesthetic vision of art and culture are equally as dangerous as those who claim art to represent a fixed truth, for both standardized models lead to the repression of all things unfixable. The proponents of the anti-aesthetic model fail to see how their position, rather than avoiding the problem of anaesthetizing politics, actually promotes it. [...]

Taking a positive rather than a reactive stance seems to me to be the only way that we might come to learn and take responsibility for how our reflections on beauty affect our own existence as well as that of the 'other'. Rather than argue that our concepts of beauty must be either jettisoned or defended, we need to generate positions that are self-consciously personal, perverse, positive, philosophical and practical. [...]

Saul Ostrow, from 'The Eternal Problem of Beauty's Return', *Art Journal*, 62: 3 (Fall 2003) 113; 115.

Arthur C. Danto

The Aesthetics of Brillo Boxes//2003

[...] The Disappearance of Beauty

It is a matter of some irony in my own case that while the aesthetics of Pop art opened art up for me to philosophical analysis, aesthetics itself has until now had little to contribute to my philosophy of art. That in part is because my interests have largely been in the philosophical definition of art. The issue of defining art became urgent in the twentieth century when art works began to appear which looked like ordinary objects, as in the notorious case of Marcel Duchamp's readymades. As with the Brillo boxes of Andy Warhol and James Harvey, aesthetics could not explain why one was a work of fine art and the other not, since for all practical purposes they were aesthetically indiscernible: if one was beautiful, the other one had to be beautiful, since they looked just alike. So aesthetics simply disappeared from what Continental philosophers call the 'problematic' of defining art. I must admit this may have been an artefact of the way I set about addressing the problem. Still, aesthetics had been too closely associated with art since it first became a topic for philosophy in ancient times to be entirely disregarded in a definition. And as my experience with the *Brillo Box* demonstrates, the aesthetics of artworks has a place in an account of why they please us, even if it is not much different from the way aesthetics functions in everyday choices – in selecting garments or choosing sexual partners or picking a dog out of a litter or an apple out of a display of apples. There is doubtless a psychology of everyday aesthetics to be worked out, and if there are what one might call laws of aesthetic preference, it would be greatly to our advantage to learn what they are. Intuitively, apple merchants polish pieces of fruit, and give prominence to especially well-formed items. And everyone knows the way cosmetics are employed to make ourselves look more desirable – to make the eyes look larger and the hair shinier and fuller and the lips redder and more moist. But is that the way it is with the aesthetics of works of art? To make them look more attractive to collectors? Or has it some deeper role to play in the meaning of art?

The philosophical conception of aesthetics was almost entirely dominated by the idea of beauty, and this was particularly the case in the eighteenth century – the great age of aesthetics – when apart from the sublime, the beautiful was the only aesthetic quality actively considered by artists and thinkers. And yet beauty had almost entirely disappeared from artistic reality in the twentieth century, as if attractiveness was somehow a stigma, with its crass commercial

implications. Aesthetics was the very substance of artistic experience in Abstract Expressionist culture. But what made paintings 'work' seemed poorly captured by the way beauty had been classically formulated, with reference to balance and proportion and order. 'Beautiful!' itself just became an expression of generalized approbation, with as little descriptive content as a whistle someone might emit in the presence of something that especially wowed them. So it was no great loss to the discourse of art when the early Logical Positivists came to think of beauty as bereft of cognitive meaning altogether. To speak of something as beautiful, in their view, is not to describe it, but to express one's overall admiration. And this could be done by just saying 'Wow' – or rolling one's eyes and pointing to it. Beyond what was dismissed as its 'emotive meaning', the idea of beauty appeared to be cognitively void – and that in part accounted for the vacuity of aesthetics as a discipline, which had banked so heavily on beauty as its central concept. In any case it seemed to have so little to do with what art had become in the latter part of the century that what philosophical interest art held could be addressed without needing to worry over much about it – or without needing to worry about it at all.

Another Look at Beauty

Things began to change somewhat in the 1990s. Beauty was provocatively declared to be the defining problem of the decade by the widely admired art-writer Dave Hickey, and this was hailed as an exciting thought. My sense is that it was exciting less because of beauty itself, than because beauty was proxy for something that had almost disappeared from most of one's encounters with art, namely enjoyment and pleasure. In 1993 when Hickey's essay was published, art had gone through a period of intense politicization, the high point of which was the 1993 Whitney Biennial, in which nearly every work was a shrill effort to change American society. Hickey's prediction did not precisely pan out. What happened was less the pursuit of beauty as such by artists than the pursuit of the idea of beauty, through exhibitions and conferences by critics and curators who, perhaps inspired by Hickey, thought it time to have another look at beauty.

A good example to consider is an exhibition that took place at the Hirschhorn Museum in Washington, in October 1999. In celebration of the museum's fiftieth anniversary, two curators – Neil Benezra and Olga Viso – organized an exhibition called 'Regarding Beauty: Perspectives on Art since 1950'. In 1996 the same two curators had mounted an apparently antithetical exhibition titled 'Distemper: Dissonant Themes in the Art of the 1990s'. Only three years separate the two shows, but the contrast is sharp enough to have raised a question of whether there had not been some artistic turning point in this narrow interval – a hairpin turn in the *Kunstwollen* – and even a reappraisal of the social function of art.

Dissonance had been the favoured ambition for art for most of the preceding century. The shift from dissonance to beauty could hardly appear more extreme.

Olga Viso told me that it was the fact that many who saw the first show remarked to her on how beautiful many of the 'dissonant' works struck them, that inspired her to put together a show just of art that was expressly made with beauty in mind. But if in fact the dissonance in contemporary art turned out to have been compatible with the works' being beautiful, dissonance could not have been quite so anti-aesthetic as the term and the spirit it expresses suggested. If, that is to say, the works from 'Distemper' were found beautiful, they were probably not that different from the works in 'Regarding Beauty' after all, and in fact that turned out to be the case. My own view [...] is that the beauty of the works in the earlier show would have been incidental rather than integral to their meaning, as was supposed to be the case in the second show. But still it would be there. By 'integral' I will mean that the beauty is internal to the meaning of the work.

Consider, for illustrative purposes, the notorious example of Marcel Duchamp's perhaps too obsessively discussed *Fountain*, which, as by now everybody knows, largely consisted of an ordinary industrially produced urinal. Duchamp's supporters insisted that the urinal he anonymously submitted to the Society of Independent Artists in 1917 was meant to reveal how lovely this form really was – that abstracting from its function, the urinal looked enough like the exemplarily beautiful sculpture of Brancusi to suggest that Duchamp might have been interested in underscoring the affinities. It was Duchamp's patron, Walter Arensberg, who thought – or pretended to think – that disclosing the beauty was the point of *Fountain* – and Arensberg was a main patron of Brancusi as well.

Now Duchamp's urinal may indeed have been beautiful in point of form and surface and whiteness. But in my view, the beauty, if indeed there, was incidental to the work, which had other intentions altogether. Duchamp, particularly in his readymades of 1915–17, intended to exemplify the most radical dissociation of aesthetics from art. 'A point which I very much want to establish is that the choice of these "readymades" was never dictated by aesthetic delectation', he declared retrospectively in 1961. 'The choice was based on a reaction of visual indifference with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste ... in fact a complete anaesthesia.' Still, Duchamp's supporters were aesthetically sensitive persons, and though they may have gotten his intentions wrong, they were not really mistaken about the fact, incidental or not, that the urinal really could be seen as beautiful. And Duchamp himself had said that modern plumbing was America's great contribution to civilization.

Let's say the supporters believed the beauty internal to the work, while I and many others think it incidental. But there can be no question that the work was,

for many reasons, *dissonant*. So it could appear in an exhibition meant to thematize dissonance – or it could appear just as easily in a show called 'Regarding Beauty'. And this might be quite generally the case, so that we can imagine two distinct exhibitions but containing all and only the same works, the one show illustrating dissonance and the other illustrating beauty. The objects in both shows would in fact be beautiful, and in fact be dissonant. It might be unduly costly to put on two distinct shows, requiring two sets of largely indiscernible objects. One could instead simply have one show called 'Distemper', and then another called 'Regarding Beauty', and have them run one after the other by changing the banners outside the museum. Or we could have two entrances to the same show, those with a taste for dissonance entering through one and those with a thirst for beauty through the other. Mostly, I think, the two bodies of visitors would be satisfied with what they saw – though there would always be the danger of two people meeting inside, having split up since she has a taste for dissonance and he for beauty – and each then wondering if they had made a mistake, walking through the wrong entrance. All sorts of Shakespearean fun can be dreamed up. We could train the docents to say, to one set of visitors, that the beauty (or dissonance) was incidental in the one show and inherent in the other – but this is carrying things too far, since there are cases where beauty is internally related to the dissonance – where the work would not be dissonant if it were not beautiful. This would be the case with the two artists most closely associated with conservative attacks against the National Endowment of the Arts – Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano.

Readers will object that I am simply indulging my imagination and letting it run wild. We all know that there are plenty of dissonant works that are not even incidentally beautiful, and plenty of beautiful works without any dissonant aspect at all. Can we not just work with clear-cut cases? The answer perhaps is No, and explaining why will be one of the merits of this book [*The Abuse of Beauty*, 2003], if the explanation is sound. Meanwhile, it will be of some value to recognize that the connection between *Fountain* and the particular urinal that Duchamp appropriated is pretty close to that between Warhol's *Brillo Box* and the Brillo carton designed by James Harvey. It was the aesthetics of the latter that got me so interested in the former, which had no aesthetics to speak of, other than what it appropriated from Harvey's boxes. But then Harvey's boxes had none of the philosophical depth of Warhol's, for much the same reason that the urinal manufactured by Mott Iron Works had none of the philosophical – and artistic! – power of *Fountain*, which after all helped transform the history of art. But it would be questionable whether the aesthetic power of the urinals – which were designed to be attractive, the way the Brillo cartons were – belongs to *Fountain* as a work of art at all. For that matter, the dissonance of *Fountain* is not

a property of urinals as such, which are perfectly straightforward fittings for bathrooms. In any case, there is a metaphysical question in distinguishing between *Fountain* and the urinal it consisted of, not altogether different from distinguishing between a person and his or her body.

Born of the Spirit and Born Again

Since I am a philosopher with a known involvement with the art world, I found myself invited to several of the conferences convened to discuss beauty, and I wrote a number of essays as well. The first time I had to confront the question of 'Whatever Happened to Beauty?' – a conference sponsored by the Art History Department at the University of Texas in Austin in 1993 – I found myself looking into Hegel's great work on aesthetics. Ever since I had begun to write on the subject of the End of Art, I found myself consulting Hegel, who of course had written on that same subject in the 1820s. His book became a kind of treasury of philosophical wisdom for me, in fact, and whenever I embarked on a subject new to me, I found it valuable to see if Hegel might not have had something to say about it. There were two thoughts, on the very first page of his work, which became deeply stimulating to me when I began to ponder the philosophy of beauty. One was the rather radical distinction he drew between natural and artistic beauty, in the very first lines of his text. And the other was his gloss on why artistic beauty seemed 'superior' to natural beauty. It was because it was 'born of the Spirit and born again'. That was a grand ringing phrase: *Aus den Geistes geborene und wiedergeborene*. It meant, as I saw it, that artistic beauty was in some sense an intellectual rather than a natural product. That did not entail that the two kinds of beauty were, other than through their explanations, necessarily different. If someone painted a field of daffodils, to use a Romantic example, it might have been beautiful in just the same way a field of daffodils itself is beautiful. Still, the fact that the painting was 'born of the spirit' meant that for Hegel it would have an importance that the natural phenomenon would lack. As always, I found profoundly stimulating the idea that two things might look quite alike but have very different meanings and identities – like *Brillo Box* and the *Brillo boxes*.

It was with this in my mind that I found a way of drawing a distinction that began to seem quite fruitful. I began to think that the beauty of an artwork could be internal to it, in the sense that it was part of the artwork's meaning. This idea dawned on me in thinking about Robert Motherwell's *Elegies for the Spanish Republic* [...]. Motherwell's paintings were, in some sense, political – after all they were occasioned by an event in the political history of Spain. Their patent beauty followed naturally from being elegies, since elegies are in their nature meant to be beautiful. Somehow the beauty of the elegy is intended to transform

pain into something endurable. So the beauty would be internal to the meaning of the works. By contrast, the beauty of the urinal, if indeed urinals are beautiful, seemed to me quite external to *Fountain*, just as the aesthetics of the *Brillo boxes* were external to Warhol's *Brillo Box*. They were not part of the meaning. In truth I do not know what the aesthetics of Warhol's *Brillo Box*, if indeed it has any aesthetics, are. It, like *Fountain*, is essentially a conceptual work. [...]

I thought that what was distinctive of a work of art, as against a natural phenomenon, was that it had some kind of meaning, which would go some distance towards rendering into somewhat contemporary terms Hegel's idea of something being born of the spirit and born again. The meaning of a work of art is an intellectual product, which is grasped through interpretation by someone other than the artist, and the beauty of the work, if indeed it is beautiful, is seen as entailed by that meaning. It was not difficult to find other examples. I thought, for example, of Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans' Memorial*, where the beauty is internally generated by the work's meaning. And many other examples were ready to hand. [...]

Initially, I felt somewhat sheepish about writing on beauty. This was a lingering consequence of the attitude towards aesthetics that prevailed in my early years in analytical philosophy – that the really serious work to be done by philosophy was in language and logic and the philosophy of science. [...] But what had happened in art in the 1960s and afterwards was a revolution, to the understanding of which my writings had somewhat contributed, and I felt that the passing from artistic consciousness of the idea of beauty was itself a crisis of sorts. But even if beauty proved far less central to the visual arts than had been taken for granted in the philosophical tradition, that did not entail that it was not central to human life. The spontaneous appearance of those moving improvised shrines everywhere in New York after the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001, was evidence for me that the need for beauty in the extreme moments of life is deeply ingrained in the human framework. In any case I came to the view that in writing about beauty as a philosopher, I was addressing the deepest kind of issue there is. Beauty is but one of an immense range of aesthetic qualities, and philosophical aesthetics has been paralysed by focusing as narrowly on beauty as it has. But beauty is the only one of the aesthetic qualities that is also a value, like truth and goodness. It is not simply among the values we live by, but one of the values that defines what a fully human life means.

Arthur C. Danto, extract from 'The Aesthetics of Brillo Boxes', *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003) 2–4; 6–15.

✓ Alexander Alberro
Beauty Knows No Pain//2004

[...] It is important to note that recent pleas for a renewal of beauty locate the pursuit of fairness, truth and justice firmly within the realm of abstract ideals. For while contemporary theorists of the beautiful keenly emphasize the link between judgements of beauty and moral judgements, at the same time they posit an art of immanence and contingency that seeks to demystify the work of art as beauty's greatest enemy. In other words, in so far as the figures of disintegration and disillusion in art practices that pursue fairness, truth and justice through an interrogation of art's own internal contradictions are made to serve an end (even if that end is dialectically yet *another* form of transcendence), they are condemned as having a deleterious effect on beauty, which by definition is experienced in a wholly disinterested manner, without a purpose. Instead of recognizing the historical (and dialectical) interdependence of the aesthetic and the anti-aesthetic, today's proponents of beauty remove these positions from their historical dynamic only to hypostatize the beautiful as the sole, undisputed and universal bearer of a better society. Rather than rethink the category of the aesthetic from a historical position that could account for what produced its critique in the first place, and rather than examine whether under current conditions the anti-aesthetic itself might have been consumed or reconfigured by the historical process, these writers simply seek to suspend the messiness of history in the hope of returning us to an idyllic and abstract past that knew of no internal tensions, disputes and contradictions. As if wanting to invite the reader to acts of unadulterated time travel, current writing on beauty revisits eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century notions of the beautiful with a desire to bring them back to our present. Yet this writing is not concerned with refunctioning those concepts or recomposing them for our historical context, but solely with reinserting them *tout court*, as if particular social and historical circumstances were irrelevant for acts of symbolic and intellectual transfer.¹

But I do not want to leave this discussion of the parallels discernible in the arguments put forward by the recent proponents of beauty without at least commenting on another reason advanced by these authors for the twentieth-century disavowal of beauty – namely, the fact that 'beautiful art *sells*.'² Repeatedly, our authors point to the very success of beauty on the market as one of the fundamental reasons for its critical disavowal during the twentieth century. Strangely enough, rather than being troubled by art's association with commercial interest and imperatives, rather than seeing the commercialization of beauty as

threatening their own desire for disinterested pleasure, advocates of the beautiful such as Hickey argue that beauty's impressive sales record over time testifies to the universal pleasure that it offers and vindicates its continued viability.³

To put it polemically, then, recent attempts to revalidate the experience of the beautiful are, first, driven by intensely nostalgic impulses; they promote ahistorical views of the past in the hope of returning us to a state unclouded by the insights and advances made in a wide range of theoretical and discursive practices, including critical theory, sociology, cultural studies and psychoanalysis. Second, though it might once again toy with Schillerian utopias of aesthetic education and political mediation, today's writing on beauty is → deeply antipolitical. It is mostly unwilling to contemplate the legitimacy of artistic practices that take a stand and bring together the aesthetic, the cognitive and the critical, preferring instead to value artworks that operate independently of any practical interest.⁴ And third, this new discourse on beauty is trenchantly antimodernist, seeing modernism and its dialectical relation to transcendence as antithetical to, as Steiner puts it, 'the perennial rewards of aesthetic experience, identified as pleasure, insight and empathy.'⁵ Interestingly enough, in privileging the transcendent experience of beauty over the realities of the world's disenchantment, the position of many of today's champions of beauty comes to look remarkably like the one they censure, namely, that of the detached professional aesthete produced – as they argue – by the category of the modernist sublime.

Many of course would stop here and dismiss this inherently nostalgic call for a revalidation of the beautiful as hopelessly retrograde and unproductive. But I want to push the analysis of this phenomenon further, for I think that it is in several ways indicative of a larger cultural condition. Nostalgic turns such as the current one towards beauty are usually symptomatic of deeper structural problems; they help distract us from topical issues whose unabashed recognition would disturb one's self-assured path through present and future.⁶ Thus, we need to try to locate the deeper socially symbolic meaning, the threats and anxieties, from which current revivals of beauty – whether it is thought of as inherently self-contained or, in Beckley and Shapiro's words, as 'uncontrollable' – divert us.⁷

At the most immediate level, the calls for a return to beauty's order and perfection are part and parcel of a rejection of the political dimension of the phenomenon that came to be referred to as postmodernism. Jean-François Lyotard famously defined postmodernism in terms of the sublime and posited it as presenting what is unrepresentable, excessive, regardless of order and perfection. The role of the sublime was advanced to search 'for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense

of the unrepresentable.⁸ From this perspective, the call for a return to beauty in art functions as an obvious attempt to restrain the politics of (post)modernism, which (for better or worse) enormously expanded the field of art in the past thirty years, not only in actual practitioners but also in the subjects, genres and media deemed appropriate for art in the first place.

These calls are also symptomatic of the perceived loss of the sensual and transcendent dimensions of the artwork in the wake of the critical art practices of the 1960s and 1970s that negated the myth of artistic autonomy and disabused the artwork more than ever before. Rather than locating the sites of meaning and value exclusively within the intrinsic properties of discrete objects, such connotative procedures were shown by a large number of artists and art tendencies that emerged in the context of the social and political protest movements of the era to belong to an intricate network of discursive and institutional practices. And this is where the other shoe drops for critics who today posit as ruthlessly materialist a visual art that expands the conventional parameters and yet refuses to be received solely through the senses.

Another level of the problematic comes into view when we consider that we have now reached an age in which it is possible synthetically to produce flawless harmony, perfection and wholeness. This ability has been (or is in the process of being) achieved in diverse fields: from digital sampling of images and sounds, to the recent boom in aesthetic or plastic surgery, to genetic engineering, cloning and virtual reality. While these technological developments have largely been greeted with enthusiasm, they also evoke deep-seated and at times profoundly unconscious anxieties. In the areas of artistic and cultural practice, they have produced a new epistemology of the image. Not only have the ways in which traditional art media are produced, exhibited and distributed been radically transformed, but the new technologies have also led to the invention of new art forms and media that eliminate from the production process the role that chance, error and the uncontrollable formerly played. Flawless images are now fairly easy to manufacture. But digital image production today also throws into question the formerly crucial distinction between copy and original in ways not even imagined by mid-twentieth-century theorists of reproducibility such as Walter Benjamin. Whereas this total collapse of the difference between copy and original requires an entirely new category of cognition and conceptualization, contemporary musing on the beautiful – though deeply troubled by how computer-based image manipulation might privilege becoming over being, physical flux over temporal stability – in the end finally wants us to return to *old* orders of experience and cognition, orders in which premodernist myths of reference and uniqueness alone can warrant the possibilities of truth, justice and social harmony. As such, the new context, this emergent cultural condition, is

not as much addressed as it is evaded or ignored. In so far as it *is* addressed, it is placed within and displaced by a framework of the familiar, thereby at once domesticating its unique features and denying its radical difference from what was previously known.

Just as there is no longer a clear distinction between the original and the copy, the difference between art and culture has also become highly nebulous. For increasingly today art is conflated with ideas and customs prevalent in everyday life. From this perspective, the return to a way of experiencing art in a bygone era when the spheres of art and culture were clearly distinct might very well be a symptom – conscious or unconscious – of the sense of malaise produced by the blurring of these boundaries, an effort to alleviate the anxiety produced by the indeterminate condition in which that blurring necessarily leaves the work of art itself.⁹ Yet, at the same time, the mobilization of a well-established theory of the beautiful also functions as part of a concerted attempt to wrest the experience of the beautiful from the vernacular where the new technologies allow it to proliferate and to link it to objects that are unambiguously high art.

But the contemporary malaise to which I have pointed here also concerns the question of agency, or at least the relationship of the human subject to history at a moment when history seems to have run out of control, catastrophically blowing us backwards into the future. Indeed, in the face of the onslaught of catastrophes that have come to define our contemporary moment, it is not entirely surprising that writers who unequivocally reject the validity of critical artistic practices should call instead for a pathos-infused, humanist aesthetics. For in the eyes of many of those who have recently advocated a return to the beautiful in art, the experience of beauty helps coalesce the disparate itineraries of human subjects through unspoken feelings and intuitive responses to magnificent works of art. What is particularly – and literally – pathetic about this, since I have just referred to it as a pathos-infused, humanist aesthetics, is the fact that one no longer sees art's pursuit of transcendence in dialectical tension with the quest for knowledge, understanding and the improvement of our contemporary condition. Rather, it is now solely in the most personal, fleeting and insubstantial facets of experience – namely, in the aesthetic and only in the aesthetic – that humans are seen to be able to come together in keeping with one another.

1 [footnote 8 in source] To be accurate, it must be said that this is not true in Arthur Danto's case. *The Abuse of Beauty* revives aesthetic response via Hegel, not Kant, allowing Danto to claim that beauty can work in the service of politics, inducing an empathic awareness of social injustice: his model is not Kantian, disinterested, but empathic, as is Elaine Scarry's. Indeed, this is also a less-than-accurate description of Dave Hickey's notion of beauty as social transgression that,

rather than disinterested *à la* Kant, is better described as a diluted version of Georges Bataille's aesthetics.

- 2 [9] On this point see Hickey's essay 'Enter the Dragon: On the Vernacular of Beauty,' in *The Invisible Dragon*, 11–24.
- 3 [10] As Hickey puts it: The arguments mounted 'to the detraction of beauty come down to one simple gripe.... Beautiful art *sells*. If it sells itself, it is an idolatrous commodity; if it sells anything else, it is a seductive advertisement. Art is not idolatry, they [the academic radicals] say, nor is it advertising, and I would agree – with the caveat that idolatry and advertising are, indeed, art, and that the greatest works of art are always and inevitably a bit of both.' *Ibid.*, 16–17.
- 4 [11] For Scarry, both the sublime and the political or 'real' have been the enemy of beauty. 'Permitted to inhabit neither the realm of the ideal nor the realm of the real, to be neither aspiration nor companion, beauty comes to us like a fugitive bird unable to fly, unable to land' (*On Beauty and Being Just*, 86). Danto is even more pronounced in his indictment of engaged art: 'That is always a danger in activist art, I'm afraid. I can understand how the activist should wish to avoid beauty, simply because beauty induces the wrong perspective on whatever it is the activist wants something to be done about' ('Beauty and Morality,' in *Uncontrollable Beauty*, 36).
- 5 [12] Wendy Steiner, *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001) xv.
- 6 [13] The indulgence in nostalgia is explicitly noted by Steiner, who explains the decision behind the 1997 National Book Critics' Circle selection committee as 'redolent with nostalgia for a lost pleasure in art: a reluctant nostalgia' (Steiner, 193).
- 7 [14] See Beckley and Shapiro, *Uncontrollable Beauty*. Steiner indicates an awareness that the calls for a return to beauty are symptomatic of 'a cultural readiness to move on' from dominant aesthetic conventions (Steiner, xxv); 'a way of registering the end of modernism and the opening of a new period in culture' (xviii). Yet, she makes no attempt to understand this 'new period in culture' or to comprehend why invoking beauty should be the legitimate response. We need to try to discern what change is taking place on the horizon and what its arrival brings to an end. Coming to terms with these phenomena may help us understand why beauty reemerged as a critical category at the end of the twentieth century.
- 8 [15] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 81.
- 9 [16] My discussion of the conflation of art and culture takes as its starting point Fredric Jameson's analysis of the postmodern implosion of the aesthetic and everyday life in *A Singular Modernity* (New York: Verso, 2002). For a provocative 'disagreement with Jameson's picture of modernism' to which my paper is also indebted, see T. J. Clark, 'Origins of the Present Crisis,' *New Left Review* 2 (March/April 2000): 85–96.

Alexander Alberro, extract from 'Beauty Knows No Pain', *Art Journal*, vol. 63, no. 2 (Summer 2004) 38–43.

**Diarmuid Costello, Arthur C. Danto, Anna Dezeuze,
Martin Donougho, Thierry de Duve, James Elkins,
David Raskin, Dominic Willsdon, Richard Woodfield
The Art Seminar//2006**

Dominic Willsdon There's a growing idea that once we take away the really big claims that were made about beauty, and begin to explore the many kinds of qualities that I was talking about yesterday (art that is 'sweet, candid, camp and knowing') and that Arthur [Danto] was mentioning, then people find the new aesthetic qualities in new areas.

Aesthetics-at-large is a heading under which we could talk about the affective traits of any number of images and objects, inside or outside art museums or art history. It would give us a licence to explore, for example, certain works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres (who is a wonderful artist) alongside the memorials to the victims of traffic accidents or fatal crimes that we see so often in the streets of big cities. Even if we were to judge a particular example of the latter to be somehow more valuable than a particular Gonzales-Torres, the Gonzales-Torres is acceptable to the curator, in his or her professional judgement, and the street memorial is not. We can distinguish between art happenings and raves, but not aesthetically. There's no difference between the kind of aesthetics assumed by curators and the aesthetics-at-large that includes street memorials and raves. [...]

Arthur Danto What really got me started in aesthetics at all – not as an academic discipline, but as a living thing – were the shrines that were set up all over New York City the day after 9/11. They were put together spontaneously out of balloons, cards and flowers. No one taught anyone how to do that, or gave anyone instructions for how to put them on the sidewalk, in foyers, in stairways. I wondered why people responded not with anger but with beauty. No artist could have done better. That phenomenon does raise the question of where beauty fits in the normal, or abnormal, course of human life.

Anna Dezeuze Artists have been exploring the relation between art and everyday life, and aesthetics has lagged far behind: not because of problems defining art, but because of problems defining the everyday. Art history can turn here to theories from sociology and psychoanalysis that have been crucial for cultural studies; but especially in the Anglo-American world aesthetics still seems to have a restricted idea of how art relates to the everyday.

- 17 [45] Bernard, 186.
 18 [49] *Ibid.*, 11.
 19 [50] I shall from now on capitalize the word 'Idea' (including in the quotations from Kant) each time I mean it as a transcendental Idea in the sense just defined.
 20 [51] Bernard, 75.
 21 [55] *Ibid.*, 150.
 22 [56] Meredith, 172.
 23 [57] *Ibid.*, 212.
 24 [58] *Ibid.*, 209–10.
 25 [59] 'To reduce a representation to concepts is the same thing as to *expound* it [*exponieren*]' (Bernard, 189). 'To *demonstrate* [*demonstrieren*, as opposed to *beweisen*] (*ostendere, exhibere*), is equivalent to presenting a concept in intuition. ... If the intuition ... is empirical, then the object is displayed by means of which objective reality is assured to the concept' (Bernard, 188).
 26 [63] See Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *L'absolu littéraire*.
 27 [64] Marcel Duchamp, 'The Creative Act' (1957), in *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Michel Sanouillet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) 139.

Thierry de Duve, extract from *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996) 301–20.

Jason Gaiger

✓ **Incidental and Integral Beauty: Duchamp, Danto and the Intractable Avant-Garde//2008**

The Intractable Avant-Garde

In his most recent book, *The Abuse of Beauty*, the philosopher Arthur Danto has presented a characteristically lively and thought-provoking analysis of the historical and philosophical significance of the work of Marcel Duchamp. In this essay, I want to challenge his conclusions and to argue for an alternative way of understanding the readymades.¹ Danto identifies Duchamp as a leading member of the 'intractable avant-garde' and claims that he was at the forefront of the Dadaist revolt against beauty, a revulsion at the sham of Western culture that issued in the horrors of the First World War. Dada artists not only refused to make beautiful objects for the gratification of those who had brought about this catastrophe, they also sought to dismantle the long-held assumption that there is an intrinsic connection between beauty and morality.²

Danto contends that the great philosophical significance of the intractable avant-garde lies in its demonstration that 'beauty was no part of the concept of art'. Indeed, the products of the avant-garde are 'misperceived if perceived as beautiful' for this is not their point or ambition.³ According to Danto, 'It was Duchamp above all others whose work was intended to exemplify the most radical dissociation of aesthetics from art, particularly in his readymades of 1915–17.'⁴ Not only has Duchamp 'single-handedly demonstrated that it is entirely possible for something to be art without having anything to do with taste at all, good or bad', he is 'the artist who above all has sought to produce an art without aesthetics, and to replace the sensual with the intellectual'.⁵

Testadura

From this perspective, to argue for the beauty of the readymades or to claim that their aesthetic properties play an indispensable role in determining their meaning is to make a gross error of judgement, equivalent to relapsing into the traditional conception of taste that Duchamp had sought to render redundant. We can imagine someone, let us call him *Testadura* or hard-head, after a figure in another of Danto's essays, who is ravished by the smooth contours, gleaming white surface and elegant curves of *Fountain* (1917).⁶ It is not hard to see that such a person has made a fundamental category mistake and he has failed to recognize the radical intentions behind the work.

According to Danto, this mistake was made by Duchamp's patron Walter Arensberg, who claimed that Duchamp's intention in submitting a urinal for

display at the Independent Artists' Exhibition in 1917 was to draw attention to 'a lovely form, freed from its functional purpose'.⁷ My own view is that Arensberg was not as naïve as Danto suggests and that he knew exactly what he was doing in making these remarks – he was, so to speak, in on the joke. However, there are plenty of others who have defended the view that the readymades are beautiful works of art, though here, too, it is hard to gauge the sincerity or irony of their remarks. Robert Motherwell, for example, in his anthology of *Dada Painters and Poets* of 1951, claimed that 'it is evident, 35 years later, that the bottle rack ... has a more beautiful form than almost anything else made, in 1914, as sculpture'.⁸

→ Man Ray's 1936 photograph of *Bottle Rack*, which Duchamp used for his *Box in a Valise* of 1941, also comes perilously close to aestheticizing the readymades. By making miniature copies and placing them alongside reproductions of his other works, Duchamp retrospectively established an underlying unity of purpose and appearance. Nonetheless, in the final decade of his life, when he was being rediscovered by a new generation of artists, he consistently opposed the 'aesthetic' reading of his work. In an interview given in 1961, he insisted that his choice of objects was not in any way determined by aesthetic factors: 'The great problem was the selection of the readymade. I needed to choose an object without it impressing me, that is to say, without it providing any sort of aesthetic delectation.'⁹ And in a panel discussion held at MoMA in 1964, he responded to Alfred Barr's question, 'Why do [the readymades] all look so beautiful today?', with the disarming reply: 'Nobody is perfect'.¹⁰

The Aesthetic Interpretation

The most committed exponent of the aesthetic interpretation is William Camfield. Contrary to Duchamp's protestations in the texts and interviews from the 1960s, Camfield claims that when we turn to the readymades themselves 'we find not aesthetic indifference but an *oeuvre* of extraordinary visual and intellectual rigour'. Duchamp possessed 'a keen eye and mind' that enabled him to 'perceive visual properties of very diverse sorts', properties that could satisfy both an aesthetic and an intellectual interest.¹¹

Let us consider two examples, both of which relate to *Fountain*. Camfield argues that Duchamp saw in this piece of industrial plumbing remarkable formal similarities to the sculpture of Constantin Brancusi, especially *Princess X* (1916). Both objects – the manufactured and the hand crafted – 'are characterized by sleek, simple shapes that suggest anthropomorphic forms with sexual connotations'.¹² Similar concerns also animate Picabia's mechanomorphic images, such as *Girl born without a mother* (1916–17). Camfield's second example derives from a remark that Duchamp is supposed to have made when

visiting an aeroplane exhibition in Paris in 1912 with Léger and Brancusi. Léger recalled that Duchamp 'walked among the motors, the propellers, without saying a word. Then he suddenly spoke to Brancusi: "Painting is finished. Who can do better than that propeller? Tell me can you do that?"'.¹³ On Camfield's interpretation, the choice of the early readymades, such as *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), *Bottle Rack* (1914) and *Fountain* was governed not by aesthetic indifference but by the new machine aesthetic: Duchamp, like many others at the time, was sensitive to the beauty of industrially manufactured objects and to the way in which form was made to follow function.

Incidental and Integral Beauty

Danto's means of addressing the problems that such arguments present to his theory is to introduce a distinction between two different types of beauty. This is the distinction between 'incidental' and 'integral' beauty, which I have taken as the title for this essay. Whereas the beauty of an ancient Greek sculpture, such as the *Antinous* in the Belvedere, is 'integral' to its meaning, Danto claims that whatever beauty might be possessed by *Fountain* is merely 'incidental'. Even if *Fountain* is 'beautiful in point of form and surface and whiteness', this is irrelevant, because the meaning of the work is entirely 'conceptual'.¹⁴

Danto concedes that there are works of twentieth-century art that possess integral beauty – he gives as an example Motherwell's series of *Spanish Elegies* – but he insists that after Duchamp beauty is optional rather than essential for art. The 'era of taste' has been succeeded by the 'era of meaning': the question is no longer, is something in good or bad taste? but, what does it mean? Through the readymades Duchamp succeeded in 'overcoming taste', thereby dissociating art from aesthetics.¹⁵

The identification of Duchamp as an agent of revolutionary change who brought about a radical and irreversible transformation in the practice of art rests on an overly simplified opposition between two different eras of art. Neither side of the distinction is stable. On the one hand, the period that Danto terms the 'era of taste' was undoubtedly more sophisticated and intellectually rich than his argument admits – no one would want to claim that artists such as Poussin or Rubens were only interested in 'retinal pleasure' and that theirs was not also an art of ideas. On the other hand, it seems misguided to suggest that so-called conceptual or post-conceptual art takes off into a purely cognitive realm in which – with some rare exceptions – it no longer matters what the artwork looks like.

Duchamp's readymades provide an important test case for this issue, not only because of the pivotal role that has been accorded to them by Danto and others in the history of modern, or rather, postmodern art. But also because it

seems fundamentally misguided to talk about the aesthetic properties of a found or chosen object.

Supervenience and Aesthetic Concepts

How, then, are we to proceed? In order to find a way out of this impasse, I want to draw on an argument put forward by the English philosopher Frank Sibley in a paper entitled 'Aesthetic Concepts', which was first published in 1959.¹⁶ While Sibley was exclusively concerned with what we might term 'traditional' works of art, I want to show that his ideas can also be used to cast an interesting light on the readymades.

Sibley starts out by drawing a distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic predicates. This is less complex than it sounds. Examples of non-aesthetic predicates include: 'red, square, curved, smooth, pale, 1.95 metres tall, made of marble', and so forth. Examples of aesthetic predicates include: 'unified, balanced, powerful, delicate, moving, elegant, garish'. When looking at a work of art we can generally agree that a line is curved rather than straight; that the sky is depicted as blue rather than red; that there are six figures not five; and that the tonal range is bright rather than sombre. Non-aesthetic predicates such as these describe observable, physical properties of the artwork. By contrast, the application of aesthetic predicates requires the deployment of a special sensitivity or perceptiveness; they indicate features that we must first come to see and whose presence or absence can be a matter of meaningful dispute.

Sibley's core argument – at least for our purposes here – is that the two sets of predicates stand in a relation of *dependence*: aesthetic terms always ultimately apply because of, and aesthetic qualities always ultimately depend upon, the presence of features which, like curving or angular lines, colour contrasts, the placing of masses, or speed of movement, are visible, audible or otherwise discernible without any exercise of taste or sensibility.¹⁷

Sibley notes that when we apply aesthetic predicates we often explain why by referring to an artwork's non-aesthetic predicates: we say that a gouache is 'delicate because of its pastel shades and curving lines' or that a painting 'lacks balance because one group of figures is so far off to the left and is so brightly illuminated'.¹⁸

We cannot, of course, infer from the fact that a painting has pale colours that it will be delicate: we do not arrive at aesthetic judgements through a process of inductive reasoning. Nonetheless, in order to support the application of aesthetic terms we frequently refer to non-aesthetic features. Sibley's argument is that aesthetic properties are grounded in non-aesthetic properties. In the language of contemporary analytic philosophy, we can say that aesthetic properties are *supervenient* on non-aesthetic properties: the two sets of

properties are so related that there cannot be a change in the first set without there being a change in the second. Since a work of art owes its aesthetic character to its non-aesthetic properties, aesthetic justification makes legitimate appeal to observable features of the object of appreciation.

Fountain Revisited

If we keep this argument in mind, and consider once again Duchamp's *Fountain*, we can see that the relation of dependency that Sibley describes is broken. The appropriate aesthetic predicates for *Fountain* are terms such as 'witty, daring, provocative, subversive, funny, intelligent', and so forth. But the application of these predicates does not depend on *Fountain* being white, curved, smooth, rounded, biomorphic, etc. On the contrary, these are properties that we normally associate with the judgement that something is elegant, stylish, graceful, etc., which *Fountain* clearly is not.

It seems, then, that Danto is right to claim Duchamp has succeeded in producing a work of art without aesthetics and that the 'standards of taste' that had remained operative for hundreds of years no longer apply to the readymades.

But Sibley's distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic predicates can also help us to cast doubt on this conclusion. For in order to recognize the wit and provocation of *Fountain* one has to see that it is troublingly similar in its physical appearance to the most advanced modernist sculpture such as Brancusi's *Princess X*. Duchamp has chosen an object that should cause problems not only for the most conservative members of the selection jury, but also for the most avant-garde. For if one can appreciate an abstract object such as *Princess X* for its smooth surface, rounded shape and biomorphic form, why should one not also appreciate *Fountain* in the same way?

Similarly, it is only if we recognize *Fountain's* proximity to the prevailing machine aesthetic, with its doctrine of form following function, that we can register the absurdity of presenting a piece of plumbing on a plinth. Even the exaggeratedly handwritten signature – with its mockery of the finished 'work' – and the economical gesture of turning the urinal upside down, contribute to its meaning. In the case of *Bottle Rack* there is a troubling proximity to post-Cubist 'constructed' sculpture, such as Picasso's *Guitar* (1912) and Tatlin's *Corner Relief* (1914). Duchamp plays with, and thereby disrupts, not only conventional ideas about art but also the most advanced views of his time. A randomly chosen object would not have the same 'resonances' or result in the same complication of aesthetic judgement.

It is therefore wrong to claim that the readymades are beautiful in the traditional sense of the term, as Camfield and Motherwell propose. Duchamp does not simply present us with a found object that can be appreciated as if it

were a work of modernist sculpture or design. Instead, he does everything he can to disrupt the expectations that the viewer brings to the work of art, including the expectations of the avant-garde.

Nonetheless, it is also wrong to claim that the beauty of the readymades is merely 'incidental' and that Duchamp has succeeded in producing art without aesthetics, replacing the sensual with the conceptual, as Danto argues. For unless we are alert to the 'beauty' of these objects, we will miss their proximity to the icons of the avant-garde. To register the full aesthetic and cognitive *dissonance* of the readymades is thus to be sensitive to their observable, physical properties as well as to the 'idea' behind them.

If we treat the readymades merely as the embodiment of an idea or concept, their interest is quickly exhausted. To apply the appropriate aesthetic predicates – witty, daring, provocative, subversive – we also need to be sensitive to their non-aesthetic properties, for it is by exacerbating the conjunction between the two that Duchamp complicates and confounds the expectations that both conservatives and radicals alike bring to the encounter with art.

- 1 This essay is an edited version of a talk given at the conference 'Against the Avant-Garde?: Duchamp, Man Ray, Picabia' held at Tate Modern, London, in 2008. I would like to thank Dave Beech for suggesting that I include the paper in this collection and for his helping to edit the text for publication.
- 2 See Arthur C. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2003). Some of the arguments in this book were originally presented in Danto, 'Marcel Duchamp and the End of Taste: A Defence of Contemporary Art', published in the online journal *tout-fait*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2000 (www.toutfait.com).
- 3 Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*, xv; 49.
- 4 Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*, 94.
- 5 Danto, 'Marcel Duchamp and the End of Taste', 6; and *The Abuse of Beauty*, 96.
- 6 See Danto, 'The Artworld', *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 61 (1964) 571–84.
- 7 Danto, 'Marcel Duchamp and the End of Taste', 7. Arensberg's remarks were recorded by Beatrice Wood; they are cited in Jason Gaiger, 'Interpreting the Readymade: Marcel Duchamp's *Bottlerack*', in *Frameworks for Modern Art*, ed. Jason Gaiger (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003) 86.
- 8 Robert Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Painters and Poets. An Anthology* (1951) (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1989) xxiii.
- 9 Alain Jouffroy, 'Conversations avec Marcel Duchamp', in *Une révolution du regard* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964) 118–19; my translation, in Gaiger, 'Interpreting the Readymade', 89.
- 10 Cited in Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography* (London: Random House, 1997) 427. It is worth noting that the majority of these interviews were given several decades after the first readymades; there is thus scope for a certain scepticism about Duchamp's remarks, or, at the

least, for critical reflection on the specific context in which they were made. Nonetheless, Duchamp's comments provide the basis for what is now the standard interpretation of his work.

- 11 William A. Camfield, 'Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*: Its History and Aesthetics in the Context of 1917', in Rudolf Kuenzli and Francis M. Naumann, eds, *Marcel Duchamp: Artist of the Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1989) 81–3.
- 12 Camfield, 'Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*', 85.
- 13 Cited in Camfield, *op. cit.*, 81.
- 14 Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*, 9.
- 15 Danto, 'Marcel Duchamp and the End of Taste', 6–7.
- 16 Frank Sibley, 'Aesthetic Concepts', *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 68 (1959) 421–50; reprinted in a slightly revised version in Frank Sibley, *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics*, ed. John Benson, Betty Redfern and Jeremy Roxbee Cox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 1–23. My references are to this edition.
- 17 Sibley, 'Aesthetic Concepts', 3.
- 18 *Ibid.*

Jason Gaiger, lecture given at the Open University Study Day, *Against the Avant-Garde? Duchamp, Man Ray, Picabia* (London: Tate Modern, Saturday 8 March 2008); revised for this volume, 2008.

which took it for granted that, love them or hate them, the *Women* were Abstract Expressionism's truth.) What Greenberg was recoiling from, I think, is the way in which choosing *Woman* as his subject allowed de Kooning to extrude a quality of perception and handling that stood at the very heart of his aesthetic, and fix it onto an Other, a scapegoat. 'The black battle-stain on a soldier's face is not vulgar, but the dirty face of a housemaid is.' For 'dirty face of a housemaid' read 'perfect smile of the model in a *Camels* cigarette ad'. Greenberg drew back from this not, need I say it, out of concern over de Kooning's misogyny, but from an intuition that such splitting and projection would make it impossible for de Kooning's painting to go on sustaining the right pitch of tawdriness, idiot facility, overweening self-regard. I think he was right. Only when de Kooning found a way to have the vulgarity be his own again – or rather, to half-project it onto cliché landscape or townscape formats, which were transparently mere props – did he regain the measure of meretriciousness his art needed. The male braggadocio, that is to say, had to be unfocused if he was to paint up a storm. It had to be a manner in search of an object, and somehow aggrieved at not finding one. What was wanted was generalized paranoia, not particular war of the sexes.

Vulgarity is gendered, of course. At the moment we are looking at, the attribute belonged (as a disposable property) mainly to men, or, more precisely, to heterosexual men. Not that this meant the art done under vulgarity's auspices was closed to reading from other points of view. What Beaton and Alfonso Ossorio and Parker Tyler and Frank O'Hara did to Pollock, with or without Pollock's permission, is clearly part – sometimes, as I have said, a central part – of any defensible history of the New York School. It seems important that, apart from Greenberg, the strongest early readings of Pollock's work (the strongest, not necessarily the best) all came from gay men. Namuth's films and photographs partake of the same homosocial atmosphere. Perhaps the deep reason why Greenberg was never able to realize his cherished project of a book on Pollock was that he found no way to contain, or put to use, the erotic hero-worship that sings in the prose of his shorter pieces about his friend. [...]

T.J. Clark, extract from *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) 375–97 [footnotes not included].

✓ Caroline A. Jones

The Discourse of the Studio Meets the Technological Sublime//1996

As one approaches the 1960s in the discourse of the studio, there is a certain acceleration, a sense of contested terms and heightened stakes. Abstract Expressionist rhetoric had already encouraged an obsession with process and the place it occurred, reflected in the early 1950s by Harold Rosenberg's metonymic construction of the canvas as an arena (standing both for the studio and the artist-creator at its centre. During the same period *ARTnews* (the influential art magazine then dominated by articles about the New York School) inaugurated a popular series of studio-action pieces titled '[X] Paints a Picture', featuring photographs by Hans Namuth, Rudy Burckhardt and others, depicting the solitary artist at work. [...]

Hans Namuth, Alexander Liberman and others had brought the probing eye of the camera into the studio in the 1950s, reinforcing tropes of isolated genius even as they disrupted that isolation, intervened in the process of creation, and embedded their images in a nostalgia that signalled its imminent demise. Books such as Liberman's 1960 *The Artist in His Studio* had tried to pin it all down, locating the artist in an eternal isolated studio – cordoned off from women, untouched by others, set off from the world. But those photographs documented a lost world. Taken in the late 1940s and 1950s, they were steeped in death and nostalgia. [...] By the time Liberman's images were published, photojournalist Fred McDarragh was ready to present *The Artist's World in Pictures* (printed in 1961), showing an ebullient crowd of New York painters playing baseball, eating Chinese food, and revelling at packed gallery openings. If Liberman was nostalgic, McDarragh was exultant. His photographs, published initially in the *Village Voice*, celebrated the new social nature of the American artist, the end of isolation, and the beginning of what Allan Kaprow would call 'the artist as man of the world'. The isolated studio, along with the solitary artist, was an endangered species; the location for the production of the sublime was becoming an increasingly noisy place. At the moment of the early 1960s, it was clear that the studio was contested territory.

The *nature* of the sublime was also an issue of some debate in the early 1960s, indicating that the romantic theme still held a powerful, if vexed, significance. Writers of the time addressed whether nature or psyche constituted its subject, and asked how America functioned as its generative source. Following Barnett Newman's positioning of the sublime as central to the American-ness of the new art, two writers emerged in the early 1960s to stake

their claims on sublimity's terrain. Robert Rosenblum was first (of the post-Newman crowd), writing in 1961 of the 'abstract sublime' and promising to explain 'how some of the most heretical concepts of modern American abstract painting relate to the visionary nature-painting of a century ago'. [...]

The British critic Lawrence Alloway specifically contested Rosenblum in his own 1963 essay 'The American Sublime', accusing the American writer of adopting the topographical fallacy and making national what is only accidental. For Alloway, the sublime is located entirely within the artist (it is not an external subject of his art, or object of his contemplation). It is sublime only because of the stylistic attributes that happen to be found in American postwar art (the big picture which dominates the spectator, the Burkean 'fuscous' colours), and, to a lesser extent, because of the 'cultural reflexes' which associate the sublime with 'the big country' to which the paintings of Still, Rothko and Newman are continually being compared. [...]

Alongside all of these early 1960s essays on American sublimity in art discourse, Leo Marx was developing his thesis on the contradictions embedded in the American sublime as reflected in American literature, symbolized for Marx by the trope of *The Machine in the Garden*, his book of 1964. The publication of this work, long in the making, itself points to the renewed fascination that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century concepts of sublimity and Romanticism held for mid-twentieth-century Americans; more important for my argument, in his book Marx articulates the fissures that were then beginning to appear in the nostalgic façade of 'the natural paradise'. Marx's project was to clarify the conflicts 'always already' present in the articulation of a virginal American landscape, and to demonstrate their uselessness in present-day culture. Briefly reviewing the rural, agrarian, pastoral myths used to sell everything from cigarettes to political programmes, Marx argued: '[In] public discourse, at least, this ideal [of the pastoral idyll] has appeared with increasing frequency in the service of a reactionary or false ideology, thereby helping to mask the real problems of an industrial civilization.' In Marx's redemptive conclusion, we must accept the fate we have created, own the technologies that we have built, confront our dreams as the fantasies that they are and seek resolution to our problems in society – through engagement, not in some mythical escape. Reflecting the optimism of early 1960s liberalism, combined with a sobering sense of the challenges to be faced, Marx wrote: 'To change the situation we require new symbols of possibility, and although the creation of those symbols is in some measure the responsibility of artists, it is in greater measure the responsibility of society. The machine's sudden entrance into the garden presents a problem that ultimately belongs not to art but to politics.'

Marx's text is a document of its time, but [in the present context] it is also a

model for my enquiry into the change in studio practices and artist roles in the period from 1945 to 1970. Like Marx, I want to emphasize the ubiquity and constancy of the conflicts embedded in the American dream: conflicts between technology and pastoralism, Warhol's 'city and country', society and the individual, the primitive and the cultured, the 'unspoiled' and the 'improved', and – although Marx does not deal with this level of meaning, it is everywhere implicit – conflicts between 'masculinist' and 'feminist' discourses on nature and civilization. The convulsions in American society that seemed to be on the brink of erupting in 1964 had erupted as well a century before, and were implicit in the founding documents of a hundred years earlier. [...]

The story I want to tell in this book [*Machine in the Studio*, 1996] is played out less within specific discrete texts or art objects than in competing aesthetic and cultural systems, but Marx's taxonomy serves me well. As he demonstrates, in contrast to the 'pure' pastoralism imposed by early European observers on the 'primitive' American soil, and against the dire warnings of European philosophers such as Schiller and Carlyle regarding the emerging industrial society, there developed in America a complex hybrid of technological progressivism and the pastoral ideal. Marx terms this 'the rhetoric of the technological sublime' and positions it in a mid-nineteenth-century America bursting with steam boats and knit together by churning locomotives. I want to suggest that this rhetoric of the technological sublime also characterized much of the 1960s, in which a growing ecology movement paradoxically coexisted with a sometimes utopian, sometimes cynical belief in technology as a pragmatic or aesthetic solution to the problems of the day. The 1960s appearance of the technological sublime was necessarily specific to its time – moon shots, superhighways, and the penetration of the technological into human nature, all changed the impact of this discourse dramatically. [...]

In the shift from a sublime centred on the individual male observer in his relation to nature (the outer nature of topography, in Marx's case, or the inner nature of the individual psyche, in our example of the New York School), to a rhetoric celebrating technology's sublime power over that very nature, are mirrored outlines of the shift from the isolate studio (with its hushed privacy and creator genius) to the expanded workshop (with its busy machinery and executive boss). In the exultations of one 1844 writer, who championed steam engines for 'annihilating space', we hear a curious forecast of the 1960s artists' aesthetics of flatness that would replace the radiant and absorptive voids of the abstract sublime. Against Walt Whitman's lyrical body electric, his 'singing the strong light works of engineers', we place Warhol's laconic aspiration to 'be a machine'.

At the moment of the 1960s when Warhol's social machinery and Stella's flattened canvases appeared, the continuing discourse of the studio and the

sublime took on a heightened urgency. The writings of Marx, Rosenblum and Alloway all reflected the need to look, and look again, into the aesthetics of sublimity, at a time when contemporary artists were aligning their art with models of postwar industrial management and a developing technological order. [...] [In] Warhol's world an artist could desire, and functionally succeed in his goal, to 'be a machine'. Henry Adams could aspire at the turn of the century to worship the Dynamo rather than the Virgin, but in Stella's career an artist could conceive of incorporating the Dynamo into his own practice, becoming the executive artist at the heart of the surging industrial workshop. By the end of the decade, such ambitions appeared exhausted in the entropic, desublimating practice of Robert Smithson, who ironized the position of artist and viewer, making the transcendence of sublimation an inaccessible and undesirable goal. The machine in the studio was new in 1960, but it was a configuration dependent on the strength of a booming centralized economy; in Smithson's 'post-studio' practice at the end of the decade, production disperses to the peripheries of a post-industrial landscape in the throes of economic decline.

The dominant art and artists of the sixties were viewed as explosively departing from the work and careers of the preceding generation of Abstract Expressionists. The production of younger artists such as Stella (and his associates Judd, Flavin, Andre), Warhol (and his colleagues Lichtenstein, Oldenburg, Rosenquist), and Smithson (linked with other Earthworks artists Heizer, Morris, Holt, De Maria) was seen as radically incommensurate with what had gone before (in the best avant-garde tradition) – so much so that New York School artists left prestigious galleries rather than coexist with what they saw as the cynical accommodations of the Pop artists (as happened with Sidney Janis's 1962 exhibition 'The New Realists'). The Abstract Expressionists' defenders muttered epithets of 'juvenile delinquent!' when they heard the businesslike rhetoric of the early Minimalist painters (such as Stella's praise for executive artists). But by the time Robert Smithson's writings were collected in 1979, the reign of the New York School was viewed as definitively over, with Smithson positioned as the logical (if quirkily anti-heroic) heir to the 'Triumph of American Painting'. [...]

These differences transcended conventional stylistic oscillations; indeed, the styles of these younger artists were themselves seen as conflicting, oppositional and utterly diverse. In charting this history, we must move beyond style as a determining factor in periodization – if style is taken merely as a manifestation of formal commitments. We must instead attempt to locate change in a deeper order of beliefs and actions that styles serve simply (and variously) to express. Certainly style and subject matter changed a great deal from the New York School painters to the Pop, Minimalist, Earthwork and other artists of the 1960s

– but can it be argued that style and subject constituted the central difference between the two generations? Was Warhol's portrayal of Marilyn Monroe so alien to Willem de Kooning, who had earlier painted her as one of his *Women*? Was Stella's admiration for the works of the Abstract Expressionists completely incredible to them, and completely invisible in his early paintings? I suggest that the basis for the perceived gulf between the painters who came to maturity in the 1940s and the artists who achieved their fame in the 1960s lies in deep methodological and epistemological differences rather than artistic styles (although I want to maintain that those styles encoded such differences) or subjects (although subjects, too, have significance for epistemological shifts). I want to argue that the art's mode of production, and the artists' way of knowing the world, were what had changed. Nothing less was at stake than how to make art; nothing more than how to be an artist in mid-century America. How the work looked would follow from those choices. [...]

From the Abstract Expressionist's flowing heroism, which summoned resources from beyond exhaustion to create works of unparalleled genius, the focus shifted in the 1960s to the hardened nugget of Stella's semi-alienated labour, which he later articulated: 'I just wanted to do it [make a painting] and get it over with so I could go home and watch TV.' The performative met the iconic: Stella's silvery objects, shaped like machined and die-cut forms, matched his workmanlike approach to painting; Warhol's series of silkscreened celebrity 'logos' suited his Factory production; Smithson's scattered sites and collaborative endeavours resonated with his discourse of post-industrial entropy and 'post-studio' art.

To say that Stella, Warhol and Smithson invoked the industrial is not to say that these artists worked literally to make machines, or sought employment in actual factories (although Richard Serra drew famously from his work in steel mills to make his sculptures of stacked steel). What Stella, Warhol, Smithson and other purveyors of the 1960s technological sublime intuitively understood was the need to play the codes: that is, to tolerate the seemingly necessary and always enforced 'uniqueness' of the art object and establish their own author-functions within art discourse (through statements, interviews, exhibitions), while simultaneously asserting and performing assembly-line production techniques, 'executive artist' efficiency, or geological agency that resonated with other cultural systems. Unlike numerous earlier artists of the technological sublime, the artists of the 1960s unified the iconic and the performative in the place of the studio (or, in Smithson's case, in place of the studio), effecting this change across 'styles' and 'isms' as different as Minimalism, Pop and Earthworks and expressing it in the useless objects of Art. That they sought (and achieved) a kind of sublimity (in technological form) is a measure of their ambition – to reach

for that overwhelming response that had always been held out as the highest goal for American art. [...] Stella's praise of 'executive artists' and use of assistants in producing his brand was one unifying move; another was Warhol's conversion of studio into Factory, use of assembly-line silkscreen techniques on serial objects, and claims to delegate art production to 'Brigid' and 'Gerard'. A seemingly final, 'post-studio' stage was initiated by Smithson, who moved art production to the industrially mediated peripheries of abandoned quarries and mining sites, and located its meaning in discourse rather than in the object above all else. This was not some 'Triumph over American Painting' (to twist the standard paean against itself). It was an inversion and critique, an 'anti-romantic anti-studio' dependent for its luminous salience on the Romantic constructs of an earlier age.

Discourses of the 1940s and 1950s constructed art's meaning as well, but did so through the construction of the artist as private creator of an art the meaning of which was, in part, its failure to signify in a public sphere. The time-worn attributes of sublimity – obscurity, largeness and terror – are matched by a defeating relation to signification. Verbal and visual representations must recreate (not represent) the experience of sublimity in the individual reader/viewer, for by its very nature sublimity cannot be described. The private drama of the Abstract Expressionist canvas was held to be its public meaning – a meaning generated by an individual for an individual, the epitome of democratic freedom symbolized by the inaccessibility of private life and private meaning. The studio stood crucially intact, in this discourse, as the guarantor and origin of that individual freedom. Both the painter and his viewer were encouraged to 'spit down' on demagoguery and turn inward, to the interior worlds of dreams and mirrors. [...]

Caroline A. Jones, extract from 'The Discourse of the Studio Meets the Technological Sublime', *Machine in the Studio* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 51–8 [footnotes not included].

✓ **John Roberts**
Replicants and Cartesians//2007

In the 1980s the debate on simulacra, copying, surrogacy and authenticity dominated Anglo-American art discourse. There was a widespread assumption that claims to subjective expression and aesthetic originality on the part of the artist were a myth, a delusional handover from the Cartesian fantasy of the 'inner self' as an authentic expressive self. Since the 1920s and the social claims of the early avant-garde the continual expansion of technology into art's relations of production made it increasingly difficult to equate normative value in art with such claims. Touch and manual dexterity had lost their place as markers of artistic taste and authority. As such, the artist was no longer seen as a self-confirming 'creator', but as a synthesizer and manipulator of extant signs and objects. What largely united these earlier anti-Cartesian moves was a theory of montage as social praxis. Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Alexander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, John Heartfield, Hannah Höch, Raoul Hausmann, all saw themselves, essentially, as artistic *constructors* and *fabricators*. As Hausmann declared: 'We call this process photomontage because it embodied our refusal to play the role of artist. We regarded ourselves as engineers, and our work as construction: we *assembled* [in French: *monteur*] our work, like a fitter.' In the 1960s and 1970s, this, in turn, was taken to be part of a deeper historical shift in the subjectivity of the artist: the dissolution of the creative *singularity* of the (male) artist. The post-gendered *monteur* was now merely an ensemble of techniques, functions and competences. In the 1980s much critical art and much art theory under the banners of postmodernism and poststructuralism was produced within this framework. Today this sense of a 'paradigm shift' is the commonplace stuff of postmodern history and theories of the 'end of modernism', taught in art schools and art history and cultural studies departments in Europe and North America. Where once the expressive skills of the (male) artist were existentially inflated, now they are deconstructively deflated. Indeed, the critique of authorship is now the template of contemporary neo-Conceptual art and post-object aesthetics from Glasgow to Manila. Yet, despite this would-be theoretical displacement of the artist from the privileged scene of his or her production, the issues of simulacra, copying, surrogacy, virtuality and the readymade remain largely one-dimensional in art theory and contemporary cultural theory. This is because the theoretical moment of the debate on authorship in the 1980s has come down to us through a discourse of apocalyptic anti-humanism, unnuanced anti-aestheticism and undialectical

for that overwhelming response that had always been held out as the highest goal for American art. [...] Stella's praise of 'executive artists' and use of assistants in producing his brand was one unifying move; another was Warhol's conversion of studio into Factory, use of assembly-line silkscreen techniques on serial objects, and claims to delegate art production to 'Brigid' and 'Gerard'. A seemingly final, 'post-studio' stage was initiated by Smithson, who moved art production to the industrially mediated peripheries of abandoned quarries and mining sites, and located its meaning in discourse rather than in the object above all else. This was not some 'Triumph over American Painting' (to twist the standard paean against itself). It was an inversion and critique, an 'anti-romantic anti-studio' dependent for its luminous salience on the Romantic constructs of an earlier age.

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social categories. The effect is to reduce the critique of authorship either to the 'end-game' reproduction of pre-existing artistic moments or styles, or to an eclecticized intertextuality. As a consequence the critical agency of the artist's labour has become diminished or flattened out, as if the critique of authorship was equivalent to the *end* of representation, the *end* of art, the *end* of meaning, and the *end* of subjectivity. But, unfortunately, this simplistic historical elision is what has usually stood for thinking in art schools and cultural studies departments in the 1980s and 1990s, dominated as they were by versions of poststructuralist simulation theory and deconstructionism. [...]

Questions of appropriation, copying, replication, simulation, and so on, have become the necessary terrain on which art after Conceptual art continues to pursue its sceptical skills. There is no value (or critique of value) in art without these forms of scrutiny. Indeed, since the high point of 'appropriationist art' in the early 1980s, a generation of artists have taken this as a 'given' and have largely internalized some notion of the artist as technician, *monteur*, ideas-manager, constructor, etc. This is why, despite the recurrence of various defences of 'aesthetics', the humanist exaltation of 'self-expression' continues to be theoretically marginalized – at least in the leading academic and cultural institutions, to the rancour of cultural conservatives and leftist philosophers of aesthetics alike. Furthermore, the notion of the artist as a *monteur* in the broad sense is now one of the key moves identifiable with the dissolution of the boundaries between fashion, style and art in our consumerist-led culture. Many younger artists see their identity as linked to the execution of tasks across formal, cultural and spatial boundaries. Commitment to one method of production or form of distribution, one set of cognitive materials, one outlook, is decried. One of the consequences of this is the emergence of a historically novel tension between a received (and depoliticized) older notion of the avant-garde critique of authorship, and the reinvention of the artist as creative entrepreneur (under the increased glare of celebrity culture).² This produces an intense conflict of ideologies: the artist's identity may be *déconstructed* under the impact of the social relations of advanced art, but it is simultaneously *reconstructed* as an enchanted image under the reified forms of the mass media. The idea of the artist as an ensemble of functions, becomes a set of multi-tasking *career opportunities*.³

But of, course, at the level of political economy, this novel situation for the artist is not so novel as to be historically anomalous. Rather, it is further evidence of how the laws of exchange operate on art in the epoch of its technological expansion and diversification. The acceptance of some aspects of the critique of authorship in early avant-garde art and Conceptual art in current art has become the means whereby the new administration of art has *reinvented* itself in order to secure its access to the new, entrepreneurial, technologically driven culture

and to new areas of cultural capital. In the absence of the pressures of the traditional artistic and cultural hierarchies, artists are freed up – indeed encouraged – to become curators and critics, and curators are freed up to be artists and critics, in ways that benefit the multiple commercial ventures of the mass distribution of art. Just as workers involved in immaterial labour are encouraged – or forced – to be multi-tasking, modern artists are encouraged to think of themselves as active as artists beyond the 'limited' point of production, because, it is claimed, artists need to think of themselves as directly engaged in the mediation of the meanings of their work.

But if this multi-tasking defines the shift of the social identity of the artist from someone who 'externalizes' his or her self from a position of repressed marginalization, to someone who works openly within a complex division of labour (in the way a designer might for example), it is not the darker side of the critique of authorship, or an understanding of the place of artistic labour within the social totality, that is emphasized. As a model of the artist-as-entrepreneur the notion of the artist as an ensemble of functions turns largely on the pursuit of market opportunities. The militant, destabilizing, uncomfortable aspects of the critique of authorship have been written out of the reckoning, or treated in a cursory and peripheral fashion. This is because, by identifying 'appropriation' and artistic 'hybridity' with the end of the avant-garde, and by linking multi-tasking with a benign pluralism of forms, the effects of cultural and social division that precede and shape the labour of signification – the materiality of signification – are comfortably disavowed. The allegorical complexities of the intentions and competences that underwrite the critique of authorship – in fact sustain its logic of negation – have been dissolved into a cultural studies model of semiotic consanguinity. Hence we have a situation in which the informal aspects of Conceptual art are now being replicated as a neo-avant-garde, but with little sense of the troubling negation of the social world that shaped the early avant-garde's and early Conceptual art's critique of the category of art. This has led, overwhelmingly, to a critique of authorship without the discomforts of ideology critique and the critique of the capitalist value-form, as if attacking the myth of self-expression was in and of itself a critical strategy. Indeed, the deconstructionist attack on authorship as an intertextual version of *bricolage*, is perfectly compatible with the most conservative views on what artists should now do to define themselves as modern.

Nevertheless, the critique of this benign pluralism is not an argument for the revocation of the original avant-garde or the recovery of a 'lost' Conceptual art. To critique contemporary neo-avant-gardism is not to think of the 'neo' as an inevitable falling away of art from the achievements and commitments of the past. On the contrary, the 'neo' is the necessary space in which the afterlives of

art and theory continue to be *reinscribed* with new and living content. As such we need to examine just what the 'neo' of contemporary neo-avant-garde actually comprises, before we can make a judgement about its criticality.

What I am proposing [...] is a model of the 'post-expressivist' artist which actually takes on the challenges of expression and representation that now confront the artist of the new millennium. This means re-theorizing what we mean by the artist as critic and re-presenter in a world of proliferating doubles, proxies, simulations, etc. For what is increasingly clear (beyond the recent moments of the radical negation of authorship in Conceptual art and critical postmodernism) is the need for a model of the artist which is *unambiguously* post-Cartesian, that is, a model of artistic subjectivity which refuses the bipolar model of interiority and exteriority on which modernist and anti-modernist models of the artist are usually based.

In the 1960s the opposition between interiority and exteriority in art took the form of the familiar conflict between modernism (as an expanded sense of art's expressiveness and affectivity) and social realism (as an expanded sense of art's claims on ethical witness and social truth). In the 1980s, this re-emerged in the form of a conflict between neo-expressionism and a photographically expanded neo-Conceptual art practice. Today, however, the taking up of a position on either side of the 'interiority' or 'exteriority' debate is inert, if not dead; there is no 'expressiveness' to be won through painting-*as*-painting, just as there is no social truth to be secured through photography (or even photography and text) as photography. This is why the weak pluralist intertextuality of contemporary neo-Conceptual art and theory has become so hegemonic: it takes the very real crisis of the exterior/interior dualism as a point of exit from 'interiority' and 'exteriority' altogether and not as the point through which their boundaries might be reformulated. In dissolving the reified identities of 'inside' and 'outside' pluralist intertextuality comes to dissolve 'expression' and the 'self and the real' *tout court*. The crucial question, then, is how the self-evident collapse of older models of expression and critique in art might allow us to continue to discuss questions of criticality, expression and representation in the twenty-first century. How is it possible to think critique and critical difference in an extended world of neo-artefactuality and neo-visualization? [...]

Essentially, since the 1960s the self-identity of the artist has become detached from the traditional hierarchies of artistic media. Artists may continue to work as painters, photographers and sculptors, but painting, photography and sculpture are not in themselves privileged sites of expression and meaning for the artist. Rather, specific media are staging areas for the warping and weaving of the process of semiosis across forms, genres and non-artistic disciplines. In this way the artist's skills as a maker of self-conscious artistic signs is

indistinguishable from the artist's competence as a theoretical manipulator of 'stand-ins', performative strategies and prosthetic devices. Yet, in most accounts of the critique of authorship, from the readymade to digital technology, there is an unreconstructed tendency to adopt the Cartesian model of the artist as the self-bound manipulator *of* such devices, props and strategies. The artist's creativity is never implicated *in* these processes; that is, strategies of repetition, re-presentation, reinscription and replication are rarely seen as extending the identity and competences of the artist. Technique, technology and artistic subjectivity – art and social *technik* – are separated. This is because simulacra, copying, surrogacy and replication are not seen as the superstructural conditions of art under advanced capitalism, but as simply modes or devices of artistic audaciousness. In other words, if art is always and already embedded in the technological relations of its time, then the technologies of copying, simulacra and surrogacy are the material basis of art's modern semiosis and not mere stylistic options. Second-order is first-order. Consequently, the early and late twentieth-century critique of authorship is the site where the dissolved category of art and the reconstituted content of artistic technique meet, the gateway through which new artistic identities and relations might be formed and the critique of ideology and the value-form sustained. It is not where the identity of the artist is lost or to be mourned.

From this perspective artistic subjectivity *is* the use and manipulation of 'stand-ins'. There is no point, no place, where the artistic self is free of the constraints of prosthetic devices (be it paintbrush or digital camera), the demands of copying (identification and reclamation), and as such the performative voice or persona (recognition of the split between work and authentic self). In this sense we need to distinguish a fundamental set of conditions for art in the twenty-first century.

Under the capitalist value-form social reproduction – the unceasing production and reproduction of the commodity – and technical reproducibility (general social technique) are conjoined, one driving the other. That is, just as general social technique is subject to the law of value, the law of value is subject to the technical transformations of general social technique. Hence in a system where the continuity of production is based on technological forms of replication and duplication, the technical conditions of social and cultural life will necessarily be based on forms of iteration (the neo-effect). Social reproduction and technical reproducibility become indivisible. The result is that the production of art is no less subordinate to the fundamental logic-of-repetition of commodity-production than other non-cultural commodities. In order for art to secure its 'newness' it must, like other commodities, reiterate itself, otherwise it becomes the thing it once was, abandoning itself to the past

and the same. But, if the artwork is subject to the drive-to-repetition of the commodity, the artwork's escape from its own heteronomous conditions of production is not like other commodities. Because artworks are invariably distinct singularities, rather than repeated prototypes, their emergence from heteronomy and their inauguration of the 'new' represents a qualitative break in the *subsumptive* repetition of the commodity form. That is, although artworks seek to reiterate themselves, as all commodities must, this reiteration is determined by the autonomy of artistic subjectivity (as opposed to the heteronomy of productive labour). In other words, in contrast to productive labour's repetition of the 'new' as the 'same', the 'new' is transformed into the 'new' as different, as other to its immediate conditions of production. This event of 'newness', as such, is precisely non-heteronomous, and therefore opposed to the very logic of subsumptive repetition that brings it into being. The important point here is that as a system of commodity production art is both formed by, and is in resistance to, the iterative logic of commodity form; or, rather, the resistance to iteration and the production of iteration are the same thing. The conditions of autonomy and heteronomy are interwoven. [...]

In this regard many theorists since the 1960s have argued that there has been a qualitative technical transformation in how images are produced in art and in mass culture in the late capitalist world. With the expansion of the commodity form, a corresponding expansion of the conditions of reproducibility has occurred, bringing with it an unprecedented freedom from the myths of authenticity and originality. Some of this writing embraces this condition⁴ and some of it decries its would-be detrimental social and cultural consequences: the loss of a sense of 'tradition', 'artistic skills', and 'stable social identities'.⁵ Less prevalent is thinking of the copy from *inside* the conditions of social reproduction and technical reproducibility. By either celebrating or denigrating replication and copying, the *nachfolgen* [following after] function of the copy is divorced from its constitutive place within the commodity's dialectic of autonomy and heteronomy. One of the results of this is that artistic technique and the various technical conditions of social reproducibility across scientific and technological domains are divorced. If this means thinking of the copy in cultural production from inside general social technique, it also means thinking of general social technique, more broadly, in relation to the sciences of replication; for example, genetic engineering, the new cosmology, theories of Artificial Intelligence and so on. [...] The upshot being that the copy is not that which fails the status of novelty, or that which lacks authenticity, but the thing *out of which* claims for novelty – what drifts or mutates the identity of the antecedent – is produced.⁶

Since the 1930s when Walter Benjamin was the first to theorize the

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conditions of technological reproduction in its modern cultural forms, the supersession of the artisanal in modern life defined the expectations for new forms of art and marked out the new forms of experience emergent from this art. If Benjamin was highly optimistic about these forms and experiences, we at least understand from his work an important historical truth: *art and general social technique does not stand still*. Indeed, Benjamin's writing presaged a vast transformation in the content of artistic and social *technik* in the second half of the twentieth century. Since the 1930s the realities of image reproduction and artistic surrogacy or authorship-at-distance have represented the high ground upon which debates on value in art have been fought out. In fact seventy years on we can now see that the debates on the readymade, on photography, on post-object aesthetics have been the phenomenal forms of a much deeper and more profound response to art's place in the social division of labour. Not only does capitalism strip the artisan of his or her means of production and status, it also strips the artist of his or her traditional 'all round' skills. Under advanced capitalism, therefore, debates on modernism, the avant-garde and postmodernism have been principally about rethinking and reinscribing the skills of the artist into these transformed conditions. The contemporary critique of authorship is no more nor less the theoretical expression of these long-term changes. But today the remnants of any nostalgia for the artisanal which once hung over the early twentieth-century debate have long vanished, as consciousness of the copy in our daily technological practices has dismantled notions of expressive and formal uniqueness. The implications for art from this are indisputable. Art is not just a series of unique inheritable objects produced by diligent individualized handcraft, but also the outcome of a set of shared iterative skills, temporal forms and collective relations. In this its forms are dispersible, expandable and endlessly reproducible. Yet discussions of skill, deskilling and reskilling in art are barely broached in contemporary art theory.⁷ Too much theory and history, in fact, filters its sense of art's futurity from a narcissistic mourning of art's would-be lost affective qualities and possibilities. As a result the interpretative disciplines can hardly keep up with the social, cognitive and cultural forces that are now bearing down on the category of art. But, if mourning for the the lost object has become a substitute for its dialectical appropriation, this does not mean that dialectics itself should lose sight of what is empty, repressive or diminished in the iterative culture of our time. To reposition artistic technique in relation to replicant thinking and general social technique is not an attempt to provide art with a set of functional use-values borrowed unmediated from science, as if the solution to the alienated social form of art was art's greater openness to scientific method and technology per se. [...] Rather, the fundamental issue remains: how might the autonomy of artistic technique be a condition of

general social technique, and of use-values external to the realm of art? [...]

The production of value in modern art is inconceivable without the idea of the critique and the reworking of notions of skill and technical competence. The very interrelationship between artistic technique and general social technique is predicated upon this. Indeed, it is on the basis of this relationship that the complex labours of art – its 'intangibilities of form' – have been constituted and reconstituted during the twentieth century.

It is the readymade, above all else, that is key to understanding the development of the modern conditions of reproducibility in art and art's relationship to general social technique. With the readymade we are, at once, in the realm of artistic labour and productive labour, art's autonomy and post-autonomy, novelty and the copy.

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- 7 [11] Where it has, it has borrowed its models from the biological, neurological and other physical sciences. One such model is the neurocomputational account of consciousness in the new neurobiology. [...]

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Mark Cousins The Ugly//1994

[...] Since antiquity, beauty has been regarded as possessing a privileged relation to truth. From this it follows that an ugly representation, or an ugly object, is a negation not just of beauty, but of truth. The category of beauty plays an epistemological role; it presents the truth of an object. Ugliness belongs to whatever negates that truth. It belongs to a series of categories which similarly distort the truth of objects. It belongs to what is contingent, for contingency cannot admit of the truth of objects. It belongs to what is individual, for individuality does not express the truth of objects. It belongs to the hell of error; it can never accede to the haven of what is ideal and what is necessary. This philosophical drama, in which the forces of truth and of error wage war over the territory of art, determines the character of ugliness. Ugliness is condemned to the role of the mistake, to the role of the object that has gone wrong. [...]

Ugliness, contingency, individuality are all terms which belong to the pole of negation. As a consequence, it follows that ugliness will be thought of from the point of view of beauty. At a logical level, ugliness is the negation of beauty; at the level of perception, ugliness is the opposite of beauty. All speculation about ugliness travels through the idea of what it is not. This is indeed characteristic of philosophy's attempt to postpone or prevent any encounter with ugliness as such. Ugliness is always shadowed by the beautiful. The argument that will be presented here is part of an attempt to suggest that ugliness has little to do with beauty and that, in fact, beauty and ugliness belong to quite different registers.

What we might call the philosophical account of ugliness was already laid down in antiquity. For Aristotle, the beautiful object is one which has the ideal structure of an object; it has the form of a totality. [...] Internally it exhibits coherence; externally it establishes a sharp boundary between itself and the world. This establishes a relation between perfection and the idea of the beautiful object. In this case, perfection does not mean, as it does to us, the zenith of beauty. The perfect object is, rather, one which is finished, completed. Any addition or subtraction from the object would ruin its form. [...]

This stress upon the object's being perfect and therefore finished already suggests a philosophical criterion as to what will function as ugly. It is that which prevents a work's completion, or deforms a totality – whatever resists the whole. An ugly attribute of a work is one that is excessively individual. It is not just that monsters and characters from low life belong to a class of objects which are deemed ugly; it is that they are too strongly individual, are too much

✓ Mark Hutchinson

Nausea: Encounters with Ugliness//2002

The failure of surface is ugliness. Ugliness has become interesting in recent art, I think, because it breaches a discourse of surfaces. It offers a model for the relationship between artwork and spectator of immediacy, urgency and proximity. This cuts through a still dominant economy in art of detachment and exclusion. Ugliness is close, threatening and exciting. Both obscene and fascinating, the ugly is a trope of contradiction and excess: it is too much. Ugliness stalks the subject: it doesn't go away when you shut your eyes because it is always out to get you. In the failure of surface is the threat and the promise to end everything, permanently.

Surface was a modernist obsession. Various formalisms made a living emphasizing, negating, displacing (and so on) surfaces and the optical picture plane. The centrality of questions of surface was an article of faith in the modernist orthodoxy. Surface was something of a fetish, a token of art's autonomy. In fact, it seemed one of the few things you had left, once the necessity of representation had, apparently, been removed. It was the carnal knowledge of modernism coming to self-consciousness: no more innocent picture making without the knowledge of what you were doing with surfaces. When it is taken for granted that art is a practice of making objects, then surface is the hidden truth behind representation: what one always already sees is a surface.

Clement Greenberg highlighted this loss of innocence when he talked about 'the cut': the first mark a painter makes on a surface. What is 'cut' is the optical surface of the picture plane. The relationship between mark and surface is conceived in terms of a relationship between figure and ground. This rests on the ideology of the inescapable fact of pictorial space and therefore art's confinement to the visual. For Greenberg, 'the cut' is the truth in painting. It is not only what painting is about, it is what painting should self-consciously be about: 'the cut' is what painting does. To disavow this truth, to hide the surface (by painting pictures which are *of* something, for example), is an act of betrayal, falsity, corruption, delusion and foolishness.

This all sounds impossibly quaint. Surfaces, it now seems, like all signs, are what you make of them: detached from a fixed and stable reality. There is no way of deciding the primacy of the literal surface over the pictorial or metaphorical surface: no figure which is not also a ground. Indeed 'the cut' of the modernist surface gave way to the 'cut and paste' of the fragmented postmodernist surface. All kinds of accumulation and appropriation of

conflicting styles and iconography were the order of the day as the idea of an overdetermined, multiple and contradictory surface made itself apparent. Artists embraced this willing failure of the unified, optical surface as a liberation from the tyranny of bureaucracy, management and control.

A surface of fragments and optical contradictions is still a surface, although one articulating the idea of the arbitrary and conventional rather than the idea that it is the bearer of some kind of truth. But the failure to have a consistent and unified surface is not the same as the failure to have a surface per se. A truly ugly face is not one lacking the requisite proportions for beauty but one lacking a properly containing surface: not one with a bad surface but one which is missing some surface. A face with disproportionate features, for example, may not be considered beautiful but is not ugly: a face lacking in features (one lacking eyes, or a nose, or lips, etc.) is what is ugly. It threatens to stop being a face at all.

The ugly is a catastrophe for surface. It cuts through the surface. It is a breach in the continuum of surfaces. Beyond the surface is raw matter, is stuff. The failure of surface is the failure of the illusion of the containing wall of stuff: the failure of an object to remain a discrete object. The failed surface lets formless stuff out into the world: a kind of ontological meltdown.

Ooze and slime and drool epitomize ugliness because they are escaped stuff, uncontained by surface. A viscous, sticky liquid is not quite a proper liquid, more like an unreliable solid, the surface of which is constantly changing as it spreads. It spreads because it does not have enough surface and it has too much stuff. As the ooze spreads, it does not flow over things, as a liquid would, but rather leaves a trace: a sticky contamination of the surfaces it has passed over. Its sticky coating impugns those surfaces too. The unreliability of its surface is demonstrated in its stickiness: the surface comes off on your hand. Its edge is indistinguishable from the rest of it: it is relentless goo, the same all the way through. The surface is indistinguishable from what it should contain. In this sense, in fact, it is without a surface at all. [...]

When an object ceases to hold its symbolic integrity, it is as if the inside has become bigger than the outside, breaking down the spatial logic of the relationship between the self and the world. It is as if the inside has started to grow. In coming through the surface, the ugly stuff is getting closer. Traditionally, in horror films, the 'undead' have bad skin. It breaks and falls off. Rancid blood and putrefying flesh ooze out through their inadequate surface, through their broken, incomplete skin. This ugly stuff is always too close to us and we have to run away. The 'undead' pursue us because the ugly is always breaking down the spatial isolation of the subject. On a more prosaic level, spots, snot, dribbling saliva, piss (the physical eruptions of other bodies) are always closer to you, psychologically, than the rest of the person. [...]

The ugly always looms large. It is the focus of attention of the ego because it is what escapes its hallucinatory architecture: its ability to negotiate the world through symbols. The ugly is horrifying yet compulsive. It gets closer in the same way that if someone tells you not to think of something horrible, you can think of nothing else. The more you try to forget, not to think about it, the more it fills your thoughts. Ugliness is relentless. It threatens to dissolve distance. It is apocalyptic. In ugliness the subject sees the end of distinctions; the end of difference; the end of space; the end of time; the end of everything. As such, the ugly both threatens death and promises to fulfil utopian longing.

Leakiness is contagion. Not only does the ugly object threaten to explode the symbolic order – to eat away the distance that keeps the world at bay – it also threatens to make the subject ugly too: to turn you back into your component parts. The breakdown of other things into matter is an unwelcome reminder that you, too, are just a heap of nasty stuff barely contained by a fragile and fallible surface. When the 'undead' monster drips onto you, the uncontained bodily ooze is a picture on the skin of what is under the surface; it is tangible evidence of how similar the ugly object is to the living subject. They don't need to catch you for you will become one of them: your own ugliness is only ever kept at bay. [...]

This is a truth that the anorexic knows. When he or she refuses to feed more stuff into the treacherous vessel of the body, it is an attempt to do away with the threat of the ugly altogether by doing away with the body. The anorexic is always too fat because he or she does not see the surface of the body but the ugly stuff therein. The anorexic sees fat not in terms of the surface of the body, not in terms of what it does to skin, but rather sees fat as just stuff. Here, fat is not relative but an absolute: 'too fat' does not make sense because any fat at all, any stuff of the body, is always already too much. Anorexia is the doomed attempt to reduce the subject to symbolic purity: to have an outside with no treacherous inside at all. The anorexic puts all of his or her investment in the maintenance of image, at any cost. What the anorexic cannot contemplate and cannot bear, is the contingency of the real, with all the pleasure and pain that that promises.

Cutting through the symbolic with another level of base reality, ugliness is a figure which makes everything exist in the same way; a figure which obliterates distinctions; a figure which murders the ground. The ugly is the breaking down of the distinctions which keep the excluded away. The ugly is the unrepresentable; it is unaccountable and unimaginable. What the cultural anorexic cannot contemplate and cannot bear is the contingency of the real: the knowledge that there is something through the surface, which cannot be contained.

The reaction of the subject to ugliness is contradictory and bodily. When ugliness hits you, it is overwhelming in its immediacy and excess. It is not as if you have a choice. A typical reaction to ugliness might be to turn away and then

look back over your shoulder; or to cover your eyes and then peep through your fingers. The ugly provokes an immediate reaction, which is one of both irresistible fascination and horrified repulsion. As such it offers a model of looking which is complex, open and not specialized.

At the beginning of the last century, Walter Benjamin considered whether democratic technology in the form of mechanical reproduction might transform the aura of artworks and, indeed, transform what art might be. A change in the way that art was produced might bring art in closer proximity to the world and everything else. This collapse of distance would press art against unthinkable responses and illicit experiences. Art might cease to exist as a result. It could not survive unmolested. The ugly is a trope that threatens to dissolve symbolic distinctions. It, too, contains the threat to destroy art altogether, in the name of that which does not have a proper place.

Mark Hutchinson, extract from catalogue essay, *Nausea: Encounters with Ugliness*, ed. Hutchinson and Nicola Cotton (Nottingham, England: Djanogly Gallery, March 2002) n.p.

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What we might call the philosophical account of ugliness was already laid down in antiquity. For Aristotle, the beautiful object is one which has the ideal structure of an object; it has the form of a totality. [...] Internally it exhibits coherence; externally it establishes a sharp boundary between itself and the world. This establishes a relation between perfection and the idea of the beautiful object. In this case, perfection does not mean, as it does to us, the zenith of beauty. The perfect object is, rather, one which is finished, completed. Any addition or subtraction from the object would ruin its form. [...]

This stress upon the object's being perfect and therefore finished already suggests a philosophical criterion as to what will function as ugly. It is that which prevents a work's completion, or deforms a totality – whatever resists the whole. An ugly attribute of a work is one that is excessively individual. It is not just that monsters and characters from low life belong to a class of objects which are deemed ugly; it is that they are too strongly individual, are too much

themselves. As such, they resist the subordination of the elements of the object to the ideal configuration of a totality. The ugly object belongs to a world of ineluctable individuality, contingency and resistance to the ideal. [...]

Ugliness can deform a work, but it can also strengthen it. For the stronger the totality of a work of art, the more it has had to overcome those elements within itself that oppose its unification. Indeed, if this is true, a new doubt about a certain type of beauty arises. If the structure of a beautiful object has been too little tested by whatever opposes that structure, then it is facile, 'merely' beautiful.

Ugliness, by complicating beauty, achieves an ambiguous status – utterly excluded from beauty, and at the same time a 'moment' in the unfolding of a beauty whose form as a totality is all the more triumphant for having overcome the resistance to itself in its 'moments' of ugliness.

The discourse of aesthetics, especially in Kant's third *Critique*, fundamentally complicates and radically skews this relation, but does not reverse it. Commentators have frequently identified the category of the sublime as one which overthrows the limits of the classical conception of beauty. [...]

The sublime is neither an image nor an object of a particular type, but the enactment of a scene in which the subject and object have a dynamic relation to each other within a specific setting. The awfulness of the object does not immediately threaten the subject, but rather – given the subject's safety-in-danger – it awakens in the subject an apprehension that his potential scope, even his scale, is greater than the vast and fearful object. [...] Indeed, there seems to be something almost inescapably cinematic about Kant's description of the site of the sublime. I sit (safely) confronting such arresting, awful, fearful representations.' As long as the gap between the subject and the object constitutes a margin of safety, as long as the subject does not cross that fateful boundary between the fearful and fear, the relation of the sublime can be maintained. If it is crossed, if the subject goes too far or the object comes too close, the sublime will collapse. The paradox of the sublime – or rather its inherent ratio – is that the closer I am to the boundary, the more intense is my experience of the sublime. The moment of its zenith is also the moment of its collapse.

But the vastness of the object, its indistinctness, its lack of proportion or symmetry, does not necessarily signal a revolution in the relation between beauty and ugliness has occurred. For, if the totality of the object seems to be absent in all these sublime representations of the world with its unfinished and unlimited character, this does not mean that the sublime abandons the category of the totality. Here, totality is an attribute, not of the object but of the subject, and of the subject's relation to the object. The attributes of symmetry and proportion, which now may seem to be lacking in the object, none the less reappear as a symmetry and proportionality *between* the subject and the object. [...]

We can now move to a hypothesis concerning ugliness: *Aesthetics cannot deal with ugliness, save as a negation and as a moment of beauty.* Aesthetics is the theoretical knowledge of beauty and the subject's relation to beauty, and it therefore follows that there cannot be an aesthetics of ugliness. It also follows that the experience of ugliness is not an aesthetic experience as such. Kant's notion of aesthetic experience and of judgement cannot admit propositions such as 'This is ugly'. The judgement 'This is beautiful' does not have an opposite. The failure to form a judgement of beauty is just that; it is not an assertion of ugliness. If ugliness is to become an object of inquiry, this inquiry will have to be conducted outside the scope of aesthetics. But like aesthetics it cannot afford to collapse into the relativism of taste. For, if the investigation of the ugly is reduced to the question of what is held, here and now, or there and then, to be ugly, there is nothing to say, beyond the fact that some people say one thing, some another. The sociological and historical investigation of personal preferences, or the cultural machinery of taste, can never accede to the problem of beauty and ugliness. For that problem is not about the variability of taste, but about a certain modality of subjectivity in relation to the object.²

We have argued that beauty and ugliness operate in different registers, but this much they do have in common: they cannot be accounted for in terms of the way in which a culture imposes a scale and a hierarchy of preferences. The problems of beauty and of ugliness both exceed, though differently, the way in which cultures use the terms. Like beauty, ugliness entails a certain relation of a subject to an object; nor can ugliness be reduced to a set of attributes which are assigned to it. It exists, decisively and fundamentally, within the relation. But what is this relation?

The next hypothesis is as follows: *The ugly object is an object which is experienced both as being there and as something that should not be there.* That is, *the ugly object is an object which is in the wrong place.* It is important to detach this definition of ugliness as far as possible from aesthetics, for it is not at all a question that an object, having been judged to be ugly, is experienced as something which should not be there. This is not a theory of propriety. It is, rather, that the experience of the object as something which should not be there is primary and constitutive of the experience of ugliness. At this level such an experience is identical to the idea of its being in the wrong place. This does not mean that there is a right place for the ugly object; there is no such place. For this is not a relation of incongruity or impropriety; the 'wrong place' is an absolute. But in what respect is the ugly object an object which is in the wrong place? Briefly, from the position of the subject to whom the object discloses itself as ugly.

But where may we look for help in thinking out the issue of something which is out of place? Undoubtedly the strongest thoughts about what is 'out of place'

come from religious taboos and from the clinical analysis of obsessional neurosis. Both sources (if indeed they are not the same source) betray an underlying concern with things being in their place, and the opposite of this, which is *dirt*. Mary Douglas has famously remarked that dirt is matter out of place. What makes dirt dirty is not its substantial form, however much we commonly believe this to be the case, but the fact that it is in the wrong place. In Judaism the earliest ideas concerning sin were expressed, not as abstract issues of ethics, but as the material problem of the *stain*. And it is the stain which leads that early notion of sin to imagine its expiation in terms of purification rather than restitution. A stain must be cleansed.³ Is this because the stain is ugly? The stain is not an aesthetic issue as such. It is a question of something that should not be there and so must be removed. The constitutive experience is therefore of an object which should not be there; in this way it is a question of ugliness. This connection between a thing being in the wrong place, sin and ugliness still obtains where the prohibitions within a culture take the form, not of elaborate reasoning, but of swift revulsion from the 'ugliness' of an act. An economy of dirt is therefore one way of opening up the question of ugliness.

This economy can also be translated into spatial terms. In so far as dirt is matter out of place it must have passed a boundary, limit or threshold into a space where it should not be. The dirt is an ugly deduction from 'good' space, not simply by virtue of occupying the space, but by threatening to contaminate all the good space around it. In this light, 'dirt', the ugly object, has a spatial power quite lacking in the beautiful object. One way of clarifying the difference between the registers of beauty and ugliness is to translate them into topological entities. Broadly speaking, the beautiful object remains the same size as itself, while the ugly object becomes much larger than it is. There is an important reason for this. All objects exist twice, both as themselves and as representations of themselves. But I have a vested interest in pretending to myself that this is not so, for if I were forced to recognize this I would have to conclude that my own existence – as myself and as my representation of myself – are different, and in certain conditions might even come apart. It is not just an idealization of the human body which is implied in the Vitruvian scheme of proportion; it is a manic insistence that an even more fundamental proportion in man is guaranteed: that he takes up only as much space as his form displaces. This phantasy depends upon a conviction about isomorphism, about the relation between objects and space. Firstly, that there will be an isomorphic relation between an object and the space it occupies. Secondly, that there will be an isomorphic relation between the outside of an object (representation) and its inside (existence). Thirdly, that this is most true when the object is a human being. For the thought of an inside being larger than its outside is one which repels human beings.

But how different is the space of the ugly object, and how little Archimedes understood of it. Contamination, at a logical level, is the process whereby the inside of an object demonstrates that it is larger than its outside or representation. This is one reason why it is important for architecture to be able to think the ugly object. It is also the topographical reason why the ugly object as dirt is not merely a question of 'where the object shouldn't be'. It is not just that the ugly object has trespassed into a zone of purity, for the ugly object is voracious and, through contamination, will consume the entire zone. This demonstrates that an important aspect of the ugly object is its relation to space – including, as we shall see, the space of the subject.

No one knows this better than the obsessional neurotic. Leaving aside the question of cleansing as a form of assuaging guilt, it is clear that for the obsessional the answer to the question 'Where should the object *not* be?' is 'Close to me'. It is not just that the obsessional wants to keep ugly objects as far away as possible; it is, rather, that they become ugly by getting closer. Underlying this is the conviction that what is at a distance is under control, and what is closer is out of control. The obsessional thinks in terms of the formula that ugliness is a function of proximity, but also thinks that the way to stop an object getting closer, to bring it under control, is to clean it. This involves a phantasy about gleaming surfaces; whatever gleams is sufficiently distant from myself. What I polish recedes; what is dirty approaches. But the hopelessness of the task of cleaning is all too apparent. The more you clean something, the dirtier it gets. As the surface is cleaned it reveals those fewer but more stubborn stains which demonstrate even more starkly how the remaining stains consume the surrounding space. The case of the obsessional shows that the ugly object, in its relation to the subject, is not static but is always eating up the space between it and the subject.

But what is this subject? Why is it confronted by something which is in the wrong place? In order to answer this it is necessary to remember that the 'subject' referred to here is not the 'subject' that Kant has in mind, nor the subject of philosophical discourse in general. Still less is it the 'subject' that serves as the bearer of cultural codes in the human sciences. It is, rather, the subject that responds to objects as a determinate psychical apparatus, that is, as a radical division between unconscious and conscious life – a being which is the locus of desire as well as the locus of institutions of defence against those desires.

This has immediate consequences for a psychoanalytic account of the difference between our responses to beauty and to ugliness. In so far as beauty may be taken as an object of desire, the subject is governed by the pleasure principle. But it is the nature of desire to work in respect of representations. 'Representation' here does not refer to the nature of an object, whether it be a

painting or a person: it refers, rather, to the fact that the economy of desire is intrinsically about representation. All objects of desire are representations, since they are substitutions for something that is experienced as having been lost. This economy of desire can be illustrated by reference to the infant. The infant does not experience desire as long as he is satisfied. The first gap in existence occurs with a lack of satisfaction. The infant does not exactly 'experience' this lack. Rather, experience is born of it. The infant deals with the lack of satisfaction by hallucinating what he imagines is the object that would restore satisfaction. But hallucination involves a relation to a representation; it does not produce satisfaction. The representation, in this sense, is a substitute for something which is now lost, and which constitutes the subject as a complex of lacks. The infant assumes subjectivity as the catastrophic precipitation into a world of desire (lack) and substitutions for a lost object. However much the subject strives to fulfil his desires, the economy of lack can never be satisfied. The lost object can never be found because it is no longer an object; it is the condition of desire. Caught between what is experienced as lost and the illusions of desire, the subject follows the plot of his own fiction.⁴

This economy governs both the life of phantasy and life in the world. But the world includes obstacles to desire; indeed the world itself may be thought of as an obstacle to desire. It is this which leads Freud to define 'reality' in a special sense, one which is quite alien to definitions offered by philosophers or by the human sciences. If the philosopher defines reality or existence as the sum of what there is, and if the anthropologist defines it as the sum of what there is from the standpoint of a culture, those definitions are no part of Freud's reasoning. For him reality is anything that functions as an obstacle to desire. The idea of 'reality testing' is not the cognitive adventure that psychologists imagine, but the painful blow, or wound, that is delivered to our narcissism. Reality is that which, being an obstacle, both arrests and denies us our pleasure. It is in this sense that we can consider a thesis which might otherwise seem petulant and melodramatic: *The ugly object is existence itself*, in so far as existence is the obstacle which stands in the way of desire. And so it is, from the point of view of desire, that the ugly object should not be there. Its character as an obstacle is what makes it ugly. [...]

- 1 In a section which follows the quotation above, Kant gives an unusual definition of the brave soldier: 'one whose sense of safety lasts longer than others'.
- 2 Since the late eighteenth century an argument has existed that assertions that something is beautiful or ugly are nothing more than a linguistic assertion that the subject 'likes' or 'dislikes' something. As such, aesthetics is ruled out of court, in favour of the analysis of preferences or taste. Contemporary sociology attempts to show how the mechanisms of taste serve the

interests of certain social classes and relations of cultural prestige. But these forms of argument, however appealing, fall short of Kant's problem.

- 3 There is a necessary ambivalence about the stain itself which must be cleansed, or the place of the stain. The space as a whole has been violated. Contamination is a process which by definition *spreads*. This is why both religious taboos and the obsessional are concerned with minutiae. For even the tiniest violation of a boundary always has large consequences.
- 4 This is an absurdly contracted statement of a psychoanalytic view of the birth of the subject, which is so different from the birth of the infant. It is concerned to signal that from the point of view of desire all objects are also representations. Such a condition reaches a point of intensity in the wish to see. For what is it that we wish to see, beyond what we see?

Mark Cousins, extract from 'The Ugly' (Part 1), *AA Files*, no. 28 (London: Architectural Association, 1994) 61-4.

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Simon O'Sullivan

**Art and the Political: Minor Literature, War Machines
and the Production of Subjectivity//2005**

[...] In [*Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1975)] Deleuze and Guattari give three determining characteristics of a minor literature, or, which is to say the same thing, of the conditions in which a literature becomes revolutionary:

1. *That a minor literature should deterritorialize the major language* (Kafka, 16). Such a deterritorialization involves the neutralization of sense, or the signifying aspects of language, and a foregrounding of the latter's asignifying, intensive aspects. This involves a kind of stammering and stuttering – or 'becoming a stranger' – in one's own tongue. Deleuze and Guattari give the example of Black Americans 'use' of English (as well, of course, as Kafka's own 'use' of German). We might think of the ongoing creolization of the English language in general. A side effect of this is that a minor literature operates to counteract the transmission of 'order words', and the exercise of power this entails ('To hate all languages of masters' as Deleuze and Guattari remark [*Kafka*, 26]).

2. *That in a minor literature everything is political* (Kafka, 17).

Political here means that the lives and individual concerns of the characters in a minor literature are always linked to the larger social, and indeed asocial, milieu (and not, for example, fixated on the familial, domestic unit). It is in this sense that a becoming animal is always political, a line of escape (for Kafka's Gregor, for example) from conjugality and the nuclear family. This links up with point 1: the animal cry – as sound, as deterritorialized noise – operates to neutralize sense, we might say to neutralize the habits of representation, of 'being human'. Asignification here takes on an explicitly political function; it disrupts dominant systems of signification and representation. In fact, the relationship between asignification and signification, and between literary-linguistic systems in general is itself a 'political situation', expressing as it does relations of power (relations of domination and resistance).

Deleuze and Guattari, following Henri Gobard, provide a tentative matrix for these relations, in fact a four-way model: vernacular language (local and territorial), vehicular language (international, a deterritorialization of the former), referential (the language of sense and culture, a cultural reterritorialization) and mythic. This last is positioned 'on the horizons of cultures, caught up in a spiritual or religious reterritorialization' (*Kafka*, 23). This schema can only be provisional. The relationships between, and functions of, different languages will always vary

depending on the specifics of space and time, which is to say a definition of the minor will depend on a definition of the major.

3. *That a minor literature is always collective* (Kafka, 17).

Collective in the sense that a minor literature works as a collective enunciation. There is less emphasis on individual authors and talents, which are at any rate scarce within a minor literature, and more on the collective production of work (its always already collaborative status). It is in this sense that we can see the artistic production of statements as a kind of precursor of a community (and often a nation) still in formation. This is the utopian function, specifically *immanent*, of a minor literature. A minor literary machine then prepares the way, in fact in many senses calls into being, the revolutionary machine yet-to-come ('We might as well say that minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary auditions for every literature' [*Kafka*, 18]).

It is this last point especially, it seems to me, that gives us a framework for thinking many recent contemporary art practices which might be seen to be involved with precisely this utopian pursuit: the collectivization of subjectivity and the calling forth of new kinds of community that this implies. Before I go on to consider this I want briefly to think through points 1 and 2 also in relation to contemporary practice.

First point 1, the deterritorialization of a major language. Deleuze and Guattari point out that a minor literature does not occur 'elsewhere' or 'apart from' a major literature (this is not a dialectic) but on the contrary operates from within, using the same elements as it were but in a different manner. In fact, it is not so much a question of the minor or of the major but of a *becoming* minor in the sense of producing movement from 'within' the major (if the minor names this movement – these 'crystals of becoming' – then the major is the name for their immobilization). What then might we understand as the major, and thus the minor, language(s) of contemporary art practice? Here are five suggestions.

First, we might think of the major and relatively recent tradition of Western art, that is to say modernism, and thus identify practices that are specifically minor to this. Both feminist and postcolonial art practices and art histories might be seen as minor in this sense, involving as they do a kind of deterritorialization, or stammering, in the 'international language' of modernism. We might take this further and identify practices of art and indeed art history that deterritorialize legitimate critiques of modernism, and indeed other 'legitimate' postmodern practices (and this might well involve a return to previously evacuated terrain). Indeed, minor practices will emerge wherever and whenever a priest and a party line emerge and order words are given.

Second, we might also think of those marginal and dissonant practices that were themselves part of modernity but which also in some senses turned against it; modernity's 'other voice' as it were. Dada, for example, which was nothing if not the making stammer, the stuttering, of language and art. We might note here the Dada manifestos, and indeed the other dissident manifestos of modernity (from Futurism to the Situationists) all of which would precisely fit our above three criteria of a minor literature. Here the question of how, when and why a minor literature – or any minor practice in general – becomes major (the apparatus of capture) will be particularly pertinent. In fact, artistic strategy might well involve a 'return' to some of these practices that have retained a deterritorializing function, for it might be the case that a minor practice does not necessarily become major but is simply passed over by the major.

Third, leading on from the above, we might alter our focus slightly and think about the major media of art, specifically painting, and thus characterize those practices as minor which abandoned the canvas (happenings, performance, and so on) or otherwise deterritorialize the figure. We might begin to identify a general 'becoming minor' in art here. Art begins with a deterritorialization of forms that have become fixed. The expanded practices of today would be but the latest moment in this genealogy of a minor art positioned explicitly outside the gallery and indeed 'outside' typical and traditional definitions of art.

Fourth, it is also important to recognize that contemporary art increasingly has itself a form derived from the international art market (and in particular the increasing presence of international biennales) – a kind of vehicular-referential 'global' language. A minor practice might then involve itself in 'stammering' the global language of contemporary art production, for example, in a focus on the local (a turn to the vernacular) or in the use of specifically non-artistic materials. Thomas Hirschhorn's 'monuments' to various philosophers would be a case in point, although we might want to ask whether a practice commissioned by Documenta can ever really be positioned as minor in this sense. A better example might be 'outsider art', although this category would itself need to be broken down and specific practices looked at on their own terms, and an account would have to be given of the increasing commodification of many examples. A key question here is the relationship of the minor to capitalism. On the one hand we might identify the minor as operating at the sharp end of capital's expansion; the minor involving the production of new forms. On the other hand, a minor practice will precisely stammer and stutter the commodity form, disassembling those already existing forms of capital and indeed moving beyond the latter's very logic.

Fifth, in each case this deterritorialization of the major will to some extent involve the neutralization of sense and the foregrounding of art's intensive,

affective quality. Here art 'stops being representative in order now to move towards its extremities or its limits' (*Kafka*, 23). A minor art pushes up against the edges of representation; it bends it, forces it to the limits and often to a certain absurdity. This is not to say that a minor art cannot itself work through representation (or at least through fragments of representation). Indeed, affective ruptures – which themselves utilize existing materials – are the fertile ground for new forms of representation, new signifying regimes. Deterritorialization is always accompanied by reterritorialization in this sense. A minor practice must then be understood as always in process, as always becoming – as generating new forms through a break with, but also a utilization of, the old. It is also in this sense that the argument might be made that a practice can still be 'activated', or become minor, even if it is located 'within' a major institution, or has otherwise 'become major'. Here the question of the spectator's investment in, and participation with, a particular practice becomes crucial, which is to say, his or her specific production of subjectivity and propensity for deterritorialization.

As a brief aside we might point to the use of humour in such a deterritorialization of language. Humour can operate as a strategy of dissent but also of affirmation. In fact, we might see humour as a form of affirmative violence; a violence against typical signifying formations. Humour here is not the irony of postmodern practice, but something affirmative, celebratory even, and something that works on an intensive rather than a signifying register.

Point 2, the political. A minor art will connect different regimes together, and in particular will connect art to the wider social milieu. This is to restate the importance of rhizomatics, or simply a general principle of connectivity. Again, we might think here of the artistic avant-garde groupings of modernity and beyond, those that seek to 'bring art back down' to life (which we might rephrase here as a desire to connect art to life). Even more pertinent are those recent collectives and groups that interact, and indeed position themselves as part of, the wider social and economic fabric. The socially engaged projects of groups such as Superflex or n55 would be a case in point (although this does not necessarily mean such practices will fit our other criteria of a minor practice). This turn away from a certain kind of autonomy (from art about art, or art about the art world) also involves a turn away from typical forms of political and social engagement. A minor art practice is not political in the usual sense. It does not involve itself necessarily with political – or what we might call molar – organizations, rather it works to connect up the different aspects of life, be they individual or social (or indeed non-human) so as to produce new lines of causality and new pathways of experimentation, precisely the production of what Guattari once called 'molecular revolutions'. If a minor practice is always

political then it is because it is always opening itself up to an outside in this sense. It is in this sense also that the minor produces a different kind of relative autonomy, for example, an association of individuals who have 'being against' the major in common. We might add here that a minor practice will also often look to 'popular', or what we might call immanent cultures (those that are self-organizing as it were). Graffiti for example would be a paradigmatic example of a minor literature, as would so called underground forms of music, such as punk, and more recently dance. Again, attention would need to be given to the specific apparatus of capture of these minor forms.

Finally point 3, the collective character of minor literature and its 'futurity', or what we might call its prophetic function. A minor art will involve a collective enunciation, the production of collaborations and indeed the calling forth of new kinds of collectivities. Here a minor practice joins forces with what Deleuze and Guattari call philosophy, that practice which in itself calls forth 'a new earth, a new people' (*What is Philosophy*, 99). Philosophy, for Deleuze and Guattari, involves a resistance to the present in its specifically future orientation (it creates concepts for a new earth and a new people). We might say that a minor art practice parallels philosophy's more abstract (and absolute) deterritorializations in offering a resistance to the present in the form of its imagined communities and prototype subjectivities. Indeed, we might say that minor practices, like philosophy, involve a 'diagramming of becoming', the invention of new modes of existence. A minor art in this sense summons its audience into being. [...]

We might say then that the Third-World filmmaker often lacks an audience, and as such must call his or her audience into being *through* his or her films. Importantly, this minor practice is produced through a manipulation of the elements of the major. [...] we might say that this is the use of cliché in order to disrupt cliché. We might add that this minor cinema is of course not just apparent in what Deleuze terms the 'Third World', but in any and all practices that somehow deterritorialize – stutter and stammer – the major language of film, or indeed any major representational tropes (we might think of the films made by Godard, as well as those more recent ones made under the Dogma rubric). In fact, we might recognize such minor practices as being very much part of the expanded field of contemporary art as it exists today: the so-called documentary turn in art practice (the increasing presence of video art). The development of hand-held camcorders, as well as the ongoing development of digital technology in general, although it can operate in the service of the major, allows the production of different forms of 'minor cinema' in this sense.

In this respect, we need also note, as Deleuze reminds us, that: 'the difference between minorities and majorities isn't their size. A minority may be bigger than

a majority. What defines majority is a model you have to conform to. ... A minority, on the other hand, has no model, it's a becoming, a process' (*Nomadology*, 173). Furthermore, this missing people is not necessarily someone else (or not just someone else) but ourselves too, 'for, if the people are missing, if they are breaking up into minorities, it is I who am first of all a people, the people of my atoms' (*Cinema 2*, 220). It is then not a question of waiting for the missing people (there is no hanging around in messianic time), for these people are in a sense already here, albeit masked, obscured by habitual modes of representation and commodified productions of subjectivity, precisely, the major.

All of this gives the minor an affirmative function. To refuse, or somehow negate, the existing language (and thus the existing major forms) is important, but a minor art must do more than this. It must also involve creation. It is also this that gives the stuttering and stammering of a minor practice such an inspirational, we might even say hopeful, tenor. A minor art is involved in the invention and imagining of new subjectivities as well as turning away from those already in place. A minor art then does not just orientate itself against, or position itself in, an 'outside'. Rather it operates at a more oblique angle (it looks for other entry points). It is at once inside and outside the major, *in* the 'world' but not quite *of* it. [...]

Simon O'Sullivan, extracts from 'Art and the Political: Minor Literature, War Machines and the Production of Subjectivity', in *Art Encounters. Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation* (London: Palgrave, 2005) 70–5; 75–6 [footnotes not included].