Introduction: Art and the Politics of Beauty

Beauty and art were once thought of as belonging together, with beauty as among art's principal aims and art as beauty's highest calling. However, neither beauty nor art have come through avantgardist rebellion and modern social disruption unscathed. Their special relationship has, as a result, become estranged and tense.

It is not that babies, flowers and diamonds have stopped looking good. The critique of beauty is never a critique of beautiful objects but always of ideas, ideologies, social practices and cultural hierarchies. When objects of beauty are contested they always stand in for objectionable conceptual frameworks: the feminist critique of beauty is typically a critique of how the social status of women is codified in and maintained by beauty; the argument stemming from Theodor Adorno for the 'crisis of beauty' focuses on how commodity exchange has abolished beauty's seemingly neutral and universal value; and so on. This is how to read Marcel Duchamp's avowed visual indifference in the selection of his readymades: if you take away beauty and the visual from the definition of art then - so one tradition of Duchampian thinking has it - the dominant forces within culture are denied their privilege. This is how to read a contemporary artist Rasheed Araeen's questioning of the western conventions of beauty imposed on the east: beauty is attacked because it has been colonized by and shaped to the needs and pleasures of the west. Both Duchamp and Araeen deliberately set out to contest beauty as such (i.e., beauty as universal, natural, given or singular) by reframing the beautiful as always in fact local and partial.

Beauty is often said to be impossible to define on account of the subjective nature of judgements of pleasure and taste. Simply put, if I say something is true then that claim implies that it is true for everyone, but if I say that something is beautiful I am merely stating what is beautiful to me. The subjective condition of judgements about beauty has not changed, but something has been added to make the problem of beauty's definition more difficult still. Modern thinking introduces a new twist to the problem of beauty: after Marx, Freud and Nietzsche develop what the philosopher Paul Ricoeur calls the 'hermeneutics of suspicion', which is described below, beauty becomes not only subjective but controversial. In other words, modernism introduces a politics of beauty.

This collection has been put together with the politics of beauty in mind. It is not, therefore, devoted solely to beauty, as if beauty could be isolated like a botanical specimen from the social and political world, but rather an exploration of beauty's full relationship to the legacies of modernism and avantgardism, the rejection of beauty and the subsequent recent disavowal of that rejection. The first section, The Revival of Beauty, begins with the inaugural text on these questions in the 1990s: Dave Hickey's 'Enter the Dragon: On the Vernacular of Beauty' (1993). This marks a turning point in thinking about beauty. It is not that Hickey's argument is taken up by subsequent writers on the revival of beauty; rather, Hickey seems to open up the possibility of affirmations of beauty that exceed his framework. The scholar of language and ethics Elaine Scarry, for instance, argues that beauty is etymologically and conceptually linked to kindness and justice, while the philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto attempts to restore beauty as a legitimate, if no longer central, concern for art as well as a necessary condition for life as we would want to live it.

The first section also includes a number of early confrontations with the revival of beauty (Kathleen Marie Higgins, Suzanne Perling Hudson, Alexander Alberro). The key historical and theoretical writings, from Adorno onwards, that inform a wider confrontation with beauty are collected in the second section, Concepts and Contexts. Here we see an expansion of the conceptual parameters for thinking about beauty (Adorno, Derrida, Bernstein, Gaiger) and the critique of beauty from a range of perspectives: from feminist interrogation of 'woman as sign' in representations of female beauty (Griselda Pollock) to the analysis of beauty as skewed by late capitalism (Fredric Jameson) and the questioning of beauty in terms of the critical values of the avantgarde (John Roberts). Other texts explore and revalue beauty's relation to ugliness, vulgarity, the sublime and practices outside established definitions and conventions of art (Mark Cousins, Mark Hutchinson, T.J. Clark, Caroline Jones, Simon O'Sullivan).

The final section, Positions, focuses on artists. Including several interviews as well as polemics, catalogue essays and lectures, it intends to highlight beauty as a contested category. Artists such as Robert Smithson and Rasheed Araeen seemingly kill beauty off while others, such as Agnes Martin and Alex Katz, value it immensely. Such evident differences of opinion will us in a position to make a choice about beauty, one which the revivalists think is quite straightforward: Beauty, they say, is a no-brainer; we must have gone some way off target as a culture if we do not prefer beauty to ugliness, vulgarity and bad taste. Scarry, for instance, complains that it is as if 'we should be obligated to give up the pleasure of looking at one another.' This argument is tempting because it gives us what we want; however, the modern history of thinking about beauty in art calls for hesitation here.

The revivalists read beauty's politicization as a loss that can and should be made good. Another way of looking at this is to say that the current politics of beauty includes the attempt to undo or unthink its existing politics. Let's remind
ourselves of what is at stake. Avant-gardism, both in the early twentieth-century avant-garde movements such as Dada and Surrealism and the neo-avant-garde such as Minimalism and Conceptualism, recast beauty as ideologically complicit with political power, while simultaneously cultivating a sensitivity to the repressed value of ugliness, philistinism, shock or abjection. On the face of it, then, the controversy about beauty appears to boil down to rival tastes, with traditionalists preferring order and beauty, while avant-gardists prefer disorder and shock. But under the surface there is another controversy about the very nature of beauty as a category of experience.

There are two contradictory conceptions of beauty: one is the conviction that it is a purely private, subjective experience; and the other is the notion that it is always, inevitably socially inscribed. To understand this rift in approaches we need to take a detour into the history of the emergence of this modern conception of socially inscribed behaviour. It is charted by Michael Rosen in his book On Voluntary Servitude (1996) where he argues that after the eighteenth century society is seen for the first time as an active, behaviour-forming system or machine in which individual belief and conduct is explained as functional for, or produced by, society. What is characteristic of premodern thinking is the conviction that society is simply the aggregate of individual choices and actions. Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ and Hegel’s ‘cunning of reason’ initiated a new conception of how individual actions were inextricably tied up with a greater whole. However, these were faint promises of what was to come – a fully-fledged theory of the ways in which society infiltrates the thoughts, feelings and actions of individuals in even the most private and subjective experiences.

Ricoeur calls this modern interpretation of the relationship between the individual and society the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’, inaugurated by the works of Marx, Freud and Nietzsche. Ideology, the unconscious and the Will-to-Power share a vital theoretical commitment to structures beyond the individual which decisively shape subjectivity itself. As a result, statements made by individuals about their intentions, beliefs and conduct cannot be accepted uncritically. Rather, the suspicion is that individuals are inevitably prey to forces that they cannot control – forces of which they are often entirely unaware. By calling the unmediated sovereign individual into question, the hermeneutics of suspicion does not thereby merely replace talk about individuals with talk about society (a hermeneutics of social certainties). Rather, it draws out the tension between individual experience and the social structure. We’ll come back to this.

At the same time that the individual was seen by the hermeneutics of suspicion as inserted into the social structure, the individual itself was radically reconfigured by the conditions of modern society. Modernity is characterized, in the sociologist Max Weber’s terms, by disenchantment, rationalization and bureaucracies. Standardization, efficiency, methodicalness and hard work combine in modernity to produce what Weber called the ‘specific and peculiar rationalism of Western culture’. Within modern enterprises and institutions, according to Weber, individuals do not just happen to act instrumentally, they are obliged to do so. The key social relations of modern life – buyers and sellers, managers and workers, experts and clients, and so on – bring individuals together through anonymous processes of organization, mediated by forms of rationality. This is why Weber describes the fate of the modern individual as constrained by the rationality of economic acquisition, as if by an ‘iron cage’, which Adorno later rechristened the ‘totally administered society’. In this way, rational calculation structures the actions, events and things in the modern world, ultimately including the consciousness, feelings and pleasures of those who live in it.

It is important for our thinking about beauty that we register the fact that ancient, classical, mediaeval, Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers did not in any significant way concern themselves about how society weaves its way through our intimate experiences of beauty. The philosophy of beauty from Plato to Kant may have been ethically charged but it did not theorize how individual pleasures, choices and tastes are always unwittingly charged with social content. To see beauty as politically loaded is to brand private, subjective likes and dislikes as unintentionally but inextricably caught up with social codes and social divisions. Sociology and cultural studies are adept at reading individual and private judgements in exactly this way. Social inscription is common currency in critical thinking, but it is, according to Rosen, a specifically modern idea. Kant’s thinking on beauty stands uncomfortably at the cusp of this modern world. No longer able to presume the individual subject’s asocial sovereignty, Kant labours to regulate a space for uncorrupted subjectivity by identifying all the major threats to it and then systematically eliminating them from aesthetic judgement properly conducted. This tension between the subjective and the social has become characteristic of modern disputes about beauty.

The controversy around beauty is rooted in the contested intersection between social facts and subjective experience. Stripped of traditional relations and forms of community, the bulk of modern sociality is markedly asocial. Competition, rivalry, antagonism, instrumentality and exploitation are characteristic of the salient structural relations of contemporary society. Subjectivity not only adapts to such conditions but is itself turned into an object of instrumental reason. The point, therefore, is not to take sides with the individual or the social analysis of beauty, for this would trap us within the terms of this fissure. As social relations take on an anonymous, mechanized and abstract manner, beauty itself becomes subject to rationality, commodity exchange and
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Losing its innocence in this way, beauty comes to feel saccharine or even violent. This is why, for instance, modernism either eliminated (as in Cubism, Expressionism, Dada and Surrealism) or streamlined (as in Constructivism, Purism, Minimalism). These were strategies that either countered beauty altogether or offered a counter-beauty in order to subvert hegemonic beauty, inherited beauty and premodern beauty. With modernism, then, we have a new category of experience, the suspiciously beautiful. And even when modernism and avant-gardism offer their own counter-beauty, beauty has no more to recommend it than the chaotic, the accidental, the philistine, the primitive, the ruined or the overlooked.

We can see the current of cultural values turn against beauty in several key moments within modernism, avant-gardism and postmodernism. Modernist art’s use of what T.J. Clark has called ‘practices of negation’ – for instance, deliberate acts of incompetence, the use of accident, and so forth – can be seen not only as the means by which ‘a previously established set of skills or frame of reference ... are deliberately avoided or travestied’ but also as a means to counter the privileges and pleasures of a peculiar historical version of beauty. The avantgarde penchant for ‘shock’ simply could not have taken place if it did not at the same time subvert existing views of the beautiful. The Dada, Surrealist or Constructivist gesture could not cause discomfort for the cultural and social elites if it presented its radicalism according to the taste of those very elites. This is why the Futurists presented the motor car as a rival model of beauty to that which was universalized by the museum. And the postmodernists take up this mantle when critics such as Craig Owens argue in favour of the hybrid. the marginalized and the low, to locate contemporary art deliberately and conscientiously in the wake of high art’s dominance of culture.

We continue to see beauty around us but this can no longer be the kind of elevated experience that it once was. Beauty might seem like something that we know when we see it, but the hermeneutics of suspicion refers such experiences to hidden motives, unintended consequences, structural conditions and spurious rationalizations. When avant-gardism took up the hermeneutics of suspicion in its diverse forms of cultural dissent, the resistance to beauty was part and parcel of the resistance to bourgeois culture generally. ‘Except in struggle, there is no more beauty’, wrote Marinetti in the 1905 Futurist Manifesto. Art after avant-gardism tended to preserve the avantgarde’s suspicion of beauty even when its politicization had been cooled. Clement Greenberg, for instance, preferred to describe work of the New York School as ‘good’ or ‘successful’ rather than ‘beautiful’. After that, Pop was vulgar, Minimalism was literal, Conceptualism was opposed to the visual and postmodernism was either calculation. Hence beauty gets tied up with design, style and marketing.

Possibly this seems like bad news for beauty, as if such ideas threaten to spoil the pleasure promised by it. However, pleasure is not cancelled by modern structures of subjectivity. For one thing they are released from the old hierarchies of social and cultural hegemony. As a result, though, it is more difficult – if not impossible – to universalize pleasure or beauty. Subjective certainties and regimes of taste can no longer be bracketed off from the economies of beauty. The result is not the rejection of beauty or the death of taste but the need to learn to love beauty without the kind of social endorsement or cultural authority that it once enjoyed and wielded. What would that be like?

Following Ricoeur, we might begin to develop what we could call an aesthetics of suspicion. This is a counter-intuitive proposal. Aesthetics, we normally think, is not the sort of experience that tolerates suspicion. But we have a model of what that might be like in Judith Butler’s performative theory of gender: a very intimate world subject to suspicion. Gender identity, she says, is performatively constituted. For Butler gender should be seen as a fluid variable rather than a fixed attribute. In this sense, she argues, gender is always an achievement. Butler argues that certain cultural configurations of gender have come to seem natural by virtue simply of their hegemonic power. In response to this, Butler calls for subversive action with the mobilization, confusion and proliferation of genders.

Various ambitious contemporary artists have taken pleasure and critical purchase from the confusion and collapse of the distinction between beauty and a vast range of its antonyms, such as ugliness, the banal, ideology, chaos, and so
on. In addition to those whose writing is included in this anthology one should also mention here several of the other significant artists in this realm, such as Tomoko Takahashi, Liam Gillick, Jeff Koons and Pipilotti Rist. Takahashi, for instance, immerses herself in waste, reclaiming unwanted and rejected items that have left circulation, and converts disorder into order and ugliness into beauty. Gillick links the question of beauty to that of living well, not limiting beauty to the visual but drawing attention to the beauty of endeavour, struggle, social change and political action. Gillick uses modernist design with all its cool appeal to pursue a double-edged enquiry into the more general ‘unfinished project of modernity’, as Habermas puts it. Koons has consistently highlighted banality, pop, indulgence, advertising, commodity culture, sexual desire and guilty pleasures, presenting these ‘low’ amusements as often outstripping the delights of a more high-minded nature. Beauty, for Koons, has to be less accountable, less sober and less privileged if it is going to capture us. And Rist, too, ‘risks vulgarity’ – to use a phrase from T.J. Clark in reference to Abstract Expressionism – in her determinedly unconventional version of beauty. An aesthetics of suspicion is played out in Rist’s work by discovering itself performatively in the act of finding things beautiful or finding ways of presenting things as beautiful.

It would be wrong therefore to suggest that the contemporary politics of beauty leads towards drab or clumsy art. Beauty is raised as an issue by these artists without the question of beauty being posed merely as a theoretical enquiry. Beauty, in other words, is not obliterated by the aesthetics of suspicion but is expanded, twisted, shifted and split. Beauty, then, need not be naturalized as purely subjective nor reduced to the social relations to which certain dominant cultural configurations are attached. If aesthetics is performed in the way that gender is, then beauty exists at the tense intersection of the individual and society, with the individual neither fully subsumed nor fully free from social norms and cultural hierarchies. There is pleasure and play in that gap as well as critique, suspicion and subversion. An aesthetics of suspicion, then, would be one in which beauty is no longer reducible to the individual, the subjective and the authentic, nor to the social, the political and the imposed. Individuals can play out social inscriptions while retaining a pleasurable and critical relation to them. Beauty – like masculine, feminine or queer positions – is not something given but something that we do and something that we change.

What all this means, as an introduction to a selection of writings on beauty, is that each text is to be seen as occupying a specific place and taking a specific position within the politics of beauty, including the aestheticist resistance to the politics of beauty. If it is true, as I’ve suggested, that the controversy of beauty is rooted in the tension between individual and society that is endemic to modern capitalism, then we can read these texts also as caught up within forces beyond their control. In other words, we cannot expect the positions and arguments to resolve the situations to which they respond. Instead, these texts are documents of the struggle for nothing less than universal human flourishing, albeit conducted for the most part in terms of very local disputes over paintings, photographs, objects and events. These details count. If universal human flourishing is to mean anything it has to be embedded in the very fabric of existence, in the minutiae of life, not just the grand idea. This is why beauty – and the politics of beauty – is never to be taken lightly.