

Generosity and the Black Swan 1997

I saw
a swan that had broken out of its cage,
webbed feet clumsy on the cobblestones,
white feathers dragging in the uneven ruts,
and obstinately pecking at the drains,
drenching its enormous wings in filth
as if in its own lovely lake, crying
‘Where is the thunder, when will it rain?’ⁱ

Elsewhere in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Baudelaire foreshadows Freud’s criteria for civilization through beauty, order, and cleanliness.

All is order there, and elegance,
pleasure, peace, and opulence.

Freud concluded *Civilization and Its Discontents* with a note of optimism, even as Fascism took hold in Europe and the future held little hope for Jews, “What the world needs is a little more Eros.”

Datta “To give” is one of three ways Eliot offers out of a dry, avaricious, and sexless landscape in the concluding section of *The Wasteland*. Beauty is generosity and reveals itself freely for it must be seen in order to exist. But we vacillate between self and giving, both as individuals and as a society.

Beauty joins grown-ups, like children, in play.

“La Beauté,” said Louise Bourgeois, “est la raison d’être.”

A few years ago, I was reading John Ruskin and Walter Pater in my semiotics class. Both taught aesthetics at Oxford in the 1870s. They disagreed on many points, particularly on the *use* of beauty and its relationship to morality, though neither had any problem employing the word. I complained that the word was seldom used today.

Then Roberto Portillo, a graduate student from Mexico City, waved a little white book by Dave Hickey called *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty*. Walking home that evening, book in hand, I saw two lovers in a park near a church on Seventeenth Street: one pressed against the other, the other pressed against a tree, the tree traversed a purple sky.

In an earlier book, *The Sense of Beauty* (1896) Santayana wrote that if beauty is linked so strongly to the sexual drive, we do not need philosophy to defend it. If one wanted to produce a being with a great susceptibility to beauty, one could not invent an instrument better designed for that object than sex. If people didn't have to unite for the birth and rearing of each generation, they might retain their "savage independence." But sex endows the individual with a silent and powerful instinct, which carries each of us continually towards another.

I recommended Hickey's little book to my friend David Shapiro, with whom I share a similar aesthetic. Soon after, perusing an antiquarian bookstore on the fringe of Boston, I found an old anthology called *Philosophies of Beauty: From Socrates to Robert Bridges*, compiled by E.F. Carritt and published by Oxford University Press in 1931. It included writings by Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Hume, Baumgarten, Kant, Wordsworth, Ruskin, Pater, Nietzsche, Shelly, Santayana, Bergson, Croce, and several others.

With inspiration from *Philosophies of Beauty*, I felt it might be time for a new anthology on beauty. But if beauty had indeed been dropped from contemporary discourse, would there be enough to fill a book? I asked David to help in the search and we were surprized at how much we found. Soon after, Peter Schjeldahl's piece derived from his "Notes on Beauty," published herein, appeared as the cover story for *The New*

York Times Magazine. Disparaged for so long in intellectual circles, if not in the popular culture, seething beauty had suddenly resurfaced.

In organizing the book, David and I categorized the writings into three sections: theory, ownership, and practice. The theory section includes philosophies of beauty from some of today's most important art critics, poets, and philosophers. The oldest essay in this section dated 1966 is by Meyer Schapiro on the concepts of perfection and unity of form and content. Arthur Danto's piece, on the relationship of beauty and morality, redefines for our time a question so close to eminent aestheticians of the nineteenth and early twentieth century like John Ruskin and Henri Bergson. Hubert Damisch contrasts the idea of beauty in Freud and Kant in the context of his book *The Judgment of Paris*. The most recent works are by Robert C. Morgan, Marjorie Welish, and Carter Ratcliff, written specifically for this anthology.

The section we call Ownership encompasses an eloquent debate between Thomas McEvilley, then an editor of *Artforum*, William Rubin, Director Emeritus of the Museum of Modern Art, and Kirk Varnedoe, Chief Curator for Painting and Sculpture at the museum. The subject of the debate is the exhibition "*Primitivism*" in *Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* curated by Rubin and Varnedoe in 1984. In this exhibition contemporary Western works of art were shown side-by-side with so-called primitive works.

One might ask, why should this material belong in a book of essays on beauty? Its overt subject matter is not beauty. But in addressing the affinity artists of the Western world might have for the primitive, the debate cuts to the core of the question of consensus, the relativity of meaning, and the universality of beauty. With McEvilley's initial response to the show, "Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief," and the replies that followed in *Artforum* and *Art in America*, we have published what could be called round one, two and three. It wouldn't be wrong to say that this was an early fight in the debate about Modernism and post-Modernism in the visual arts. In what may be the beginning of a fourth round, to be reserved hopefully for a new book, Rubin has recently completed a

new introduction to the Primitive catalogue, picking up where he left of in 1985. McEvelley still insists that what Rubin, Varnedoe and he are arguing are two views of beauty--his with a small b as a value which is culturally conditioned and “characterized by disjunction and change,” and Varnedoe’s and Rubin’s with a Capital B involving “unchanging universals.” Varnedoe recently retorted that “extreme relativists often think that the only thing not affected by deep bias and obfuscating blinders is their own viewpoint!” What one can feel most of all from these exchanges, both historical and recent, is the intensity of feeling the debate evoked, the absolutely fundamental importance all who were directly involved knew it had. In speaking to McEvelley, Rubin, and Varnedoe about publishing the articles and all the subsequent responses, I could see that the debate has not cooled one bit. They seemed to feel it still as keenly as if it had happened yesterday. For me, it was like stumbling into the O.K. Corral at High Noon, an experience I’ll never regret.

The last section, Practice, begins with the psychologist James Hillman’s essay “The Practice of Beauty.” This easily could have been an introduction to the book itself, for it is a summary of how we arrived at the point of reconsidering beauty today. The writings that follow are from critics, poets, and two of our greatest artists, Louise Bourgeois and Agnes Martin, on the activity of making art. Donald Kuspit takes on the twentieth century’s most controversial paintings, DeKooning’s women, by defining beauty through vulgarity, and Julia Kristeva and Ariane Lopez-Huici discuss the aesthetics of men. John Hejduk describes the spirituality of a house through the humanity of architecture, and David Shapiro brings Mondrian’s flowers out of the closet. I first saw the flower paintings in a show David curated at the Sidney Janis Gallery in 1991, but I know David has been obsessed with them since the early seventies, because I remember him mentioning them when we first met. Even Mondrian’s own theory rejected the flowers, and they remain transgressive still through their beauty and feminine refutation of the perpendicular. John Yau probes the enigma of Jasper Johns’s method, and the “trap of looking,” through Johns’s sketchbooks notes. Max Fierst, our youngest contributor,

contrasts the way one approaches aesthetics through the personalities of his two aunts. I experience the same kind of vitality with a twenty-two year-old poet like Max that I feel with Louise Bourgeois, who keeps getting younger every minute. I'll always remember the four hot Sunday afternoons in the late summer of 1997 that I spent with her.

Que batir sur les cœurs est une chose sotté;
Que tout craque, amour et beauté,
Jusqu' à ce que l'Oubli les jette dans sa hotte
Pour les rendre à l' Eternité!ⁱⁱ

I was a graduate student in Philadelphia at a time when there was a shift from the large, serious, retinal paintings that evolved through Pollock, Still, Newman, Frankenthaler, Noland, and Stella to the anti-aesthetic of Marcel Duchamp and the subversive poetry of Dadaists like Tristan Tzara.

Tristan Tzara writes in an early manifesto:

Beauty and Truth in art don't exist; what interests me is the intensity of a personality, transposed directly and clearly into its work, man and his vitality, the angle from which he looks at the elements and the way he is able to rescue these ornamental words, feelings, and emotions, out of the basket of death.ⁱⁱⁱ

The question then, as with any new tendency, is: Were the Dadists against beauty or simply against old beauty? In their reaction against established forms of visual as well as social organization, the Dadaists introduced new forms, chance arrangements, and

humor to replace traditional elements of composition. In *Life Against Death*, Norman O. Brown compares making jokes to making art, and rightly argues their similarity both in the creative process and experience. Though largely neglected until the late sixties--a time when subversive concerns with regard to sexual and racial equality conspired to change society in a constructive way--the Dadaist's anti-aesthetic, Marcel Duchamp's work in particular, took hold and blossomed into the conceptual movement.

After worshipping Frank Stella throughout my undergraduate days, a break in my own aesthetics occurred when my teacher Italo Scanga introduced me to Sol LeWitt, Marcia Tucker, and Bruce Nauman at recurrent barbecues in his backyard in Elkins Park. Bruce Nauman, a former student of Italo's, arrived one afternoon in an old black Citroen. He had nailed a little plaque onto a tree that said, "A Rose Has No Teeth," and Sol LeWitt buried a white cube in the ground. (I had never seen a Citroen before.) Sol suggested I read Wittgenstein's *The Blue and the Brown Books*. Overnight, a rupture occurred in my aesthetics.

Two shows that included my work soon defined the conceptual movement: *Art of the Mind* (1969) in Oberlin, Ohio, and *The Information Show* (1972) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. My piece in the earlier show was simply the title "My Ears are Clogged," masonite letters nailed to the wall. It was, perhaps, an incomplete surrender in the realm of the senses. I knew conceptualism had its limits. The employment of new mediums such as photography was expansive--why paint it if you can photograph it?--but conceptualism's denial of retinal pleasure seemed close to the Puritanism of my home town from which I had just attempted to escape. Both the Amish fathers living in Virginsville, and Joseph Kosuth, the spiritual leader of conceptualism here in New York, always wore black. In their anthem against painting as an object and as a commodity, conceptualists and Marxists were naive, even hypocritical. A photograph is an object, its just a little thinner than a painting.

Through language, we can make love, tell jokes, or we can preach. A tendency to the latter took over in the eighties when politically motivated artists became pious, as Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe observes in his recent book, *Beyond Piety*. Musicians, even while

evangelizing, as many rap artists do, still get off on harmony, dissonance, melody, and rhythm. For artists, the lure of the irrational lies, as Jacqueline Lichtenstein eloquently suggests, in color. Color is the element most conceptualists neglected.

As conceptualism turned to agit-prop, lacking not only color but sensuality and humor, a new disease infiltrated bodily fluids, and it was everyone's worst nightmare. Perhaps we needed a postmodern update of the anti-aesthetic as an intellectual rationale to foster a fear of pleasure.

If there is a cloud lifting, a change in the wind now, we can attribute it to small progress with respect to that disease, and to the long leashed dragon of desire. We might also look among the scorpions and the hounds, the jackals, apes, and vultures-the beasts of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*. A beast inhabits that zoo that is "uglier and fouler than the rest, although the least flamboyant of the lot; the beast that would gladly undermine the earth and swallow all creation in a yawn." That beast is boredom.

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We might blame Wittgenstein for *beauty's* fall. Influential to conceptual artists in the sixties and seventies, he had little patience for questions like *What is beauty?* In the summer of 1938, Wittgenstein devoted a lecture at Cambridge to the word. Meanings of words like *beauty* result from their use. *Beauty*, he pointed out, is most often used as an interjection, similar to *Wow!* or rubbing one's stomach. When aesthetic judgments are made, aesthetic adjectives such as *beautiful* or *fine*, hardly play any role at all. "The words you use are more akin to *right* and *correct* than to *beautiful* and *lovely*."

Dave Hickey attributes *beauty's* disappearance to the progressive flattening of picture space. He writes in "Prom Night in Faltland," one of the four essays on *beauty* in *The Invisible Dragon*, that when flat pictorial space triumphed over the effeminacy of illusionist space, the "gender" of the work of art changed. It became masculine,

impenetrable. Consequently, we replaced feminine descriptives like *beauty*, *harmony*, and *generosity*, with masculine terms like *strength*, *singularity*, and *autonomy*.

If we could bring back John Ruskin, a passionate ecologist as well as an aesthetician (who would have loved proms), he might look at our contemporary landscape with its highways bludgeoning through hillsides and conclude that there simply isn't any beauty left. Torn between Cindy Crawford and Cindy Sherman, we might need to explain why we want to speak of beauty again. Is our project a nostalgia for a nineteenth-century phenomena now supplanted by the political?

If beauty has resurfaced in contemporary discourse, some of the questions that Doctor Seuss raised in *Green Eggs and Ham* might be back too--to like it here or to like it there? If the *here* is in the eye of the beholder, the *there* is in the object. If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, is the capacity for perceiving beauty a result of the individual's culture or is it inherent? Is beauty something all human beings enjoy because we have the same basic faculties? If beauty is inherent in an object, this is mysterious, even magical, very magical for the late twentieth century.

“For with this desire of physical beauty mingleth itself early the fear of death--the fear of death intensified by the desire for beauty.” Walter Pater wrote these lines in the magical time of deep late Romanticism. *The Child in the House* tells the story about the aesthetic awakening of a young boy. In another story about a young boy, Thomas Mann carried the affiliation of death and beauty into the early days of the twentieth century and likened beauty to disease. If, in *Death in Venice*, Aschenbach had not stayed in Venice to watch the beautiful Tadzio play on the beach, he wouldn't have eaten the “dead ripe” strawberries that brought the cholera to his body. Was the cause of his death *cholera vibrio*, or should we attribute it to beauty?

A few months ago my two-year-old son caught the flu. He couldn't keep any liquids down. At the doctor's office, a nurse inadvertently threw his urine sample away. It was all the precious golden liquid we could gather in his severely dehydrated state. As

the day passed, we tried to coax some more urine from him, but he just couldn't pee. He became uncharacteristically lethargic. At seven thirty we took him to the emergency ward. Only three other patients were there--a jaundiced man lying in a bed across the room, a dark skinned man with delicate tortoise-shell glasses lying next to my son, and a woman who wrenched and convulsed at regular intervals. A team of doctors surrounded her.

After much fussing to find a vein in both his feet and in his arms, the doctor, a matronly woman in her thirties, finally plugged in the life-saving saline solution. For an hour or so, a surreal time measured by the drips of the liquid falling from the bottle into the tube and from the tube to his veins, I couldn't help but wonder about the other three people in the ward. The jaundiced man looked like he had all the symptoms of advanced AIDS. Like Aschenbach, had beauty brought him here? The man with the tortoise-shell glasses told me he was dying of cancer. I had no idea of the cause of the woman's convulsions.

In *Illness and Metaphor* and *AIDS as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag argues against placing metaphoric weight on disease. It gets in the way of proper treatment. I was sure the doctors were not considering beauty as part of any prognosis here. How would you treat it?

We have come a long way since the nineteenth century, passing even through Thomas Mann's continued association of beauty, desire, and disease in books like *Death in Venice*, *Doctor Faustus*, *Magic Mountain*, and *The Black Swan*. (The latter book is a poignant story of an older woman who believes her recent love for a young man has brought back her capacity to have children, only to find the blood from her womb is the result of a tumor.) Though there are so many passages in literature linking beauty and death, the following passage from *The Captive* by Marcel Proust is unique in that it does not suggest death as a punishment for desire, but poses beauty as a gift, generosity in the last moment of life. Read at the funeral of Meyer Schapiro it is appropriate as an epitaph for the great aesthete, and captures *an* essence of this book.

It describes the death of Bergotte, an art critic. The circumstances of his death began with an attack of uremia, which led to his being ordered to rest. (Uremia is a disorder of the kidneys, an accumulation in the blood of the constituents normally eliminated by the urine, producing a toxic condition marked by headaches, gastric-intestinal disturbances, and vomiting.)

While convalescing, Bergotte is reminded by a fellow art critic of Vermeer's *View of Delft* in a local exhibition. Instead of resting, he has something to eat and goes to the exhibition to look for the painting, a picture he adores. He recalls "a little patch of yellow wall" painted so well—a beauty that is "sufficient in itself." When he gets there he feels dizzy. Ignoring the other paintings in the exhibition, he comes to the Vermeer. He notices for the first time some small figures in blue, the pink sand, and finally "the precious substance"—the tiny patch of yellow wall. He fixes his gaze "like a child upon a butterfly" that it wants to catch. "That's how I should have written," he says. "My last books are too dry, I ought to have gone over them with a few layers of color, made my language precious in itself, like this little patch of yellow wall." iv

He is unaware of the seriousness of his condition. In minutes he will die. "In a celestial pair of scales" Proust writes, "there appeared to him, weighing down one of the pans, his own life, while the other contained the little patch of wall so wonderfully painted in yellow...."

Bergotte repeated to himself: "Little patch of yellow wall, with a sloping roof, little patch of yellow wall."

There is no reason inherent in the conditions of life on this earth, Proust continues, to oblige an artist to do over and over again a piece of work the admiration aroused by which will matter little to his "worm-eaten body" like the little patch of yellow wall painted with so much skill and refinement.

Such obligations, which have no sanction in our present life, seem to belong to a different world, a world based on kindness, scrupulousness, and generosity, a world entirely different from this one, which we leave in order to be born on this earth before, perhaps, returning there to live once again beneath the sway of those unknown laws

which we obeyed “because we bore their precepts in our hearts--those laws to which every profound work of the intellect brings us nearer and which are invisible only--if then!--to fools.”

Proust pursues beauty through language that is various and eloquent. When a child simply says *nice* in a high pitched voice, discovering and commenting on something for the first time, it is a similar pursuit. (If *nice* is not exactly *beautiful*, I respond in the way Robert Farris Thompson did when presented with the question of why some cultures do not have a word for beauty, “Well, didn’t anyone ever hear of synonyms?”) Through exclamation, a child differentiates between fascinations and the rest of the world. A little patch of yellow wall. That’s what is so interesting.

Arthur Danto wrote that in the Age of Indignation beauty may be in for a rather long exile. We wait for its return. There is a culture--only a handful remain--living on the small island of Obi west of Borneo, east of Papua New Guinea, bounded by the Seram Sea. Coincidentally, Obi is also the habitat of the violet bower bird, the only other animal that constructs solely for aesthetic motives. On the summer solstice in Obi which is December 21, the inhabitants gather on the beach just before sunset. If the horizon is clear--sometimes for years it is not--the sun sets between two ancient palms and its rays fragment in their fronds bouncing off sprinkles of water that dance above the waves. This phenomenon is evidently pleasing to the eye.

There is only a small patch of yellow beach from which this is visible. Each year the people of the island come with blankets beautifully woven and wait in anticipation. If the ominous cigar-like clouds that are common at that time of year are present in the sky, it only increases their anticipation and their potential for joy or sadness. At the last moment the clouds might block the sun in the midst of a beautiful sunset. But if the clouds hang just above the horizon, the sun will drop below them, between the fronds, and the sky will radiate for a moment with golden crystalline mist before the sun disappears altogether. They have a two syllable word for the anticipation of this event. Translated, the word means roughly “Prepare for beauty!”

In reading these essays and poems I did not feel burdened by the weight of over-definition or heavy-handed ideology. A most beautiful and otherwise reclusive actress once told me during an intermission between *Queen Christina* and *Camille* “Never admit to a weakness.” But I confess, the pretense for doing this book was not to identify a new doctrine or ideology, or to band together a new group of artists. It was to find a yes somewhere. It could be that every aesthetic choice is political. But it is equally possible that every political choice is ultimately aesthetic. What Nabokov says he remembered of *Lolita* after he wrote it, is also what we remember of civilizations: the images.

You can actively seek beauty, as Wilde once told Whitman, “I cannot listen to anyone unless he attracts me by a “charming style, or beauty of theme,” or you can just let it happen, as Whitman responded to Wilde, “Why Oscar, it always seems to me that the fellow who makes a dead set of beauty by itself is in a bad way. My idea is that beauty is a result, not an abstraction.”

Those were the days when beauty was self-evident, and, as Carter Ratcliff wrote, “the existence of people like us was inconceivable.” In the dawn of the twenty-first century, when my son Tristan is old enough to read this, with friends as inconceivable to us as we must have been to Victorians, I hope he mislays it and finds beauty for himself without guilt, in happiness for his own eyes, ears, and his nose. If along the way he encounters an anti-aesthetic as I did, may he greet it with a smile then take a piss. Because if you are looking for beauty it is with yellow relief, squatting or standing, fixed on the sky, fixed on the earth, that so often you find it.

Zumbah!

Bill Beckley
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ⁱ Charles Baudelaire, from *Le Cygne*, *Les Fleurs du Mal*

ii Charles Baudelaire, from Confession, *Les Fleurs du Mal*

iii Tristan Tzara, *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*

iv This is not to imply that the production of beauty is always laborious. Andy Warhol recruited a couple of assistants to urinate on copper plates, and exhibited the beautiful oxidation.