

No One's Servant, Everyone's Private Lover

Beauty

Edited by Dave Beech

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Review by Catherine Cullen

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Beauty and esthetics were separated following the French revolution as social changes fostered a sense of self in relation to community and state which politicized the individual. Historically extolled as the purpose and meaning of art, beauty took a passenger's seat next to the ascendancy of an esthetics of power. As individual points of view defined the subject matter chosen so did the artist's role shift as Marx wrote, to gaze "with open eyes upon his conditions of life and true social relations." *Beauty*, released in March 2009, investigates the subject's shifting position following avantgardism and modernism. Organized under three section headings: *The Revival of Beauty, Concepts and Contexts* and *Positions*, the editor Dave Beech collected the essays 'with the politics of beauty in mind'.

The first offering is Dave Hickey's seminal 1993 essay, *Enter the Dragon: On the Venacular of Beauty* in which he complains that church priests were replaced by academics at liberal arts institutions suspicious of beauty's power to distract and seduce from the higher calling as they saw it, to practice social critique and political activism. Pushing something to the sidelines to languish in the shadows rarely de-potentiates. Beauty gained the power of darkness. It became according to Hickey, "...the snake in the garden. It steals the institution's power and seduces its congregation."ⁱ

Alexander Alberro suggests beauty's recent re-validation is a means to address current social threats and anxieties. Alberro and Diurmuid Costello, in a separate round table discussion, warn against a reactionary return to historical definitions of beauty without carefully examining the origin of 20th century critiques of beauty and to consider how the anti-aesthetic, too, has been altered by the natural fluxes of art practice and in turn has altered the aesthetic to which it is dialectically linked even if only in negation.

Beauty's role was called into question according to Arthur Danto, 'when art works [Duchamp' readymades] began to appear which looked like ordinary objects'ⁱⁱ. Aesthetics 'had banked so heavily on beauty as its central concept. . . and the idea of beauty appeared to be cognitively void.'ⁱⁱⁱ He quotes Hegel 'artistic beauty seemed superior to natural beauty' as it was 'born of the spirit and born again' . . . an intellectual rather than a natural product.'

In Kathleen Marie Higgins response to Danto she presents a model questioning the disheveled relationship between human handiwork and the natural world: 'Our creations are the products of a Faustian pact, which signs away paradise for power.' Higgins writes that 'Perhaps the modern avoidance of beauty reflects our deepest fears about ourselves. . . [do we have the capacity] 'to appreciate and transform at the same time

Simon O'Sullivan makes a reference to the 'so-called documentary turn in art practice' in his intriguing essay tracking how minor forms such as graffiti disrupt power relations and energize major forms. Based on Deleuze and Guattari's language matrix, minor forms on the periphery 'stammer and stutter' or 'deterritorialize', creolizing the major language. Sullivan positions

modernism as a dominant form and 'feminist and postcolonial art practices' as de- and re-territorializing endowing 'the minor with a affirmative function,' 'imagining new subjectivities'. Neither inside nor outside, 'it operates at a more oblique angle' searching out alternative ports of entry.

In his introductory essay, Beech mentions a few artists for whom beauty is a valued by-product of an investigative process of making (Liam Gillick), is in the driver's seat (Pipilotti Rist) or is a navigator through social and cultural terrains (Jeff Koons). Additional artist's writings would intensify and deepen the discussion which ranges as is from Robert Smithson's preference for nihilism and disintegrative processes to Paul Wood's essay on Gerhard Richter:

"For Richter there is still a truth to be told. It is the business of art to tell this truth, and the means of its doing so is the reconstitution of beauty; as he puts it, a 'downgraded' word that none the less offers the only antidote to 'war, crime and sickness.'" ^{iv}

In an excerpt from *Notes*, Gerhard Richter counters the notion of esthetics as responses to and enactments of power structures: "Letting a thing come rather than creating it - no assertions, constructions, formulations, inventions, ideologies - in order to gain access all that is genuine, richer more alive; to what is beyond my understanding." ^v

Suzanne Perling Hudson writes in support of artists re-making beauty for their own ends as it is 'a kind of Trojan Horse' to get work inside the gates of 'otherwise disinterested' institutions.

The ugly has the appearance of negating beauty and truth, Mark Cousins asserts in his essay, *The Ugly*, yet serves the valuable function of nemesis; an unsuitable, out-of-place, dirty or fearful object that beauty must necessarily reckon with. Whether the ugliness is absorbed, redefined, or co-exists with in an ambiguous relationship, the process of integrating strengthens the structure of beauty.

Ungovernable and inexhaustible, beauty is no man's servant and everyone's private lover. Beech's selection of essays largely support his admonition not to forget the lessons of the 20th century in a headlong return to beauty as a salve or to revive a utopian ideal, and to honor beauty's absence or presence as a barometric gauge of relationship to the other and to self. Somehow, though this collection lacks the in the midst of the fray, down in the clay pits urgency of *Uncontrollable Beauty* (1996) in which Hickey's essay also appeared. Prodigal, beast, pretender to the crown, social antagonist or ideal lover, the quality of beauty defies being affixed or owned and this ability to elude true capture or true exile ensures the incessant negotiating and renegotiating of subjectivity that keeps beauty abreast of the flow stream of meaning. Art, with its changeable nature, need not be a workhorse saddled with social purpose or political complaint. Beauty's natural and incessant hunger readily bends and varies and triumphs as any or all or none of the above and it is the re-stitching and stitching that enact the strange couplings that give rise to new forms in art.

ⁱ Dave Hickey, *Enter the Dragon; On the Vernacular in Beauty*, p. 25

ⁱⁱ Arthur Danto, *The Aesthetics of Brillo Boxes*, 2003, *Beauty*, p.60

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*, p.60.

^{iv} Paul Wood, *Truth and Beauty: The Ruined Abstraction of Gerhard Richter*, p.187

^v Gerhard Richter, *Notes*, p. 180