

In Defense of Beauty

Taney Roniger
(978) 273-4651
tr@concatenations.org

It is not without some irony that the notion of beauty in art today stands on trial, in need of defense. For in a culture that would by most estimates seem utterly infatuated with appearance and image—the more impeccably beautiful, the more narcissistically satisfying—one might expect to find works of art aspiring to this consummate value being held in the highest regard by critics, gallerists, and others on whose authority public opinion depends. Instead, what we find more often than not is a lofty disdain for "mere beauty" in the arts, as if the degree of beauty in a work of art were a measure of its irrelevance, its naivete, its anachronicity. Indeed, even raising the subject of beauty with regard to art often feels embarrassingly retrograde, as if it were a frivolous and indulgent concern, not worthy of a serious artist's interest. This—in an artworld that has in so many other ways co-opted the values endorsed by popular culture¹, having, it seems to me, long ago abandoned any of its more genuine counter-cultural impulses—begs many questions.

The possible reasons for this denigration of beauty in serious art (which is here to be distinguished from the craft arts and the decorative arts) are many, to be sure, but a few of them seem worthy of immediate mention. The first of these has to do with postmodernism and its emphasis on social issues (the iniquities propagated by colonialism and patriarchy, for example, or race relations and class struggles), its preoccupation with multiculturalism, its grave suspicion of "absolute values" (such as those studied by metaphysics), etc.—next to which the subject of beauty seems hopelessly elitist and inconsequential. The second has to do with the legacy left by Conceptual Art, which, while doing so much to elevate the status of art amongst intellectual types by drawing attention to the creative power of *ideas*, has had the curious effect of rendering art's physicality suspect. It is as if the promotion of the concept as the defining feature of a work of art meant that all other components of the work had to be negated. In other words, we seem to have inherited from Conceptualism the tacit assumption that in order for a work of art to be conceptually rigorous (i.e. "meaningful"), it must also be either ugly or immaterial (literally)—without sensual or even sensory components. It is regrettable that all the ground gained by both of these cultural movements (and who can deny that postmodernism's cause has instigated some long overdue recognition of gross social iniquities, or that Conceptualism provoked some much-needed recognition of one of art's most powerful features?) turns bittersweet when set beside what has been lost. A cursory glance at the art being produced by our culture today is likely to yield the following conclusion: that ours is an art culture with a high degree of social self-consciousness and a healthy respect for the role of ideas in art—but with a gaping hole in the very center of its being.

Another, perhaps more subtle, factor in beauty's demise has to do with its association with sensuality (i.e., with the body). In today's climate of near-manic hope for the salvation of humanity through high technology, the issue of the organic body and our relationship to it is especially salient. It seems reasonable to assert that the general trajectory of contemporary technology has us moving away from the natural human body with all its natural functions and toward a

¹ To name just a few of the more obvious ways: consumerism (i.e., the commodification of the art object), fashion-consciousness, fast-track careerism, and political correctness.

technologically enhanced (and therefore "superior") version of ourselves as a species. Indeed, there are those among us who whole-heartedly embrace the (not-so-distant) futuristic vision of the total liberation of mind from matter, as if once freed from our bondage to corporeal existence we might finally be able to achieve our "higher" (i.e. intellectual or spiritual) human aspirations. Of course most of us do not have *conscious* fantasies about this kind of release, but given the extraordinary degree to which the scientific/technological march of progress is endowed with an unquestioned authority by culture at large, this condemnation of the natural body (and, by extension, of nature itself²) cannot but seep into the ethos of our age and thus enter into our art.

It is by way of this last point about the rejection of the natural body that I will launch my defense of beauty, for although there are other factors to consider, this one raises an issue so fundamental that it can be seen to underlie and uphold all the others. Aside from the glaring question of the technological feasibility of the riddance of body from mind, the most curious thing about this general tendency away from the organic body is the assumption that the body has nothing whatsoever to do with "mental" activities such as knowing, thinking, apprehending, comprehending, etc. One does not know exclusively with one's brain just as certainly as one does not experience sensory stimulation exclusively with one's sense organs. Consider, as evidence of the latter point, the case of sound. The auditory organ, the ear, is a highly specialized precision instrument whose job it is to receive vibrations (i.e., sound waves). But the reception of these vibrations alone does not constitute sound as we know it. It is only through the intervention of the brain that the auditory data get translated into "units" of sound, which in turn do not become recognizable as sound, which is to say meaningful, until the mechanism of thought situates them in a contextual matrix composed of information gathered by the other senses and memories of prior experiences.

Clearly the experience of sensing is not confined in locus to the organ receiving the sense data. If this is true of sensing, should it not also be true of thinking? Consider now a mental operation, such as that of ascertaining which of two possible explanations for a given phenomenon is the truer of the two. In the process of this evaluation, two scenarios will be examined, neither of which exists except in ideation; the thinker will imagine, which is to say visualize in thought, the circumstances involved in both possibilities, and then juxtapose the re-creations, checking for discrepancies between the end results of each process and the given facts of the phenomenon in question. Whichever of the two imagined processes yields fewer discrepancies will be selected as the more likely explanation. The significant point here is that nothing of either scenario is coming to the thinker by means of present empirical observation; every "scene" involved in the evaluation is being constructed by the imagination. It is clear that this operation would be impossible were it not for the senses, because it is the senses that were responsible for collecting the units of information out of which the imagined recreations are being built. The senses are, among other things, the progenitors of the building blocks of the imagination.

Since so much of thought consists of visual images and processes, it is easiest to understand thought's reliance on the senses in terms of sight. In the process of imagining, one has often to visually construct things one has never actually seen, and this is accomplished with relative ease in two ways (in either one of the two or in some combination of both). The first of these is rather like

² A clear example is the case of medical science, where aging, disease, and even death are considered vile enemies to be subjugated and conquered at any cost. Especially in the case of death is this disturbing, for death is so integral to life that if we view it as an abomination, a defeat—a failure, even—we are hating life itself. That one would willingly suffer the violence of medical intervention to extend one's life when one cannot stand life to begin with is a sad irony indeed.

collage, because it consists in the rearranging of bits and pieces of stored (i.e., old) visual data in such a way that a new image is formed. If I am asked to visualize a unicorn, for example, it is easy to do so: instantaneously, and quite without my conscious effort, I imagine a horse, which I have seen, and a horn, which I have also seen (on another animal), and I graft the horn onto the horse to make something that I have never seen. The other way of visualizing the unseen is by drawing analogies, or creating metaphorical links, between things. When scientists try to picture the world of subatomic particles, they are engaging in this kind of analogical imagining; no one has ever really seen an electron, for example, let alone seen it "orbiting" the nucleus inside an atom, and yet in order to understand the behavior of these invisible entities scientists liken the interior of the atom to a solar system, which is of course something they visually know already. The same is true of the other senses with regard to the imagination: one has at one's disposal only those pieces of sense data which have been gathered empirically and stored in the memory. The more diverse and intricate the sensory experiences that one has had, therefore, the greater will be the wealth of material with which to imagine.

There are of course mental operations that are far more abstract than visual (or auditory, or tactile, etc.) imagining. But then there are also bodily senses that are far more subtle than the five of which we are generally aware in experience. One example of these is the kinesthetic sense, which is responsible for the detection of movement, balance, and a general sense of orientation in the body. Surely this sense is summoned whenever one imagines any kind of physical space, because one's awareness of space can only be realized against a point of reference that delineates space from non-space (i.e., against an unconscious awareness of one's own physical presence in that space). If the kinesthetic sense is involved in our thinking about "concrete" space, it seems not too much of a stretch to implicate it in our thinking about abstract space as well. Abstract thought abounds in spatial metaphors—as is evident when we speak of reaching a point in our thinking, placing an idea into a new context, or considering something to be beyond the realm of possibility—to such degree that thinking is almost inconceivable without them. Even in mathematics, where extremely subtle operations and processes are performed on entirely abstract entities, the processes occur "inside" a kind of fictive space that is deeply informed by our bodily awareness of being in the world. Indeed, no less a thinker than Einstein described his mathematical process as consisting primarily of "muscular" elements, combined with visual images -- which only in later phases of his process were translated into mathematical symbols and procedures³. It is difficult to imagine any kind of cognition that does not draw from the incredibly rich and subtle knowledge-base with which the body provides us.

So far it has been suggested that neither sensing nor thinking is an independent activity restricted to the organ we generally associate it with. There is a third activity to consider, however, and it is one that is more subtle than the others because it is not directly associated with any one bodily organ. This is the experience of insight. In what does this experience consist? First, when one "has" an insight, there is no clear and distinct locus that feels as if it were the bodily place where the occurrence is happening; the feeling seems instead to be coming from and moving through one's whole body. And unlike thinking, or imagining, there is no clear visualization (even of an abstract process) taking place in one's mind. Nothing is being consciously constructed out of empirically derived sensations, no rigorous operations are being performed by thought, and yet there is clearly something significant happening "inside" one. Suddenly a problem that had previously seemed insoluble reveals a hidden dimension that makes plain the solution, or a new level of understanding opens up wherein one suddenly recognizes a connection between two radically disparate things. The experience of insight, which so often seems to strike in the most unlikely moments, is much more immediately felt as a whole-being (i.e., body and mind)

³ Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions* [New York: Crown Publishers, MCMLIV], pp. 25-26.

phenomenon than either sensing or thinking. Insight is the most mysterious (and, I would argue, the most powerful) of all internal phenomena precisely because it seems to come from an unknown source, the locus of which is neither internal nor external, neither body nor brain. It is no wonder that so many of the ancient wisdom traditions of the East (i.e., Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, etc.) focus so heavily on the cultivation of body-awareness through various exercises and disciplines as a way of facilitating insight into the nature of reality. The body, far from being a dumb lump of matter forever getting in the way of our knowledge of reality, is evidently keenly attuned to truths that thought alone could never grasp. To distinguish it from the organ that "secretes" thought, many have posited the term *mind* to refer to the entity to which these insights and subtle intuitive understandings can be attributed.

The brain, the sense organs, and the mind together form one singular (albeit highly complex and multifaceted) system. Any internal event, whether "mental" or "physical", instigates a whole host of other internal events, all occurring simultaneously, and all being experienced as one undivided and undifferentiated process. This torrent of psycho-physical activity which constitutes every moment of our living experience, includes, of course, the entire set of previously acquired and stored experiences—memories, volitional tendencies, longings, desires, and resistances—all of which comprise the self at any given moment. Every new stimulus or mental state is met by this whole endowment, and it is always with this whole endowment that one responds.

The fundamental unity of mind and body is of critical importance in the case for beauty; indeed, it may be said that the case stands or falls according to one's acceptance or rejection of it. For once the notion of beauty is freed from its severely limiting association with the "merely sensual", it can come to be understood as a phenomenon that engages the whole person: a highly complex, multi-dimensional, and profound phenomenon with the power to transform one's understanding of the world. For our present culture, however, this is no small leap to make. For well over three-hundred years we in the West have been fully immersed in the project ushered in by the Scientific Revolution, which introduced the idea that we could "conquer" nature (which necessarily includes ourselves) by way of objectification, quantification, and *control*. Descartes' dualistic philosophy, which separates mind from body (or human intelligence from "brute matter") and his analytic method of reasoning, which divides ideational content into discrete pieces and performs reasoning operations on these pieces, together form the unconscious metaphysic by which and through which we continue to see the world. Let us not forget with regard to this mindset that it was—and continues to be—a human construct: a fabrication of thought created for and judged by its use-value in human affairs. Evidently the Cartesian mind-body split and the analytic method proved to be so useful in bringing about improvements in human life that they became axiomatic—unquestioned "givens" necessary for the integrity of the grand equation. Both the usefulness of this approach and an inkling of its limitations become clear when one thinks of the great success of the scientific method specifically, and of analytic reasoning in general; in order to perform an experiment on something, either empirically or in thought, one must first isolate the thing that is to be studied. In the act of isolating, a degree of clarity and control is achieved that would otherwise be impossible -- but only at the cost of an artificial division of something that was originally whole. So, while it is wise to recognize the link between Cartesian dualism and modern science and to appreciate all the life-enhancing discoveries so enabled, it is also wise to recognize this link and to mourn some of the losses occasioned by it. For to impose a radical division on something (again, even if only in thought) that is in actuality a unified whole constitutes an act of violence that, though sometimes quite subtle, wreaks havoc on human affairs in ways of which we are only yet dimly aware.

In art, this pernicious habit of thought manifests itself as the age-old form/content dichotomy, where the two are seen as categorically distinct things which can be combined, in varying

proportions, to make a work of art. Since beauty is generally associated with the senses and their data, it typically falls (and stays) on the form (body) side of the split. Beauty alone is therefore considered to be essentially "without content" or meaningless: an outer shell with a titillating surface, which may or may not conceal behind its dazzling facade something substantial. It is imperative in the case for beauty that this false dichotomy be seen for what it is, namely, an illusion engendered by thought. In beholding a beautiful object one is moved not just by the particular sense data that the object provides, but also—and perhaps to a much greater extent—by the internal processes (ideational associations, insights, memories, desires, etc.) that they instigate in him. *Both* of these things—the sense data provided by the object of beauty and the internal processes they stir inside the subject—are what constitutes the experience of beauty, and this experience (in contrast to our *thinking* about it) cannot be divided into its constituent parts. The richer and more suggestive the beauty of the object, the more varied and powerful the internal processes it will instigate in the beholder. Form cannot be separate from content if the experience of the one generates and gives shape to the other.

In order to move more fully into this experience of beauty, it is first necessary to clarify the relationship between beauty *per se* and the experience it gives rise to in human beings. Beauty is a quality that a thing is said to possess and as such cannot reasonably be said to inhere in the thing itself. (Surely it is we who endow a thing with beauty.) Perhaps much unnecessary strife can be avoided by sidestepping entirely the issue of which things "possess" beauty and which do not, and by instead drawing all of our attention to the *experience* of beauty, of which, unlike judgements concerning taste, there is much commonality between individuals. My response, therefore, to the charge that beauty cannot be taken seriously because it is "so subjective" is that the charge itself should be dismissed—on the grounds that it fails to address the larger point. Hereinafter, then, the term *beauty* will refer always to the quality with which one endows a thing, and *aesthetic experience* will be the term for what happens in one's consciousness when one does it.

What exactly is it that occurs in one's consciousness during aesthetic experience? The first thing one may notice about it is that a person who has been moved by the beauty of an object will most likely be unable to articulate precisely why, without resorting to tautologies, he has been so moved — even to himself. Take, for example, the case of an aesthetic experience induced by listening to a Bach fugue. Afterward, the person so moved may feel compelled to wonder: what was it about this particular piece of music that induced in me such a distinct experience of profundity? Or: since I feel quite certain that this piece must have enormous meaning (given the enormity of my response to it), would it be possible to determine precisely what that meaning is? Then, if he is sufficiently analytical by nature, this person may proceed to enumerate to himself all the specific features of the piece (i.e., the inversions, modulations, counterpoints, expositions, etc.) that struck him as being meaningful within the fugue. And finally, with a great deal more effort and dedication, he may even be able to arrive at a very thorough and exhaustive formal analyze of the work in question. And yet, as perfect as this analysis may be, it will still have done nothing to capture the *meaning* of the piece of music. From this should one conclude that the piece was "merely beautiful" — and thus completely devoid of meaning?

Clearly one should not. That the meaning of the fugue cannot be grasped by and articulated in analytical thought does not force the conclusion that the fugue is without meaning. A more likely explanation for this disjunction points to the inherent limitations of analytical thought as a tool. Using analytical thought to describe aesthetic experience is rather like trying to pick up water with a sieve; the specificity of the instrument, so fine-tuned for other tasks, reduces the attempt to an absurdity. For meaning in aesthetic experience is different *in kind* from meaning in the ordinary, factual sense. In the latter sense, the factual, there is a finite (if not always direct and unequivocal) correspondence between signifier and signified, between the sign and its meaning -- or between a

string of signs and their collective meaning. And in addition to this finiteness, meaning in the factual sense is structured in such a way that it can be broken down into its constituent parts and then pieced back together, bit by bit. If I come upon the statement "The horses in the barn are twenty-three in number," and I decide that the statement is meant to be factual and not poetic, I can determine its meaning by first ascertaining what is meant by each individual word and by then supposing from the syntax and the context of the statement the relationships between them. It is a relatively simple operation, involving the fitting together of parts, as in a jig-saw puzzle. As ambiguous as a factual statement may be—and factual statements are certainly capable of lending themselves to more than one interpretation—its range of meaning will always be finite (and therefore exhaustible) and its shape or structure constituted in such a way that it is amenable to *analysis* (literally: the separation of a whole into its constituent parts).

In aesthetic experience, by contrast, meaning is fluid rather than definite and discrete, infinitely valent, and inexhaustible. Unlike the aforementioned factual statement, a statement taken to be poetic (or aesthetic)⁴ will yield no formal and precise correspondences between the separate units that make up the statement and any specific units of meaning to be linked by an assessment of relational context. Instead, there will come over the one who has been moved a certain growing awareness of a vast "field" of meaning that seems to extend outward in all directions. This sense of expansion, this movement away from pieces and parts and specific meanings and their relations toward *meaning as an all-encompassing whole* is the very hallmark of aesthetic experience. In the presence of something beautiful, one is moved from one's ordinary mode of consciousness into a larger consciousness of "the ultimates", by which I mean the fundamental questions of existence that fuel the sense of wonder innate in every person. This interior shift can be likened to the shift that occurs in a lens with the capacity to focus either on the most minute details of a thing's surface or the total pattern or shape that emerges when the thing is seen against its background. There is a continuum, of course, between the two poles of which the lens is capable, but no two modes can be experienced simultaneously; in order to see the details of the surface one has to forsake the general pattern or shape of the whole picture, and vice versa. This is not to suggest that anything is actually abandoned in the process of a shift; it is merely a matter of focus, and the point is that with any movement in either direction, one way of seeing is being temporarily favored while all others are temporarily suspended.

The dissolution of language and logic concomitant with aesthetic experience, then, can be attributed to a shift in focus away from knowledge of parts and their relations—to which language and logic are so keenly attuned—and toward a larger, less defined (but no less certain) knowledge of the whole. For the shift that occurs in aesthetic experience is not a shift in *seeing*, as the analogy of the lens literally suggests; it is essentially a shift in *knowing*. Because clearly it is not the case that in aesthetic experience one ceases to receive sensory impressions—or to generate the linear flow of thought. These processes continue on as ever and are given shape by the particularities of the beauty one is beholding. But with the sense of interior expansion induced by the experience of beauty their *quality* changes. It is as if one's ordinary experience—of sensing and perceiving and thinking and feeling—begins slowly to stretch outward and bend into a deeper dimension, so that all the things that were before ordinary and familiar become suffused with a new kind of significance, a higher order of magnitude. At the core of this sense of expansion is a type of knowing that defies proof or rational explanation. Like the experience of insight, this new sense of things seems, strangely, to be coming from nowhere in particular—nowhere *and*

⁴ "Factual statements" and "poetic statements" can, of course, be topically identical, because *anything* can be aestheticized; however, since the decision as to which things will be approached in which way is a subject that lies beyond the scope of the present paper, they will here be treated as different things.

everywhere, for while it feels to be emanating from some ill-defined center in one's being it is also something that does not end at the imaginary line delineating self from world. Unlike insight, however, it is not sharp and fleeting, but is rather diffuse, slow, and sustained. Its effects linger. After the experience, one has been changed, however subtly. One now knows that enfolded somewhere within the self is a space broad enough and deep enough to contain things that in ordinary moments seem logically untenable, incomprehensible, paradoxical, or emotionally unacceptable. The memory of having understood things so differently, if only for a moment, alters the potential of one's future encounters.

Aesthetic experience, so far from being trivial, is fundamentally the experience of an epistemological shift: a shift away from parts and precision-knowing toward wholes and general-knowing. Beauty, then, can be seen as an agent of integration in a world that, through the machinery of rational thought, fosters division and fragmentation: a much-needed corrective to an obsessive imbalance in culture at large. If beauty can achieve such a shift, even in small degrees, it cannot be meaningless. It is not a matter of what the beauty of this or that piece of art "means" in this or that context; beauty, regardless of its context, is *inherently* meaningful. For to experience beauty is essentially to be moved in the direction of wholeness.

That the art world has been dismissive of beauty in recent decades may be due, more than anything else, to its failure to fully appreciate the complexity of the experience beauty can give rise to. Surely this failure is symptomatic of a culture that feeds on sound bites, quick fixes and the frenetic rush of information; in order to have a real appreciation for *any* experience, it is necessary to allow oneself to become fully immersed in the experience and to let it run its full course. Not only does this require time and a certain level of attention (both of which are in short supply today), but, what is more important, it requires considerable awareness of and skill in the experience of oneself *as a unified system* and not as a heap of separate and wayward faculties, some to be exalted and others repudiated. For it is clear that the human project of imposing divisions on external reality as a way of knowing it has come full circle; the agent doing the dividing has himself become divided.

It is often assumed that our culture's obsession with *narcissistic* beauty can only mean that we have become shallow and vain, that it signals a general depravity of spirit that sets in when affluence tips over into decadence. This may well be the case. But is it not also possible that our overwhelming fixation on beauty in one's own appearance and image—on the *external manifestation* of beauty rather than the *experience* of it, on *showing* rather than *being*—may be a thwarted expression of a very real need? If we are so internally fractured and alienated from ourselves that we are unable to have full, rich, and complete experiences of beauty, it is plausible that one of the results might be a compulsion to keep returning to the perceived source of the frustration—as if somehow a large enough accumulation of fragments might eventually amount to (or at least eclipse the gaping absence of) the unbroken whole. In any case, that there is a hunger for beauty in our culture could not be more clear. Surely the chances of any real satiation will be increased considerably if we let beauty find its way back to the arts.