

American Beauty

"Beautiful!"

Assorted Americans

1 The Exclamation

I began writing the essays that precede this one twenty years ago when I was living at the beach in San Diego, comfortable in my tiny niche. Until the panel discussion that I describe in "Enter the Dragon," I had never uttered the word "beauty" in public. Once I had, my life became a lot less pleasant. Many powerful and influential people, I discovered, thought art and art criticism would be substantially democratized if we could but cloak with forgetfulness those eidetic encounters with beauty that are virtually defined by the ease and pleasure with which we remember them. In the preceding essays, I try to defend my predisposition to speculate on beauty. In this essay I sketch out the democratic tradition of doing so. The fate of beauty itself, besieged by zealots, has never been my concern. Beauty is and always will be blue skies and open highway.

I would like to begin by talking about the way contemporary

Americans talk about the things they find beautiful—whenever and wherever they find them—because they talk about them all the time. When they do, they use the word “beautiful” with consistency and precision in a very traditional way that dates back to the Renaissance and beyond that to Latin antiquity. In this vernacular usage, the word “beautiful” bears no metaphysical burden. It signifies the pleasure we take in something that transcends the appropriate. It identifies that “something” as better, somehow, on account of its beauty. In everyday talk, the word usually occurs as an exclamation. “Beautiful!” we say, using the word as a demonstrative gesture to locate the source of our involuntary pleasure in the external world. More often than not, these exclamations are followed by talk—by comparisons, advocacy, analysis, and dissent.

The object we identify as beautiful may be anything from a chemical sunset to a rookie’s jump shot. The mystery resides in our precognitive certainty that there are sunsets and jump shots worthy of mention. Otherwise why utter the word “beautiful” at all? And why respond when someone else does? The pleasure that our exclamation acknowledges is involuntary, private, and self-fulfilling. Why make it public? For three reasons, I think. First, we speak the word “beautiful” and respond to its being spoken because we are good democrats. We aspire to transparency and consensus. Second, we speak the word “beauty” and respond to its being spoken because we are citizens of a self-consciously historical society. We count these personal responses as votes for the way things should look or sound;

we acknowledge the chance that, once made transparent, these spontaneous exclamations may presage a new consensus. Third, we speak the word and respond to it because we can, because we live in a society in which freedom of speech and the pursuit of happiness are officially sanctioned.

So we talk, because the experience of American beauty is inextricable from its optimal social consequence: our membership in a happy coalition of citizens who agree on what is beautiful, valuable, and just. In this we are the direct descendants of those Renaissance artists, mercantile princes, and connoisseur churchmen who spoke of beauty the way we do. Those sixteenth-century Italians, in their retrospective reverence for Pliny and Cicero, rejuvenated the antique artistic discourse of the *paragone*—the argumentative comparison, competition, and ranking of things, like to like. Under the auspices of the *paragone*, devotees of the “new learning” sought to establish objective standards by isolating undeniable paragons of virtue. They considered and reconsidered, in taxonomic hierarchy, the relation between one design and another, one painting and another, one artist and another, one genre and another, and one art and another.

These speculations established not one objective standard. In fact, they inadvertently facilitated a permanent and profoundly democratic revolution in the way we look at things in the West. Before the reestablishment of the *paragone*, the proper way of looking at an image was to “read through” it—to tease from its illusory depths an interpretation of the events that the image had been

commissioned to portray The *paragone* instead compares paintings to paintings, foregrounding their physical and abstract attributes. Looking and appraising in this way, like to like, reduces paintings' official content to competitive categories (Best Annunciation, Best Flight into Egypt, Best Crucifixion).

Authorized instruments of sacred devotion and political power are thus transformed into objects of private delectation. One's preference for Raphael's *Annunciation* over Guido Reni's as a paragon of virtue asserts the contour of one's own values relative to those of Raphael and Reni and the Roman church. For the sake of an argument, the clarity and repose of Raphael's painting may be freely elected to represent some aspect of one's personal taste. This requires hubris, and the vanity of enthusiasts who appropriate devotional objects as icons of self-representation has been much decried down through the centuries. It has never lost its status as the primary vice of connoisseurship. Even so, with the rebirth of the *paragone*, the power to invest works of art with meaning and value begins to shift from the supply side to the consumer side of the visual transaction.

Since that time, our propensity to squabble about the relative beauty of things has become inextricably entangled in the folkways of the mercantile republics in which these squabbles first flourished. They are equally indebted to the conventions of republican democracy, to the dynamics of commerce, and to our residual pagan penchant for investing objects with power. The give-and-take through which we ascertain the relative value of

objects derives from the haggle of the marketplace. There is no other precedent. At the same time, even though there is always a hard market in objects at the spine of our arguments about beauty, most of the buying and selling is verbal and symbolic, something closer to a civic forum in which objects (often in the possession of others) are elected by free-floating constituencies of citizens as incarnations of their shared pleasures and desires.

The mystery of the art market is that some people would rather possess an object of marginal utility than the ultra-useful money they exchange for it. This is the mystery of all markets in which taste is transformed into appetite by a nonpecuniary cloud of discourse that surrounds the negotiation. There is always a tipping point at which one's taste for Picasso or freedom or pinot noir becomes a necessity, or at least something one would rather not do without. The exact nature of this "something" is effervescent and indistinct. Moreover, since the value of art objects is purely extrinsic, invested from without, our adjudications are always tossed in the tides of personal and social evaluations. When exchange value segues into social value, commercial haggling segues into ethical speculation. Any intrinsic qualities the object might possess are quickly subordinated to the object's personal and cultural meaning for the human beings who are bargaining over it.

In practice, these arguments address a perceived inequity between a ballpark price and an ineffable, unarticulated value that tends to remain out of sight, open to speculation and unavail-

able to consciousness. It is a world of semblance. Something seems too cheap to someone; it seems too expensive to another; to a third, it seems correctly priced. So we haggle about everything, from the bouquet of wine to the ambience of cities. The sum of our own positions on things we value determines the shape and texture of our social lives. This is why contemporary Americans acknowledge the things they find beautiful and talk about them all the time. Our commonality as citizens resides almost exclusively in the world before our eyes. Those little explosions of harmony with the world beyond us constitute landmarks in our inner lives. The landmarks we share with others have personal importance to us as opportunities to experience the confluence of our commonality.

As Americans, we are citizens of a large, secular, commercial democracy; we are relentlessly borne forth on the flux of historical change, routinely flung laterally by the exigencies of dreams and commerce. We are bereft of the internalized commonalities of race, culture, language, region, and religion that traditionally define "peoples." As such, we are social creatures charged with inventing the conditions of our own sociability out of the fragile resource of our private pleasures and secret desires. So, lacking the terms for communication, we correlate. We gather around icons from the worlds of fashion, sports, the arts, and entertainment as we would about a hearth. We trace infinite lines of transit around these strange attractors. We organize ourselves in nonexclusive communities of desire. We stay or go according to the whims of romance

or the climate of the times. This "weather map" model of social organization may be construed as beguiling or appalling, but there is no denying its efficacy, its appropriateness, or its provenance.

2 The Pursuit of Happiness

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.— That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,— That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

The second sentence of the Declaration of Independence is not a particularly beautiful sentence, but the idea of American beauty could not exist without the cool impudence of its first seven words: *We hold these truths to be self-evident*. In a single breath, this phrase exempts the sentence's subsequent asseverations of human equality and unalienable rights from the claims of traditional conduct, religious belief, metaphysical certainty, and scientific proof. The words do what the thirteen colonies were themselves doing. They declare their independence and divest themselves of all external authority. They do not say, "These things are true,"

or “These things have always been true,” or “These propositions have been proved to be true,” or “These truths, validated by scripture . . .” They don’t even say, “These truths are self-evident.” They say that the Second Continental Congress *holds* the subsequently enumerated Truths to be self-evident, on its own authority, and henceforth, within the purview of congressional authority, they shall have the status of law. Period.

There is no confirming rationale, only the imperative challenge to hold these principles in perpetuity. Equality and unalienable rights are bestowed by the authority of the Second Continental Congress, whose authority derives from the consent of the Governed, who derive their rights from the fiat of the Declaration’s opening clause: the Congress empowers the people to empower the Congress to empower the people. Upon this *donee*, this self-contained legal asseveration, clenched tight as a fist, was the United States founded. With this concise, circular assertion of forms and principles the Congress proposes to guarantee, with qualifications, certain rights to its citizens. There is no existential quibbling. Equality is posited whether it exists or not. Life is guaranteed under the rubric of Safety. Happiness (whether *it* exists or not) is not assured, but its pursuit is protected.

This final permission, to pursue happiness with no promise of getting it, has always been the most beguiling to me. By distinguishing safety from the pursuit of happiness and promising both, the language of the Declaration introduces dynamic instability into the philosophy of public governance. Liberty is defined both

positively and negatively: the government will act to ensure our safety, and it will stand back as we act on our own behalf in the “pursuit of happiness.” When that pursuit putatively threatens our safety, however, the government invariably steps in. Safety trumps happiness, the government always wins, and beauty is always a casualty. This phrase, “the pursuit of happiness,” is generally presumed to be a Lockean euphemism that guarantees the pursuit of commerce and industry under the purview of contract law. It certainly is that; it is also true that, beyond the prerogatives of contract law, we have no civil rights to speak of. But the phrase is not dead language. It invests the neglected discipline of eudaemonics with legal consequence. It derives from a rhetoric in which commerce and industry are said to produce and disseminate “goods”—lowercase virtues incarnate. Uppercase Happiness, in the locution of the Second Continental Congress, is the Good toward which all these lowercase goods aspire.

Moreover, the goods that are legally enfranchised by the right to pursue happiness (reinforced by the Constitution and Bill of Rights) extend well beyond objects of use and consumption to include intellectual and artistic properties. Since we are each free to pursue our own happiness, the relative value of all these “goods”—beans, true love, biscuits, or paintings—may be, and should be, determined independent of governmental edict, regardless of scientific proof, and, whenever necessary, contrary to religious or metaphysical certainty. These propositions are adjudicated in discourses of the forum, the court, the piazza, and the marketplace.

Herein lie the cosmopolitan pagan roots of the republic. So it is not surprising that a society whose citizens propose and elect a hierarchy of incarnate creatures to represent their interests in the realm of governance should propose and elect a hierarchy of incarnate goods to represent their transient and variegated longings. It is hardly imaginable, in fact, that citizens of a society like this, for whom the pursuit of happiness is a primal mandate, would *not* produce grails to embody the apotheosis of their quest. It is inconceivable that icons of happiness and desire would *not* proliferate in the tides and currents of this fluid cultural weather system.

Every morning, when I was in the sixth grade at Santa Monica Elementary, we stood beside our desks, stared at the flag, and, under the baton of Ms. Veronica Chavez, sang “America the Beautiful.” La Chavez sang the official line: *Oh beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain . . .* We sang our own countertext, a paean to beauty in its presence: *Oh beautiful for gracious thighs, for amber babes of Spain . . .* It was a puerile encomium, but I have not forgotten the pride we took in our collective poiesis as we sang out, *Veronica, Veronica, God shed his gaze on thee . . .* And I have yet to discover a contemporary whose class bards did not invent their own customized lyrics to be sung to this tune—none as euphonious as ours, of course. In any case (probably thanks to the Second Continental Congress), we all felt deserving of our own aesthetic. We could agree on “Oh beautiful for” but would complete the sentence, in meter, to taste. Each of us asserted our own brand of beauty as a privilege of citizenship, as an icon of happiness, and we intended to pursue it.

Responding to our youthful expectations, the city of Santa Monica presented us with beautiful things at every turn, and with many things that were not beautiful. At recess, milling around in the asphalt schoolyard, we beach dudes extolled the sublimity of roaring, smoking surf, the romance of fuzzy palm trees in the fog; and we deplored the grungy indignity of city buses. Fledgling Bukowskis among us took exception to our antiurban cant, as did the barrio kids for whom nothing that was not an automobile, a pop tune, or Veronica Chavez qualified for serious contemplation. So the argument would bubble along—the song holding us together, the lyrics setting us apart. In this haphazard manner, the vernacular discourse of beauty flourished at Santa Monica Elementary. Not one of us would have quarreled with Baudelaire’s dictum in *Le Salon de 1846* that “there are as many kinds of beauty as there are habitual ways of seeking happiness.”

Nor would any of us have quarreled with Baudelaire’s assertion that we seek happiness as a matter of course and call it beauty. If we take the view from the terrace, it’s hard to deny the fact that all of us, in the conduct of our daily lives, pursue beauty, happiness, and justice (conceived as beauty and happiness free of impediment). We brave crowds to gaze at paintings on the walls of museums. We gather on scenic overlooks just off the interstate. We cheer as the jump shot swishes or the skater lands smoothly. We sit attentive as the solo or the aria concludes, and occasionally, in our delight, we mutter this involuntary vocalization: “Beautiful!” Or sometimes, “Great!” Or, if we reside in the borough of

Queens, "Gorgeous!" Then we look around for confirmation or argument. Either will do, since the only qualification for arguing about beauty is a shared experience, and we share a lot.

beginning
Mass production, mass communication, and sheer mobility make available to us a vast repertoire of replicable objects and events. Having these things in common, and little else, we talk about them obsessively. Sometimes we learn from these conversations, but knowledge is not the point. There are no correct interpretations. We may, and routinely do, misinterpret the putative content of the things we find beautiful. And we lobby for our misinterpretations—as every gay guy in my high school class enthusiastically misinterpreted episodes of *The Flying Nun*, and the Lesbian Coalition of Detroit endorsed the rock machismo of MC5 and the Detroit Wheels in the interest of its own butch agenda. We talk about beauty with anyone, anyplace and anytime, because we know it when we see it, and we remember it—since the absence of beauty informs our recognition of the banal and the grotesque, the existence of which few have the temerity to question.

John Ashbery once remarked that, after we discover that life cannot possibly be one long orgasm, the best we can expect is a pleasant surprise. I think of encounters with beauty in just this sense, as pleasant surprises, positive moments in the history of our free responses to the world. For most human beings, these are far from daily occurrences, but they can be, and they do happen. We encounter the embodiment of what we like, what we are like, and what we want in the external world, and we are delighted. Our

bodies, our minds, and the world beyond us coalesce and vibrate like a tuning fork. This sudden, unexpected harmony of body, mind, and world becomes the occasion for both consolation and anxiety. In that moment, we are at home with ourselves in the incarnate world but no longer in tune with the mass of people who do not respond as we do. We seek out, as a necessity, the constituency of people who do respond, if such a constituency exists.

Thus the urgency of our vocalization: "Beautiful!" Thus our willingness to accost strangers with our enthusiasm, to venture among them in search of coconspirators. In this way, beautiful objects reorganize society, sometimes radically. Random things, found to be beautiful, create polyglot constituencies. They represent for those who convene around them both who they are and what they want. You can argue that we are being seduced into this condition of resonance, and maybe we are, but we have the *right* to be seduced. To save us from seduction is to deny us our protected rights as moral actors. Dismissing our enthusiasm as mere fandom misses the point, because, in a free society, the question of what any group of citizens wants is always a matter of political consequence.

The resulting din of aesthetic contention is so ubiquitous that it's easy to take for granted. It's even easier to deplore the daily fret of living in a nation of exquisite connoisseurs (where yuppies spend more time lingering in front of the Starbucks pastry case, deliberating on their choice of muffin, than I do buying a car), but commercial democracies conduct their business in just this clamorous

way—consider the floor of the stock exchange as a microcosm. We live without rules, regulated by choices that are informed by the ongoing murmur of advocacy, discrimination, and dissent about everything from chainsaws to eyeliner, from Giacomo Puccini to Jan Van Eyck. The cornucopia of options is so overwhelming that the bulk of the choices we make are purely speculative, less about acquiring things than the ongoing mystery of pleasant surprises—of physical resonance with a world where our responses matter and our vote counts. The simple act of “liking” something bears with it the inference that we have recognized our “likeness” in the world beyond ourselves—something to our taste, like a muffin.

3 Issues of Representation

The acquisition of my tape recorder really finished whatever emotional life I might have had, but I was glad to see it go. Nothing was ever a problem again, because a problem meant a good tape, and when a problem transforms itself into a good tape it's not a problem anymore. An interesting problem was an interesting tape. Everybody knew that and performed for the tape. You couldn't tell which problems were real and which problems were exaggerated for the tape. Better yet the people telling you the problems couldn't tell anymore if they were having the problems or if they were just performing.

Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy from A to B*

Today, in the *New York Times*, there is an item that speaks directly to the echoing consequences of liking and likeness. David Brooks's column quotes Brett Pelham, professor of psychology

at SUNY Buffalo, who has, by some statistical sleight of hand, ascertained that “people named Dennis and Denise are disproportionately likely to become dentists. People named Lawrence and Laurie are disproportionately likely to become lawyers. People named Louis are disproportionately likely to live in Saint Louis and people named Georgia are disproportionately likely” to reside in the Peach State. The inference we may draw from this is that Michel Foucault was right. Our engagement with the tapestry of superficial resemblance that unfolds before our eyes each day—our happy embrace of moments when we find ourselves “rhyming” with the world—still drives the deep tides of our personal existences. We have inherited the proclivities to like things and to liken them to others, a practice long abjured by “advanced thinkers,” from the premodern world. Here is Foucault’s overview from *The Order of Things*:

If language exists it is because below the level of identities and differences, there is the foundation provided by resemblances, repetitions and natural criss-crossings. Resemblance, excluded from knowledge since the seventeenth century, still constitutes the outer edge of language: the ring surrounding the domain of that which can be analyzed, reduced to order and known. Discourse dissipates this murmur [of resemblance] but without it we could not speak.

More specifically, without this murmur, Dennis the dentist,

Laurie the lawyer, Georgia from Georgia, the entire beaux-arts appetite for pleasant surprises, and our multivalent moments of self-recognition would remain inexplicable.

The experience of pleasant surprises, however, is not local to the social experience of commercial democracies. Pleasant surprises are ubiquitous and infinitely variegated. Human beings are each very different and the world so very wide and chock-full of different things that there is never a shortage of occasions for surprise. The conversation arising from pleasant surprises, however, flourishes to best effect in highly mobile, loosely organized, and casually administrated commercial societies whose members feel privileged to respond. Better organized and more rigorously administered societies—those that are less practically pagan and restlessly cosmopolitan—cope with pleasant surprises less efficiently. The experience of American beauty, when it surprises us, is always, potentially, an occasion for change—for changing one's beliefs, one's friends, one's fashions, one's furnishings, or one's livelihood—for changing one's home, in the hope of discovering a new home that "feels more like home."

In societies where precipitous change is not an everyday event—in tribes, villages, theocracies, armies, academies, monasteries, laboratories, and governmental bureaucracies—pleasant surprises take on a darker aspect. In these realms, one's eccentric taste is more likely to be construed as a threat to the community, as a symptom of disloyalty, than as an icon of aspiration. In tribal environments, the consequence of espousing a dissenting aesthetic

(as each of us do) is always alienation and anxiety. Any tribal elder will tell you that it was young Paris's pleasant surprise and his cosmopolitan pursuit of happiness that started the Trojan War. It was Helen's *beauty*, nothing other, that launched a thousand ships and stacked the dead like cordwood, and you dare not forget it.

So beauty, in most of the world, still constitutes a threat to the community, an invitation to disloyalty, a cosmetic dissimulation, and an attribute of moral weakness. (The Taliban have yet to buy into the whole "pleasant surprise" thing.) Only in commercial democracies, where one's success depends in large part upon one's predisposition to step up and pet the pretty tiger, is beauty deemed a virtue, and beauty only reigns with the ardent consent of the governed. Both Gilles Deleuze and Leonard Meyer, while addressing different subjects, have noted that our routine consent to be governed by the "difficult beauty" of great music, literature and art has about it an element of romantic masochism—the frisson of petting the tiger—as does the dynamic of democracy itself. We do elect our masters, after all, and these masters must ultimately abide by our wishes.

Authoritarian and fundamentalist personalities need not apply. Those who do not feel free to cede control when it promises delight feel anxious and alienated, especially in a permissive society like this one, in which a majority of our cloistered guardians are charged with the task of denying us one sort of permission or another. Societies require guardians, of course, but their job is not ours. Clerics, bureaucrats, accountants, and academics assess

“real” danger, adjudicate “real” value, uncover “true” meaning, and enforce “correct” interpretations. They labor to protect us from error and danger, so we must forgive their distress at the tumult in the street, where everyone, from the deli guy on the corner to the drifter he’s hassling, is a brazen, chattering aesthete sporting impudent opinions in lieu of a green carnation. Guardians are concerned with securing our Safety. We are pursuing our Happiness.

In the United States, there is no easy fix for this. More hierarchical European societies have cultural elites, civil servants professionally dedicated to “refining” the taste of the masses—to performing *Coriolanus* for surfers and skateboarders, to bestowing those glittering prizes that encourage intellectual compliance and redirect aberrations in style. The pursuit of happiness in America, by contrast, is a creature of private-sector improvisation. It disdains the tedium of helmet laws, no smoking signs, play dates, and child monitors. It acknowledges our passionate expectation of feeling simultaneously at home in our bodies, in the world, and in society. This sort of civil imperative is only imaginable in a society whose primal texts assert the priority of eudaemonics—where we expect first-rate representation from senators, congressmen, lawyers, paintings, landscapes, pop tunes, cell phones, video cameras, and tape recorders.

In this milieu, the proverbial “issues of representation” are less concerned with how the signifier represents the signified (or fails to) than with how well the beholder and that which is beheld represent one another. In his *Philosophy* Andy Warhol argues that, by

being represented, in any way imaginable, the citizens of democracies are redeemed. They are calmed and socialized by seeing and hearing their likeness in the tapestry of the ongoing pageant. This vision of democracy, as more theatrical than dramatic, has the virtue of privileging civility by reconstituting reflection and speculation as literal activities and rewriting ideological content into narrative fiction.

4 Backstory in Italy

The first time I was in Rome, [in 1506] when I was young, the pope was told about the discovery of some very beautiful statues in a vineyard near S. Maria Maggiore. The pope ordered one of his officers to run and tell [my father] Giuliano da Sangallo to go and see them. He set off immediately. Since Michelangelo Buonarroti was always to be found at our house (my father having assigned him the commission for the pope's tomb) my father wanted him to come along too. I joined up with my father and off we went. I climbed down to where the statues were, when immediately my father said, "That is the Laocoön, which Pliny mentions." Then they dug the hole wider so that they could pull the statue out. As soon as it was visible everyone started to draw, all the while discoursing on ancient things, chatting as well about the things in Florence.

Francesco da Sangallo, in a letter, 1566

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Italy, a loose confederation of artisans and church decorators created a body of artistic work whose authority utterly eclipsed the agendas it had been designed to promote. In recognition of this achievement,

the elite category of cultural and commercial value—previously restricted to works of classical antiquity—was tacitly expanded to include the work of contemporary masters. In 1605 this expanded category was confirmed in writing by the city of Florence when it passed an edict that forbade the sale and export of any work on any subject by eighteen artists, including Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, Del Sarto, Correggio, Parmagianino, and most of the rest of the Italian canon.

The artists whose work is singled out in the Florentine edict had all executed permanent public works for churches and civic buildings throughout Italy. The objects at issue in the edict, however, were those visually dazzling, readily portable paintings on canvas and panel whose most amazing attribute in their own time was their public vogue—their celebrity in a fame-crazy culture—their burgeoning marketability in a renascent commercial society. It is true, of course, that this work was idealistically inspired by the corporeal authority of classical sculpture, casually informed by the cosmopolitanism of Roman learning, and justified, as often as not, by the casuistry of Neoplatonist gurus. It is also undeniable that these paintings and the artists who made them remained fully complicit in the incarnate mysteries of primitive Catholicism and indebted to its ideologies.

The conflicted debt these paintings owe to Renaissance fashion and commerce, to primitive Catholicism and classical paganism remains unpaid to this day. It is still an active ingredient in most of our arguments about art and about all our experiences that are

confirmed in perception, under the rubrics of beauty, grace, and eloquence. The complexity of this inheritance is demonstrated succinctly by the agendas, controversies, and rationalizations that swirled around the greatest technological innovation in Renaissance art: the practice of oil glazing, which first proliferated in Northern Europe and quickly made its way south. Oil glazing involves the application of transparent layers of pigment suspended in oil, one over the other, to create the ravishing surfaces whose luminosity became the trademark of this painting. Since it mimics the layering of white people's skin, the technique itself probably derives from observation. The practical virtue of this layering is that it simultaneously evokes the seductive corporeality of flesh and the translucency of antique objects carved in marble.

The ostensible theological rationale for this invention was its ability to make the doctrine of the Incarnate Word palpable in portrayals of Christ, and particularly the Christ child. Even though oil glazing was never restricted to painting the body of Christ, oil-glazed surfaces do allow ambient light to pass through levels of transparent color and bounce back so the paint appears to hold the light and glow. The seductive simultaneity of light and gross matter was taken as a metaphor for Christ's simultaneous mortality and divinity as the word of God made living flesh. In its broad, everyday applications, this shadowless and, by inference, timeless, luminosity was also presumed to signify eternal grace—the visible investment of a mortal body with some aspect of immortal sanctity. This visible investment, however, is not properly a meta-

phor for timeless grace, since the presence of grace in Renaissance theology is presumed to be visible in fact. Eyewitness testimony affirming the visible aura of grace was always considered in the clerical adjudications that surrounded the bestowal of sainthood.

So, if grace can be seen in fact, then what is the status of objects whose physical luminosity *replicates* the state of grace? A person invested with grace is visibly a saint. An object invested with grace is a sacred icon. A mimetic picture, however, is a representation that stands in for the absence of its physical subject. What, then, is a mimetic image of Christ that, thanks to oil glazing, seems an uncanny *incarnation* of Christ? Is it a picture, an icon, a craven idol, or something else? If it is only a representation of the historical Jesus, it stands in for Christ and signifies his *absence*. Yet Christ, conceived in grace, is *never* absent, and any presumption that a man-made picture might embody Christ plays fast and loose with the Second Commandment. So the Roman church proclaimed such works to be images of the *once and future* Christ, whose life on earth was historical and will be again, whose spiritual presence is eternal and signified by incarnate luminosity.

The church's idea that works of art might exist in a *simultaneous condition of absence and presence*, as both representations and incarnations, persists throughout the history of Western art, reaching its modernist apotheosis in Impressionism and Minimalism. The critical issue in Catholic Italy, however, was not explained by the official explanation. What is the *source* of this once and future visible aura? Christ was conceived in a state of

grace. Everyone and everything else must be invested with grace from without. The Catholic church claimed the right to invest human beings with grace. Protestants and dissenting Catholics believed that human beings could be invested with grace by God directly, without clerical intercession—that believers might become, in the Congregationalist idiom, “visible saints.” Tangible relics of human beings who have been invested with grace by the Catholic church might, according to that church, invest the icons that contain them with grace. Dissenters held objects and images purportedly invested with such sanctity to be nothing more than false idols and pagan simulacra of Christianity.

To many moderns these issues seem trivial. They are not. Wars have been fought over them, and one cannot help but suspect that these issues of incarnation and idolatry, of grace and its investiture, were greatly exacerbated by the challenge of Renaissance painting. This extravagant painting (which must have been all the more ravishing in the image-poor culture of its time) would ultimately break the supply-side stranglehold over its proper uses. The theological hairsplitting that surrounded paintings' ability to persuade the eye while proving nothing by the Word or by reason, remains ubiquitous. Even today, the phrases “craven idolatry” and “commodity fetishism” may be substituted for one another with no loss of sense. Artists and art-lovers alike still implore us to drive the moneychangers from the temple of art—even though there is no such temple, nor has there ever been.

The idea of grace as sanctity-visibly-confirmed, however, echoes

Quintilian's insistence that, unlike philosophy, the embodied eloquence of the orator can never be counterfeited; this translates easily into Ruskin's "argument of the eye"—the idea that beauty need only be seen to be believed. An object in a state of grace, an oration that embodies true eloquence, and a work of art in an autonomous state of quality, goodness, or beauty are almost identically characterized: the artwork, the oration, and the icon are presumed to incarnate a condition of extrahistorical once-and-future authority. The question remains, however, for saints and paintings alike: *What is the source of this invested value?* Does the saint's state of grace derive from God directly or from the church? Does the painting's authority derive from God, who authorized the institution that sponsored its creation? From the artist who created it? From God, who inspired the artist? From the iconographer who determined its content? From the devotional efficacy of the stories, grounded in The Word, that it tells? Or, perhaps, a painting derives its authority from a constituency of beholders who have experienced its power, agreed upon its loveliness, and publicly confirmed its authority in word and deed? In the history of commentary on art, all of these sources of authority have been passionately defended except the last, which I would like to passionately defend—the idea that the power of art may come from its beholders.

We know that enthusiastic secular constituencies created the public vogue of Renaissance painting. We know that this public vogue created an extra-institutional beaux-arts tradition that lasted four hundred years. We still hesitate to acknowledge its primacy

because a crowd of enthusiasts talking around and about a work of art evokes the noisy chaos of the souk. It calls to mind the louche abandon of feckless Israelites dancing around the golden calf. And it should. Francesco da Sangallo's description of the chattering crowd gathered around the pit from which the Laocoön has just been exhumed should tell us: *Fine Art Begins Here!*—in the heady blend of pagan reverence, commercial interest, artistic passion, intellectual curiosity, and worldly ambition.

Everyone present at the excavation is drawing, talking, comparing, and appraising. The Laocoön, rising from the earth, is at once a golden calf, a prized commodity, an artistic challenge, and a confirmation of ancestral wisdom. Giuliano da Sangallo, who recognizes the statue from an antique description (not Pliny's, though), is an architect by profession. Michelangelo Buonarroti is both an artist and an architect. On this particular occasion they are both commercial agents of the pope, and it's hard to see how this circumstance might diminish our assessment of either man. Contributing to the rescue and preservation of the Laocoön is hardly an offense against culture. Ignoring the impact of commerce, competition, consumption, avarice, and social aspiration on the history of art does qualify, however. It simplifies and mystifies art's primal occasions and leads inevitably to writing in which the terms "magic" and "inspiration" are bandied about.

I am more comfortable tracing the origins of Renaissance image-making to the late Middle Ages, when the Catholic church began outsourcing its decoration piecemeal. Over the next few

centuries, the sacred orders that had served as in-house marketing departments were gradually reassigned. By the mid-fifteenth century, the visual marketing of Western Catholicism could be said to reside firmly in the hands of private contractors overseen by commissioning bishops and scholarly iconographers. Ultimately, the church in Rome, as an image-provider, would function as a public-private conglomerate surrounded by a satellite ring of competing subcontractors. (Consider the competition in 1401 between Brunelleschi and Ghiberti for the contract to portray the sacrifice of Issac on the doors of the baptistery of the Florence cathedral—the outcome of which launched Ghiberti on a career of bronze doors and drove Bruneleschi into architecture, much to his chagrin and our own joy.)

Over the years, this outsourcing project had a threefold effect on art practice. First, unlike the artisans within sacred orders, these new subcontracting artists, artisans, and ateliers vied for competitive advantage. They developed trademark styles and guarded their techniques and technologies as proprietary knowledge. (This, by the way, is the best argument I know for David Hockney's thesis about the covert use of sophisticated mirror technology by artists in this period.) These entrepreneurs invested their production with idiosyncratic mannerisms on the principle that getting your style on the ceiling improved your chances of getting it in the nave. Second, the daily scrum of stealing, borrowing, refining, and inventing eroded the integrity of regional artistic idioms. Expatriate artists and artisans, brought to Rome by

provincial popes to celebrate their papacies in local styles, stayed in Rome, absorbed local influences, and continued to compete in an increasingly cosmopolitan stylistic environment.

Finally, and most importantly, the church's public administration of private art practice created a nascent art world populated by connoisseur churchmen and scholarly iconographers well versed in artistic practice and conversant with its classical and contemporary texts. Since these clerics commissioned and oversaw the production of works of art whose ideological content was identical by fiat, they evaluated the work of artists via the *paragone*, compared works according to their formal and rhetorical acuity. These gentlemen of the church were not, after all, going to artists to "get the word." They were going to artists to get the Word made flesh. Without their imposition of ideological consistency, the Renaissance orgy of formal diversification, visual refinement, and technical invention would, almost certainly, have been a lot less exuberant.

The tripartite artistic agenda, to distinguish one's product, while changing it with the fashion, while holding its content steady, created enormous tectonic pressures on the practice of art in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The content and intention of Renaissance painting was, for all intents and purposes, static, a given. Style was indispensable and style-change was a commercial necessity mandated by the fashions of the marketplace. The practice of painting responded to this pressure to be at once singular, old, and new by becoming more refined, spreading like a river delta,

dividing and redividing in graded distinctions of increasing delicacy. Because of this, the steep curve of escalating sophistication in late-sixteenth-century Italian painting had its darker consequences. Throughout this era, under the pressure of competition and in response to the formidable challenge of Reformation, Italian painting assumed new grandeur at the expense of what, in retrospect, seemed like its innocence. The vivid, corporeal verisimilitude of these paintings, striving to beguile an unlettered audience, striving to change without changing, enlisted ravishing sensuality in aid of sacred circumstances and created the fulcrum upon which all future critiques of “truth besmirched by beauty” would turn.

5 The Aesthetic and the Anesthetic

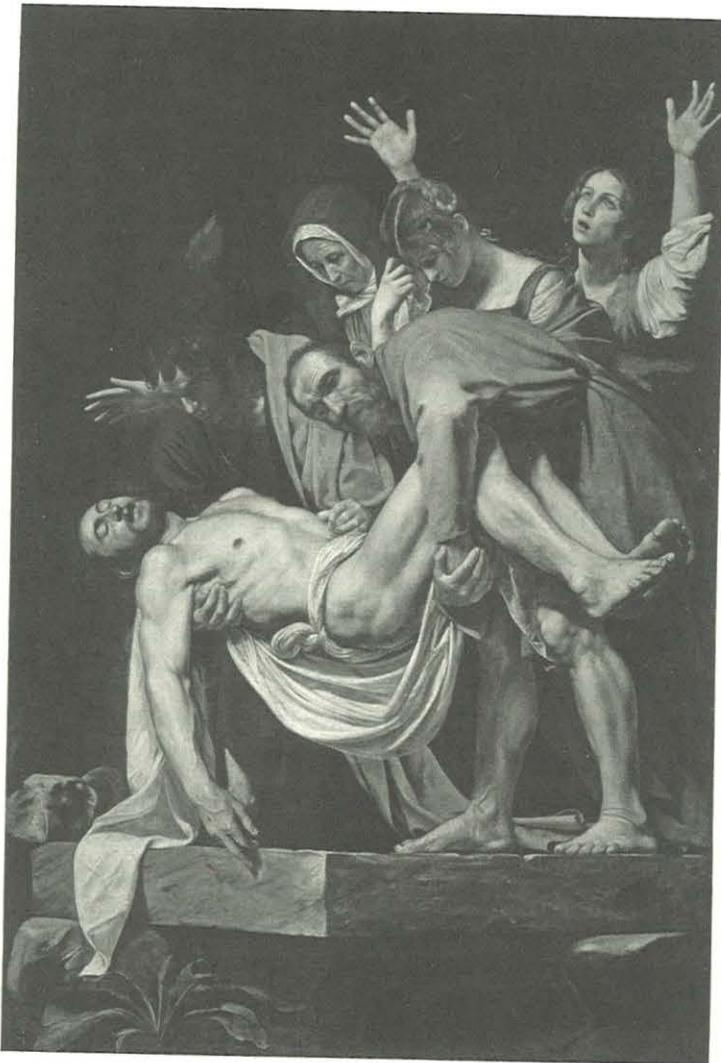
It is curious that princely galleries were so highly admired during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a period during which the hierachal classification of the arts was taken for granted and the orthodoxy of religious imagery was a matter of real consequence. No one seems to have complained that, by treating portraits on the same level as history paintings and by hanging altarpieces . . . next to scenes of the most enticing eroticism, collectors were defying the considered teaching of churchmen and philosophers in order to create a category of art for which only aesthetic quality needed to be taken into account.

Francis Haskell, *The Invisible Museum*

The application of the *paragone* compares artworks like to like and turns them inside out, so that their narrative content comments

on their attributes as objects (as the icing on Wayne Thiebaud’s layer cakes comments on his appetizing *peinture*, as Tom Wesselmann’s stylized nudes comment on the erotics of painting itself, as Donald Judd’s rigorous permutations comment on the impersonality of his work’s glamour). I call this the Aesthetic Maneuver. Such a maneuver may be said to have taken place when a seventeenth-century Italian standing before Caravaggio’s *Entombment* in the Cheisa Nova is transformed from a simple Christian into a connoisseur of Christian art. In that instant, the Roman church has lost a communicant and one of its most powerful instrumentalities. Today, Caravaggio’s painting remains in the church’s custody in the Vatican Pinacoteca, but it is no less free. Crowds shuffle past. They shudder in the grave that Caravaggio has dug for them, only half aware of who is being entombed and why, yet their awe is undiminished. They pass on, daunted but enlivened by the dour occasion, because the *Entombment* has been granted its secular immortality.

In this exact sense, choosing beauty over content (or choosing beauty *as content*) is always an act of sedition. If we accept the cant of official culture, we must believe that the beauty we steal from any man-made thing is stolen from its more virtuous and metaphysical backstory, wherein “real” beauty is said to reside. Official culture must regard our habit of casually ignoring these off-site narratives as, at least, a misdemeanor, like ignoring a stop sign, or, on more august occasions, as a treasonous felony. Andy Warhol would invent a strategy for feigning compliance by



CARAVAGGIO *The Entombment (The Deposition)*

OIL ON CANVAS, 1600–1604.

VATICAN MUSEUMS.

PHOTO: SCALA / ART RESOURCE, NY.

“getting it exactly wrong,” by creating the effects of Abstract Expressionist paintings while stripping away the expressionist cant that informs their piss-elegant aura. Susan Sontag insists in her diatribe “against interpretation” that the problem is not interpretation (we all interpret—can’t help but do so) but in the tyranny of interpretation.

So all our great good fortune begins with a crime. The founders of the beaux-arts tradition steal Renaissance painting from the church by misinterpreting it—then hand it over to us for further misinterpretation. As Francis Haskell observes, the princely collectors of the seventeenth century invent “a category of art for which only aesthetic quality need be taken into account.” This category, of course, is not really a category of art but a categorical way of *looking at art* that, among princes and cognoscenti, privileges the comparative quality of the object’s visual aplomb. Thus, the singular attribute of beaux-arts connoisseurship is Ruskin’s “innocent eye,” simple sight precedent to “insight.” One need only appraise a painting of mallards in flight as a painting compared to other paintings—not as a representation of waterfowl to be tested against reality.

This is not rocket science. Ignorance is as good a reason to speculate as impudence or curiosity. Thousands of brilliant readings

have arisen out of ignorance—some of them mine, none of them Freud's. Subteen cults routinely claim anthems from the songbook of Oswald Osbourne as their own. They find magic meaning in them. Oswald expects and encourages this, and I rather suspect that Raphael and Caravaggio did too. Their paintings are rife with double-entendres and private jokes. Why else would Caravaggio paint the beautiful bum of a beautiful boy at the dead center of his *Flight into Egypt*, if not to have a little joke at the expense of solemnity?—just the kind of secret joke that gangs of teenagers, French film buffs, aging Trekkies, and the occasional Charles Manson routinely discover in their own cultural icons (*pace* the amazing revelation that “Paul is dead”).

These cults of marginal enthusiasm, as nerdy as they are, do not differ much from the aesthetic cults of the art world. Aggregations of adepts espouse a specialized way of looking at things. You either get it or you don't. If you get it, you join a semisecret order—a festival of insider trading in which a revolutionary Aesthetic Maneuver, successfully executed, may redistribute the wealth of nations and change the world. The revolutionary occasion may be triviality itself, a flicker of resemblance. Dante Rossetti notices that the young women in his crowd (Elizabeth Siddal, Jane Morris, Effie Gray, Fanny Cornforth, and Anne Miller) resemble the young women painted by the Florentine, Alessandro Botticelli. He remarks on this to Edward Burne-Jones and John Everett Millais. They agree. All three set to work on neo-Botticelli portraits. By this route, the genetics of Victorian womanhood, enhanced by

its regimen of diet and exercise, allows the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood to enhance their careers by resurrecting a well-known but presently unfashionable artist. In the process, they invent the bourgeois art market in Britain.

So Botticelli returns to fashion from his long exile. Orange hair is back. Ladies fashions turn Italian. Collectors get to collecting. Scholars get to scribbling. All this because Victorian maidens look like Florentine ice princesses. A century later, another fugitive resemblance: postwar American beauties start to resemble Victorian maidens. Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol get it, and the Botticelli thing too (re: Edie Sedgwick!). Roy and Andy resurrect Pre-Raphaelite lovelies from their own exile in the funny papers, and reinstate them as beaux-arts heroines. (*Oh, Brad!*) Andy even buys a suite of red chalk drawings by Dante Rossetti of Fanny Cornforth in all her blondness—Marilyns avant le lettre—and hangs a row of them in the hunter green entry hall of his brownstone. Then braids are back. Hippie chicks embrace the Primavera's aura of frantic hedonism. Emilio Pucci invents colorful, diaphanous neo-Florentine frocks. Roy, Andy, and their friends invent the bourgeois art market in the United States.

Thus, Botticelli is resurrected by theft. Through a flurry of resemblances and cross-references, the Renaissance referents that Botticelli's paintings evoked are replaced with updated running gear, once in the 1860s and again in the 1960s. For a dead painter, this is a good sign. Objects once stolen from their official source have a propensity to be stolen again. The abil-

ity of oft-stolen images to acquire new meanings over time is enhanced. The odds of their survival under fluid cultural circumstances are greatly improved. The likelihood of such images *sustaining* cultural meanings long enough to communicate official propaganda is virtually nil.

Why? Because objects in the beaux-arts tradition survive unblemished by time. They stand still. History flows through them. The old goes in and the new comes out. Stable, historical objects are reaccredited. Their aura of flexible signification liberates them from their original authorization. Dynasties die out. Nations crumble. Theories dissolve. Institutions wither. Objects survive because we like them and because we somehow recognize our likeness in them. For five hundred years, adepts of the beaux-arts tradition rescue beautiful objects ready for the dustbin—long past their “use by” date—on the premise that a beautiful man-made object, regardless of its cause or content, is preferable to one that is not so *beaux*. Even more amazingly, man-made objects, once found beautiful and no longer considered to be, are rescued, as well, on the grounds that they might become beautiful again.

This is why Rubens and his friends bought Caravaggio’s *Madonna of the Rosary* from a storage shed in Naples and gave it to a church in Antwerp. This is why Rubens persuaded the Duke of Mantua to buy Caravaggio’s *Death of the Virgin* after Sta. Maria Della Schola had rejected it as “inappropriate.” This is why Guidobaldo Rovere’s raffish nude, painted by Titian, hangs in the

Uffizi in classical drag as the *Venus d’Urbino*. During its residency in the duke’s bedchamber, the work was simply catalogued as “a painting of a naked woman by Titian.” Titian’s pinup, however, was quickly recognized as quintessentially Italian—as opposed to quintessentially Greek or Roman or Byzantine—in a moment of intense Italian cultural self-consciousness. So the naked woman was “cool” (or whatever the sixteenth-century slang might have been for objects that are unassailably *au courant* despite their inappropriateness).

In this ragtag manner, the beaux-arts sensibility saves what can be saved, piece by piece, through hoarding, thrift shopping and dumpster diving. Everything stolen is in some sense memorable, or else it is forgotten. Each object resides somewhere in the vast imaginary warehouse of human recollection and resemblance, each with a provenance of approval, each responsive to the beaux-arts way of looking at things and open to interpretive resuscitation. Beauty is the occasion. Content is a matter of taste. Style is the indicator of temporal fashion. At one time or another the works of Botticelli, Guido Reni, François Boucher, Henry Moore, Morris Louis, Jules Olitski, Ronnie Bladen, and David Salle have been banished by fashion from serious interest—but they were never ejected from the warehouse of recollection. Fashion is dialectical. The likelihood of these objects returning to public vogue is actually enhanced by their being quintessentially unfashionable in the moment and waiting just offstage.

From the sixteenth through the eighteenth century, the sites

of official art patronage dispersed across Europe. Competitive nation-states and their aristocracies joined the church as purveyors of artistic propaganda. The Aesthetic Maneuver persisted, with its permission to personalize and commercialize objects of official propaganda. The gradual erosion of religious and aristocratic authority during this period seemed to foreshadow the ultimate triumph of a purely “aesthetic” art. Panic at this prospect, however, created the conceptualizing *Anesthetic* Maneuver to reinvest works of art with elements of public virtue, social consequence, and philosophical interest.

As a result, there are today hundreds of “better” reasons for looking at works of art than enjoying the way they look. Many of us indulge our appetites by embracing any semi-legitimate reason that falls to hand, but, the urge to tease out “serious” reasons for looking at art is far from reactionary folly. Primary among twentieth-century reasons is our awareness that beauty, in the hands of authority, unmitigated by democracy, ranks high on the Richter scale of social consequences. Our awareness of beauty’s power, unfortunately, has persuaded us against all reason that the public virtue of art exists in spite of, apart from, and in opposition to its physical appeal. Fine, except for the fact that *Beauty is precedent*. Beautiful works survive sans virtue. Virtuous works sans beauty do not. In a democratic society, we express our discomfort with Beauty’s off-site rationale by dispensing with it. But we keep the beauty.

6 The Waltz of the Anesthesiologists

Some writers have so confounded society with government, as to leave little or no distinction between them; whereas they are not only different, but have different origins. Society is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness; the former promotes our happiness *positively* by uniting our affections, the latter negatively by restraining our vices. The one encourages intercourse, the other creates distinctions. The first is a patron, the last a punisher. Society in every state is a blessing, but government even in its best state is but a necessary evil.

Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*

Before the French Revolution, the imprimatur of church, state, and aristocracy might be said to have anesthetized works of art while validating them. We were free at the time to ignore the work’s official content but not yet free to replace that meaning. In the late eighteenth century, the anesthetic wore off. The ideological neutrality of art burst asunder. The pastime of connoisseurs, who ignored the king’s meanings, became the practice of the masses. What the Aesthetic Maneuver had previously suppressed, it now wiped clean and thus made the future possible. Paintings like David’s *The Oath of the Horatii* and *Death of Marat* were taken to represent opposing political interpretations of genuine gravitas, whose historical meanings were confirmed on the barricades and on the guillotine.

The Anesthetic Maneuver, then, should be seen as a complementary consequence of the Aesthetic Maneuver, not as its oppo-

ment. In the early nineteenth century, everything was up for re-interpretation and our flailing efforts to deal with the new world of multivalent objects engendered a quantum escalation of art's perceived cultural importance. Romantic writing and the dawn of industrialism transformed art and craft into the very emblem of human aspiration, historical achievement, and cultural identity. Soon thereafter, new, purportedly scientific teleologies arose to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of traditional interpretation, but art still bore its newly invested relevance.

As a consequence, the theories that flowed from the pens of Herder and Hegel, Darwin, Marx and Freud, all of which proposed brands of historical formalism, had uses for the art of the past. Works of art that would have been banished by the Reformation simply reopened under new management. Art that once argued for the primacy of church, state, and patrimony now argued for "natural selection," "the class struggle," and the validity of "oedipal rage." In what is now Germany, the art and folk art of the past was upgraded, "correctly reinterpreted," and exhibited in *Kunsthalles* to validate separatist myths of cultural identity, regional autonomy, and tribal tradition.

The bête noire of all these manly narratives was the gaggle of aristos, dilettantes, and poetasters who constituted Anglo-French beaux-arts society. These cosmopolitan dandies—dismissed by their German counterparts as "preening dancing masters"—were, indeed, long on whimsy and short on attention span. In the mid-nineteenth century, however, their society brought forth an ex-

clusively beaux-arts *practitioner* in the person of Edouard Manet. Manet and his followers (along with their Pre-Raphaelite cousins in Britain) firmly established a bourgeois art market free of institutional oversight. Almost simultaneously, a newly minted cadre of German academicians, called "art historians," sought to bring the flurry of free interpretation that had been occasioned by the French Revolution back to order by establishing a new regime of *correct interpretation*. Henceforth, in Europe and America, an academic establishment strove to muffle art's efficacy by specifying its original cultural intentions. Alongside it, an unofficial class of collectors, dealers, critics, and artists sought to exacerbate its local effects.

Beyond the realm of academia, casual, freehand reinterpretation continued to flourish throughout this period. Aesthetes and anesthetists addressed the same field of objects. It was presumed that works of private delectation might acquire sufficient credibility to be considered as icons of public virtue—through the investment of interest by private constituencies. Aesthetic and anesthetic virtues might coexist in any object that could sustain both regimes of interpretation. This premise guided the art world in the United States and Western Europe for the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. It raised the bar for artistic acclaim by requiring the presence of both artistic and intellectual virtues. It required memorable works of art to be *worthy* of remembrance, with the caveat that *only* memorable works were worthy at all.

The most beguiling attribute of this aesthetic/anesthetic dis-

course of objects is that it conforms to Foucault's conditions of language by insisting on the precedence, if not the primacy, of the aesthetic. To redact Foucault, this society accepted, almost by definition, that beaux-arts discourse rested on a foundation of "formal values"—of resemblances, repetitions, and natural crisscrossings that had been excluded from knowledge since the seventeenth century—that this foundation of lateral references existed below the level of identities and differences—that it was precedent to that which can be analyzed, reduced to order, and known—and that, without this foundation, nothing could be known or even remembered.

So things were remembered. As in the sixteenth century, a hard market in objects provided the spine of a broader and more complex civil discourse about artworks that one needn't own to critique and evaluate. One need only *remember* them, and the task of being remembered fell to the works themselves, since they were sustained in public vogue only by this ongoing, external investment of value. In this period, the accrediting function once exercised by the worldly bishops fell to freelance arbiters of taste who bet money, essays, books, bequests, exhibitions, chatter, hints, nods, and knowing smiles on the public consequence of the art they favored. The arbiters with the best track records became aristocrats in a tiny world of volunteers. Those who were mostly right and never wrong wrote history.

By 1974, this transatlantic discourse was all but defunct. By 1605, its Italian counterpart was also defunct. Both dissolved for

the same reasons. The transatlantic art world became a global art world. The Italian art world became a European art world. The field of shared assumptions, visual experience, and philosophical education shattered, never to be reconstituted. The ancient agora within which citizens compared things like to like began to resemble an exclusive club. Finally the critical languages that characterized Italian and transatlantic art in their heyday proved to be woefully inadequate. Sixteenth-century critique was revealed to be intrinsically medieval. Twentieth-century criticism proved to be woefully indebted to nineteenth-century modernism, to the historicizing of Herder and Hegel, Marx and Freud.

My suggestion here is that, if we presume twentieth-century critics to have been as wrongheaded and nondescriptive as their sixteenth-century counterparts, the sobriquet "high modernism," as applied to the brand of art that began with *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*, seems nothing but a dated excuse to validate dead language—especially since the cream of high modernist art conforms to the conditions of postmodernity described by midcentury continental theorists. Roland Barthes, after all, killed the author on behalf of all objects and texts, so that we might have Picassos without Picasso. And without Picasso, what is modern about a Picasso that is not postmodern? Likewise with Stein, Joyce, Stravinsky, Piscator, Nijinsky, Man Ray, Beckett, Picabia, and Duchamp. Viewed as authorless, all of these artists' work has the crazy tang of exploding history. All of it posits a substrata of "resemblance precedent to differ-

ence.” None posits meaning outside the text. None manifests the least affection or affinity for the industrial modernism of the nineteenth century.

More to the point, if we think of high modernist art as postmodern art, the art that arose in its wake must bear that hilarious, oxymoronic title of “sincere postmodern art”—although it doesn’t really deserve a name at all. To enforce this point, here’s a little historical rhyme: The fate that befell sixteenth-century Italian painting also befalls transatlantic art in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. In two words: The Academy.

Under its weight, around 1974, the beaux-arts tradition collapses. Everybody forgets everything. The fluid commingling of the aesthetic and the anesthetic is sundered at the level of practice by an academic reformation. The academy of anesthesiologists, whose original agenda was only to make art more culturally meaningful, becomes increasingly concerned with making art less aesthetic—with shredding the beaux-arts filigree of resemblances, similitudes, harmonies, and resonances—with forgetting the way an Edo screen illuminates a drawing by Degas. It seeks to reinstall the autocracy of origin, difference, and identity. Under this flag, anesthesiologists backed by official authority rise up against self-employed aesthetes, and guess who wins?

Almost immediately, public support for art in the form of tax incentives for private benefactors is replaced by public support for art governance in the form of direct grants, and, as Thomas Paine would have predicted, the newly empowered art government—

free at last from the cordiality of society and the marketplace—addresses itself to our wickedness and finds it in full abundance in the art of the present, in the art of the past, in artists, genres, ambitions, and every variety of content and rendering. A regime of correct speech is instituted to “civilize” Americans by limiting their moral and aesthetic choices under the oversight of a European-style bureaucracy of guardian civil servants.

On the morning after the coup, “noncommercial art” comes into being. This is not simply “art that doesn’t sell” (of which there has always been a surfeit); it is art that doesn’t sell but nonetheless pays very well because institutions will patronize art that suppresses the attributes that guarantee art’s survival in the public memory and imagination. So noncommercial art is ephemeral, site specific, and heavy on *objets trouvés*. Lacking stylistic precedent and the incentive to change, it doesn’t. Its technologies evolve; that’s it. Bereft of pattern or idiosyncrasy it is quickly forgotten, gone before we notice, but no worry. Since it cannot be misinterpreted, an official interpreter can just tell you what the artist means. Thus, “misinterpreting the artist’s intentions” quickly replaces “ornament” as art’s capital crime.

Works of art under this regime represent the exclusive interests of their preexisting constituencies. After four centuries of theft, inside jokes, cross-pollination, and misappropriation, all stolen or borrowed art is returned to the churches, states, cultures, classes, races, places, genders, philosophies, and traditions from which it has been snatched. The past is sent home. Efforts to maintain the

art of the past in contemporary vogue are written out of the budget. The stylistic influence of art created before 1970 is obliterated. The task of sorting out who can claim the benefit of what object becomes a major industry. Many artists of consequence, like Degas and Picasso, are found guilty of profiting from the theft of proprietary iconography.

The beaux-arts agora that provided a site for arguing about our likes and likenesses is relocated deep in the wilderness of popular culture. The beaux-arts historical project of saving everything we ever loved just stops. We lose the object, our sophistication, and the pleasure we once took in outfitting official virtue in the clown suit of folly—the very emblem of civilized sedition. Word walls arise to water-board works of art with verbiage and stunt their life expectancies. The amateurs who built those halls of culture, who filled them with treasures, are relegated to the dark past, their passions relinquished into the custody of philistine colonizers for use in outreach projects to the skateboard community.

Then, around 1993, the anesthesiologists' discourse just goes poof. It evanesces without leaving a trace in fact or memory, just assorted shreds of jargon and faded photo-documents. Everybody is going to the art fair! And we are right back where we started, in Florence talking prices on the balcony in the sunshine. We perform upon a larger stage, quaff better wine with more culturally diverse aristos, but we have managed somehow to re-create that ruthless sixteenth-century carnival of fame, folly, avarice, waste, and swagger without the Leonards, or the Raphaels, or even the

frivolously talented Parmagianinos, without the kvetching critics who might remind us that, after all that's happened in the last sixty years, the schism of virtue and beauty remains intact.

7 The Pagan Embrace

The branch from which the blossom hangs is neither long nor short.

Krishnamurti

Here beginneth the ending, with a bald assertion that pleasant surprises do, in fact, exist. Their social, psychological, and somatic dimensions are radically contingent and infinitely complex, but beyond the opacity of the occasion there is no question about whether they happen. They do, and they provide the foundation for a vernacular discourse of beauty—a perfectly explicable mode of adjudication requiring nothing more of its practitioners than a reversal of Western civilization's semiotic priorities by application of the *paragone*—by habitually looking like to like. As Oscar Wilde remarked, “a gentleman always judges by appearances.” We begin our education in doing this with a base premise of American semiotics: All simple signs have two primary domains of reference. (1) All signs that we call signs have *designative* meanings. They refer to things that are *unlike* themselves—as words infer their referents and pictures what they represent. (2) All signs that we call signs are also things in this world. They have *embodied* meanings. They

reference things in this world that are *like* them—as a word, a color, or a musical note is known with reference to other words, colors, or musical notes.

No one questions the existence of these two domains. Nor has anyone proposed a way of sorting our their tangled skeins of reference. The quarrel is about the relative priority of embodied and designative meanings—about what we know through which agency. Do we learn about the king (compared to other kings) through the agency of his portrait, or do we learn about the painting (compared to other paintings) through the agency of the king's portrayal? Do we learn about the table (compared to other tables) through Picasso's portrayal of it, or do we learn about Picasso's painting (compared to other paintings) through the agency of the table he portrays?

The king's portrait is *intended* to celebrate the king, of course, and Picasso's table is *intended* to celebrate his painterly cubism. As free citizens, however, we are unencumbered by authorial intention. We choose between two ways of reading that require two ways of looking at things. In practice, there is no absolute distinction. We always choose a reading somewhere between these two extremes. A reading weighted toward designative meaning prioritizes the absent king and the imaginary table. A reading weighted toward embodied meaning prioritizes the two paintings. Either is possible, but which is preferable and to whom?

Administrative cultures necessarily prioritize designative meanings. They are preoccupied with delivering the message,

keeping the record, teaching the lesson, and assuring our compliance. Their administrative job requires that they be relatively certain that we (their administratees) accept what they say words mean and what colors stand for. If we stop at the octagonal red sign and stop at the red light as well, they smile. Their ability to control our behavior is confirmed. They are urgently concerned with teaching us because they are concerned with our safety, not our happiness, but the world gets in the way. Their authority depends absolutely on our reading the designated reference of official signage correctly. Sadly for them, our propensity for looking like to like gives the *embodied* meanings of their signage cognitive precedence over its message.

When Jacques Derrida asserts that there is no meaning outside the text, he is not arguing for the priority of pages with words on them, but for the primacy of embodied relationships generally. He is arguing that any field of designative reference we construct behind the patterned signs that compose a text (and the patterned signs that express their meanings, and the patterned signs that express *their* meaning, ad infinitum) is radically contingent and literally imaginary. Embodied relationships are physical and perceptible without designative reference. They signify the *possibility* of designative meaning. The actual designative meanings we assign are always up for grabs. A framed pattern of colors may be a picture but not necessarily. A bounded series of words may tell a story or make an argument, but it needn't. Embodied patterns invite us to seek out designative meanings, nothing more, and

however well we have been indoctrinated, the beauty and authority of the embodied pattern *itself* is determined by us, as we read or chose not to. If we are empowered to respond and pass judgment, we do.

If we tend to privilege beauty and dismiss the banal and the grotesque, the seriousness with which we take any designative message is contingent upon our taste—upon our aesthetic response to the pattern of embodied signs. So the physical existence, the primal intervention, of embodied signs poses a perpetual threat to bureaucratic authority. If we exclude the Orwellian option of simply deracinating our languages, there are three administrative ways of addressing the problems that arise when our taste mitigates our compliance. One may obliterate taste by disenfranchising the polity and denying them their rights of preference. In commercial societies this is suicide.

Failing that, one might promote a quasi-Protestant “cult of content” in which embodied and designative meanings are presumed to vary inversely. This popular academic option holds that bad writing infers good meaning, that ugly painting infers beautiful content, and that dissonant noise defines good music. The only defense of this cult is that, on rare occasions, the bad does become good, the ugly beautiful, and the dissonant harmonious. But this is almost never the case. In the fullness of time, 99 percent of the bad, ugly, stupid, obtuse, and banal remains so and sinks into oblivion. Even so, there is always enough of it around.

Finally, there is the option of teaching taste to bureaucrats—of

training power’s minions in a felicitous mode of embodied expression and educating the polity to appreciate it. This creates “appropriate” expression, and it works for the Brits, although the whole history of art in the West stands as gorgeous, proliferating testimony to the fact that nothing taught and nothing learned—nothing merely appropriate—can override the revolutionary efficacy of the pleasant surprise. A five-hundred-year tradition of aesthetic discourse rests upon one principle: *In the moment of encounter, intricately constructed patterns of embodied reference always have the potential to completely reinvent themselves, to reinvent their own pasts and yield up the future in new, surprising, and totally unauthorized designative meanings.*

Any citizen conversant in the discourse of relative beauty, with its perpetual promise of radical destabilization, must then be predisposed to question established authority at every turn, because the experience of beauty itself invariably overrides it. Confronted with inept administrative expression, we decry its ugliness and ignore it. Confronted with appropriate administrative expression, we wring our hands at its banality and ignore it. On those few occasions when we encounter administrative expression that is beautiful and surprising (while standing before a Raphael, perhaps) we still ignore the off-site message and keep the beauty if we can. We appropriate Raphael’s painting and invest it with new social meaning.

So here is the argument: Human beings in the course of their daily lives experience involuntary positive responses to configu-

rations of embodied signs in the world, whether these responses are socially permissible or not. When the responses are permissible, we call others' attention to their source in the hope of creating a constituency of agreement with our own evaluation. So, in societies where it exists, the cognitive priority of embodied signs makes beauty a powerful category of value. If beauty does exist as a category of value, the cognitive priority of embodied signs more or less guarantees that the pleasant surprises we experience in the presence of art will function as a hedge against habit and rhetoric—will routinely preempt the blandishments of vested interest, tribal authority, transcendental religion, metaphysical ethics, and abstract philosophy.

The utility of beauty as a legitimate recourse resides in its ability to locate us as physical creatures in a live, ethical relationship with other human beings in the physical world. Natural and man-made objects reside at the heart of this discourse. The intentions and values that inform these objects bear no relation to any meanings they might acquire. These physical things provide us with a correlative, an interstice or pause, if you will, upon which the past and future may pivot. The past may create an object and that object create the future if we read the physical world as ancient oracles read the entrails of goats and the flight of eagles—if we are sensitive to the past, alive to present, and alert to the possibilities of the future.

The condition of existence I am describing is nothing more or less than ethical, cosmopolitan paganism—the gorgeous inheri-

tance bestowed upon us by the pre-Christian societies of the Mediterranean whose idolatrous proclivities have never been obliterated or even subordinated in the Christian West. Nor are they likely to be. The vernacular of beauty is a part of that pagan inheritance. The whole rhetoric of commerce and practical science is a part of it too, as are the foundational premises of this republic, whose framers embraced Cicero's insistence that the virtue of any politics is confirmed in the body of the citizen—in the corporeal safety and happiness of that single and collective body.

Talking about beauty involves us in a physical world bereft of transcendental attributes. Its human attributes are as numerous and protean as the gods of Rome (and amazingly similar in their utility). They fall to hand as we need them—novelty, familiarity, antiquity, autonomy, rarity, sanctity, levity, solemnity, eccentricity, complicity, and utility. Their value in the moment determines the temple at which we offer up our sacrifice. There is never any doubt of our desire, if we feel ourselves free enough to buy into the embodied panoply of likeness and resemblance before our eyes—not to own it, but to join it in a pagan embrace that closes the space between ourselves and everything beyond ourselves. It's hard to hold the world, of course, as we hold values dear, as we hold certain truths to be self-evident, but beauty, value, and truth arise out of the intimacy of that embrace. Beauty is and always will be blue skies and open highway.