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Enter the Dragon: On the Vernacular of Beauty//1993

It would be nice if sometime a man would come up to me on the street and say, 'Hello, I'm the information man, and you have not said the word *yours* for thirteen minutes. You have not said the word *praise* for eighteen days, three hours and nineteen minutes.'
– Edward Ruscha, *Information Man*

I was drifting, daydreaming really, through the waning moments of a panel discussion on the subject of 'What's Happening Now', drawing cartoon daggers on a yellow pad and vaguely formulating strategies for avoiding punch and cookies, when I realized that I was being addressed from the audience. A lanky graduate student had risen to his feet and was soliciting my opinion as to what 'the issue of the nineties' would be. Snatched from my reverie, I said, 'Beauty', and then, more firmly, 'The issue of the nineties will be beauty' – a total improvisatory goof – an off-the-wall, jump-start, free association that rose unbidden to my lips from God knows where. Or perhaps I was being ironic, wishing it so but not believing it likely? I don't know, but the total, uncomprehending silence that greeted this modest proposal lent it immediate credence for me. My interlocutor plopped back into his seat, exuding dismay, and, out of sheer perversity, I resolved to follow beauty where it led into the silence. Improvising, I began updating Walter Pater; I insisted that beauty is not a *thing* – 'the beautiful' is a thing. In images, I intoned, beauty is the agency that causes visual pleasure in the beholder; and any theory of images that is not grounded in the pleasure of the beholder begs the question of their efficacy and dooms itself to inconsequence. This sounded provocative to me, but the audience continued to sit there, unprovoked, and *beauty* just hovered there as well, a word without a language, quiet, amazing and alien in that sleek, institutional space – like a pre-Raphaelite dragon aloft on its leather wings.

'If images don't *do* anything in this culture', I said, plunging on, 'if they haven't *done* anything, then why are we sitting here in the twilight of the twentieth century talking about them? And if they only do things *after* we have talked about them, then *they* aren't doing them, *we* are. Therefore, if our criticism aspires to anything beyond soft-science, the efficacy of images must be the cause of criticism, and not its consequence – the subject of criticism and not its object. And this', I concluded rather grandly, 'is why I direct your attention to the language of visual affect – to the rhetoric of how things look – to the iconography of desire – in a word, to *beauty*!'

I made a *voilà* gesture for punctuation, but to no avail. People were quietly filing out. My fellow panellists gazed into the dark reaches of the balcony or examined their cuticles. I was genuinely surprised. Admittedly, it was a goof. Beauty? Pleasure? Efficacy? Issues of the nineties? Admittedly outrageous. But it was an outrage worthy of a rejoinder – of a question or two, a nod, or at least a giggle. I had wandered into this *dead zone*, this silent abyss. I wasn't ready to leave it at that, but the moderator of our panel tapped on her microphone and said, 'Well, I guess that's it, kids.' So I never got off my parting shot. As we began breaking up, shuffling papers and patting our pockets, I felt a little sulky. (Swallowing a pithy allusion to Roland Barthes can do that.) And yet, I had no sooner walked out of the building and into the autumn evening than I was overcome by this strange Sherlock Holmesian elation. The game was afoot.

I had discovered something; or rather, I had put out my hand and discovered nothing – this vacancy that I needed to understand. I had assumed that from the beginning of the sixteenth century until just last week artists had been persistently and effectively employing the rough vernacular of pleasure and beauty to interrogate our totalizing concepts 'the good' and 'the beautiful'; and now this was over? Evidently. At any rate, its critical vocabulary seemed to have evaporated overnight, and I found myself muttering detective questions like: Who wins? Who loses? *Qui bono?* – although I thought I knew the answer. Even so, for the next year or so, I assiduously trotted out 'beauty' wherever I happened to be, with whomever I happened to be speaking. I canvassed artists and students, critics and curators, in public and in private – just to see what they would say. The results were disturbingly consistent, and not at all what I would have liked.

Simply put, if you broached the issue of beauty in the American art world of 1988, you could not incite a conversation about rhetoric – or efficacy, or pleasure, or politics, or even Bellini. You ignited a conversation about the market. That, at the time was the 'signified' of beauty. If you said 'beauty', they would say, 'The corruption of the market', and I would say, 'The corruption of the *market*?!'. After thirty years of frenetic empowerment, during which the venues for contemporary art in the United States had evolved from a tiny network of private galleries in New York into this vast, transcontinental sprawl of publicly funded, postmodern iceboxes? During which time the ranks of 'art professionals' had swollen from a handful of dilettantes on the East Side of Manhattan into this massive civil service of Ph.Ds and MFAs who administered a monolithic system of interlocking patronage, which, in its constituents, resembled nothing so much as that of France in the early nineteenth century? While powerful corporate, governmental, cultural and academic constituencies vied for power and tax-free dollars, each with its own self-perpetuating agenda and none with any vested interest in the subversive potential of visual pleasure? Under *these* cultural

conditions, artists across this nation were obsessing about the market? – fretting about a handful of picture merchants nibbling canapés on the Concorde? – blaming them for any work of art that did not incorporate raw plywood?

Under these cultural conditions, I would suggest, saying that ‘the market is corrupt’ is like saying that the cancer patient has a hangnail. Yet the manifestations of this pervasive *idée fixe* remain everywhere present today, not least of all in the sudden evanescence of the market itself after thirty years of scorn for the intimacy of its transactions, but also in the radical discontinuity between serious criticism of contemporary art and that of historical art. At a time when easily 60 per cent of historical criticism concerns itself with the influence of taste, patronage and the canons of acceptability upon the images that a culture produces, the bulk of contemporary criticism, in a miasma of hallucinatory denial, resolutely ignores the possibility that every form of refuge has its price, and satisfies itself with grousing about ‘the corruption of the market’. The transactions of value enacted under the patronage of our new ‘non-profit’ institutions are exempted from this cultural critique, presumed to be untainted, redemptive, disinterested, taste free, and politically benign. Yeah, right.

During my informal canvass, I discovered that the ‘reasoning’ behind this presumption is that art dealers ‘only care about how it looks’, while the art professionals employed by our new institutions ‘really care about what it means’. Which is easy enough to say. And yet, if this is, indeed, the case (and I think it is), I can’t imagine any but the most demented naïf giddily abandoning an autocrat who monitors appearances for a bureaucrat who monitors desire. Nor can Michel Foucault, who makes a variation of this point in *Surveiller et punir*, and poses for us the choice that is really at issue here, between bureaucratic surveillance and autocratic punishment. Foucault opens his book with a grisly, antique text describing the lengthy public torture and ultimate execution of Damiens, the regicide; he then juxtaposes this cautionary spectacle of royal justice with the theory of reformatory incarceration propounded by Jeremy Bentham in his ‘Panopticon’.

Bentham’s agenda, in contrast to the king’s public savagery, is ostensibly benign. It reifies the benevolent passion for secret control that informs Chardin’s pictorial practice, and, like Chardin, Bentham *cares*. He has no wish to punish the offender, merely to reconstitute the offender’s desire under the sheltering discipline of perpetual, covert, societal surveillance in the paternal hope that, like a child, the offender will ultimately internalize that surveillance as a ‘conscience’ and start controlling himself as a good citizen should. However, regardless of Bentham’s ostensible benignity (and, in fact, because of it), Foucault argues that the king’s cruel justice is ultimately more just – because the king does not care what we *mean*. The king demands from us the appearance of

loyalty, the rituals of fealty, and, if these are not forthcoming, he destroys our bodies, leaving us our convictions to die with. Bentham’s warden, on the other hand, demands our *souls*, and on the off chance that they are not forthcoming, or *cannot* come forth into social normality, he knows that we will punish ourselves, that we will have internalized his relentless surveillance in the form of self-destructive guilt.

These are the options that Foucault presents to us; and I would suggest that, within the art community, the weight of the culture is so heavily on Bentham’s side that we are unable to see them as equally tainted. We are, I think, such obedient children of the Panopticon, so devoted to care, and surveillance, and the irredeemable *souls* of things, that we have translated this complex, contemporary option between the king’s savage justice and Bentham’s bureaucratic discipline into a progressive, utopian choice between the ‘corrupt old market’ and the ‘brave new institution’. Thus beauty has become associated with the ‘corrupt old market’ because art dealers, like Foucault’s king, traffic in objects and appearances. They value images that promise pleasure and excitement. Those that keep their promise are admitted into the presence of the court; those that fail are subject to the ‘king’s justice’, which can be very cruel and autocratic indeed. But there is another side to this coin, since art dealers are also like Foucault’s king in that they do not care ‘what it means’. Thus radical content has traditionally flourished under the auspices of this profound disinterest.

The liberal institution, however, is not so cavalier about appearances as the market is about meaning. Like Jeremy Bentham’s benevolent warden, the institution’s curators hold a public trust. They must look carefully and genuinely care about what artists ‘really’ mean – and therefore they must, almost of necessity, distrust appearances – distrust the very idea of appearances, and distrust most of all the appearance of images that, by virtue of the pleasure they give, are efficacious in their own right. The appeal of these images amounts to a kind of ingratitude, since the entire project of the new institution has been to lift the cruel burden of efficacy from the work of art and make it possible for artists to practise that ‘plain honesty’ of which no great artist has yet been capable, nor ever wished to be. Yet, if we would expose the inner soul of things to extended public scrutiny, ‘sincere’ appearance is everything, and beauty is the *bête noire* of this agenda, the snake in the garden. It steals the institution’s power, seduces its congregation, and, in every case, elicits the dismay of artists who have committed themselves to plain honesty and the efficacy of the institution.

The arguments these artists mount to the detraction of beauty come down to one simple gripe: *Beauty sells*, and although their complaints usually are couched in the language of academic radicalism, they do not differ greatly from my grandmother’s *haut bourgeois* prejudices against people ‘in trade’ who get

their names 'in the newspaper'. Beautiful art *sells*. If it sells itself, it is an idolatrous commodity; if it sells anything else, it is a seductive advertisement. Art is not idolatry, they say, nor is it advertising, and I would agree – with the caveat that idolatry and advertising are, indeed, art, and that the greatest works of art are always and inevitably a bit of both.

Finally, there are issues worth advancing in images worth admiring; and the truth is never 'plain', nor appearances ever 'sincere'. To try to make them so is to neutralize the primary, gorgeous eccentricity of imagery in Western culture since the Reformation: the fact that it cannot be trusted, that imagery is always presumed to be proposing something contestable and controversial. This is the sheer, ebullient, slithering, dangerous fun of it. No image is presumed inviolable in our dance hall of visual politics, and all images are potentially powerful. Bad graphics topple good governments and occlude good ideas; good graphics sustain bad ones. The fluid nuancing of pleasure, power and beauty is a serious, ongoing business in this culture and has been since the sixteenth century, when the dazzling rhetorical innovations of Renaissance picture making enabled artists to make speculative images of such authority that power might be successfully bestowed upon them, privately, by their beholders, rather than (or at least prior to) its being assigned by the institutions of church and state.

At this point, for the first time in history, the power of priestly and governmental bureaucracies to assign meaning to images began to erode, and the private encounter between the image and its beholder took on the potential of changing the public character of institutions. Images became mobile at this point, and irrevocably political – and henceforth, for more than four centuries subsequent to the rise of easel painting, images *argued*, for things – for doctrines, rights, privileges, ideologies, territories and reputations. For the duration of this period, a loose, protean collection of tropes and figures signifying 'beauty' functioned as the *pathos* that recommended the *logos* and *ethos* of visual argumentation to our attention. It provided the image's single claim to being looked at – and to being believed. The task of these figures of beauty was to enfranchise the audience and acknowledge its power – to designate a territory of shared values between the image and its beholder and, then, in this territory, to argue the argument by valorizing the picture's problematic content. Without the urgent intention of reconstructing the beholder's view of things, the image had no reason to exist, nor any reason to be beautiful. Thus, the comfort of the familiar always bore with it the frisson of the exotic, and the effect of this conflation, ideally, was persuasive excitement – visual pleasure. As Baudelaire says, 'the beautiful is always strange', by which he means, of course, that it is always strangely familiar.

Thus Caravaggio, at the behest of his masters, would deploy the exquisite

hieratic drama of the *Madonna of the Rosary* to lend visual appeal and corporeal authority to the embattled concept of the intercession of the priesthood – and would demonstrably succeed, not only in pleading his masters' case, but in imposing the urbane glamour of his own argument onto that doctrine. So today, as we stand before the *Madonna of the Rosary* in Vienna, we pay homage to a spectacular souvenir of successful visual litigation – an old warhorse put out to pasture – in this case, a thoroughbred. The image is quiet now; its argumentative frisson has been neutralized, and the issue itself drained of ideological urgency, leaving only the cosmetic superstructure of that antique argument just visible enough to be worshipped under the frayed pennants of 'humane realism' and 'transcendent formal values' by the proponents of visual repose.

Before we genuflect, however, we must ask ourselves if Caravaggio's 'realism' would have been so trenchant, or his formal accomplishment so delicately spectacular, had his contemporary political agenda, under the critical pressure of a rival church, not seemed so urgent? And we must ask ourselves further if the painting would have even survived until Rubens bought it, had it not somehow expedited that agenda? I doubt it. We are a litigious civilization and we do not like losers. The history of beauty, like all history, tells the winner's tale; and that tale is told in the great mausoleums where images like Caravaggio's, having done their work in the world, are entombed – and where, even hanging in state, they provide us with a ravishing and poignant visual experience. One wonders, however, whether our standards for the pleasures of art are well founded in the glamorous *tristesse* we feel in the presence of these institutionalized warhorses, and whether contemporary images are really enhanced by being institutionalized in their infancy, whether there might be work in the world for them to do, as well.

For more than four centuries, the idea of 'making it beautiful' has been the keystone of our cultural vernacular – the lover's machine gun and the prisoner's joy – the last redoubt of the disenfranchised and the single direct route from the image to the individual without a detour through church or state. Now, it seems, that lost generosity, like Banquo's ghost, is doomed to haunt our discourse about contemporary art – no longer required to recommend images to our attention or to insinuate them into the vernacular, and no longer even welcome to try. The route from the image to the beholder now detours through an alternate institution ostensibly distinct from church and state. Even so, it is not hard to detect the aroma of Caravaggio's priests as one treads its grey wool carpets or cools one's heels in its arctic waiting rooms. One must suspect, I think, that we are being denied any direct appeal to beauty, for much the same reason that Caravaggio's supplicants were denied appeal to the Virgin: to sustain the jobs of bureaucrats. Caravaggio, at least, *shows* us the Virgin, in all her gorgeous

autonomy, before instructing us not to look at her and redirecting our guilty eyes to that string of wooden beads hanging from the priest's fingers. The priests of the new church are not so generous. Beauty, in their domain, is altogether elsewhere, and we are left counting the beads and muttering the texts of academic sincerity.

As luck would have it, while I was in the midst of my informal survey, the noisy controversy over exhibiting Robert Mapplethorpe's erotic photographs in public venues provided me with a set-piece demonstration of the issues – and, at first, I was optimistic, even enthusiastic. This uproar seemed to be one of those magic occasions when the private visual litigation that good art conducts might expand into the more efficacious litigation of public politics – and challenge some of the statutory restrictions on the conduct that Mapplethorpe's images celebrate. I was wrong. The American art community, at the apogee of its power and privilege, chose to play the ravaged virgin, to fling itself prostrate across the front pages of America and fairly dare the fascist heel to crush its outraged innocence.

Moreover, this community chose to ignore the specific issues raised by Mapplethorpe's photographs in favour of the 'higher politics'. It came out strenuously in defence of the status quo and all the perks and privileges it had acquired over the last thirty years, and did so under the tattered banner of 'free expression' – a catchphrase that I presumed to have been largely discredited (and rightly so) by the feminist critique of images. After all, once a community acquiesces in the assumption that *some* images are certifiably toxic, this, more or less, 'opens the door', as they say in the land of litigation.

And finally, hardly anyone considered for a moment what an incredible rhetorical *triumph* the entire affair signified. A single artist with a single group of images had somehow managed to overcome the aura of moral isolation, gentrification and mystification that surrounds the practice of contemporary art in this nation and directly threaten those in actual power with his celebration of marginality. It was a fine moment, I thought, and all the more so because it was the *celebration* and not the marginality that made these images dangerous. Simply, it was their rhetorical acuity, their direct enfranchisement of the secular beholder. It was, exactly, their beauty that had lit the charge – and, in this area, I think, you have to credit Senator Jesse Helms, who, in his antediluvian innocence, at least saw what was there, understood what Mapplethorpe was proposing, and took it, correctly, as a direct challenge to everything he believed in. The senator may not know anything about art, but rhetoric is his business, and he did not hesitate to respond to the challenge. As, one would hope, he had a right to. Art is either a democratic political instrument, or it is not.

So, it was not that men were making it in Mapplethorpe's images. At that

time they were regularly portrayed doing so on the walls of private galleries and publicly funded 'alternative' spaces all over the country. On account of the cult of plain honesty and sincere appearance, however, they were not portrayed as doing it so *persuasively*. It was not that men were making it, then, but that Mapplethorpe was 'making it beautiful'. More precisely, he was appropriating a baroque vernacular of beauty that predated and, clearly, outperformed the puritanical canon of visual appeal espoused by the therapeutic institution. This canon presumes that we will look at art, however banal, because looking at art is, somehow, 'good' for us, regardless and, ultimately, in spite of whatever specific 'good' the individual work or artist might urgently propose to us.

This habit of subordinating the artist's 'good' to the 'higher politics of expression' of course, makes perfect sense in the mausoleums of antiquity, where it was born, and where we can hardly do otherwise – where it is, perhaps, 'good' for us to look at the *Madonna of the Rosary* without blanching at its Counter-Reformation politics, because those politics are dead – and where it may be 'good' for us, as well, to look at a Sir Thomas Lawrence portrait and 'understand' his identification of romantic heroism with landed aristocracy. It is insane and morally ignorant, however, to confront the work or a living (and, at that time, dying) artist as we would the artefacts of lost Atlantis, with forgiving connoisseurship – to 'appreciate' his passionate, partisan and political celebrations of the American margin – and in so doing, refuse to engage their 'content' or argue the arguments that deal so intimately with trust, pain, love and the giving up of the self.

Yet this is exactly what was expected and desired, not by the government, but by the art establishment. It was a matter of 'free expression', and thus, the defence of the museum director prosecuted for exhibiting the images was conducted almost completely in terms of the redemptive nature of formal beauty and the critical nature of surveillance. The 'sophisticated' beholder, the jury was told, responded to the elegance of the form regardless of the subject matter. Yet this beholder must be 'brave' enough to look at 'reality' and 'understand' the sources of that formal beauty in the artist's tortured private pathology. If this sounds like the old patriarchal do-dah about transcendent formal values and humane realism, it is, with the additional fillip that, in the courts of Ohio, the sources of beauty are now taken to be, not the corruption of the market, but the corruption of the artist. So, clearly, all this litigation to establish Robert Mapplethorpe's 'corruption' would have been unnecessary had his images somehow *acknowledged* that corruption, and thus qualified him for our forgiveness. But they did not.

There is no better proof of this, I think, than the fact that, while the Mapplethorpe controversy was raging, Francis Bacon's retrospective was

packing them in at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Joel-Peter Witkin was exhibiting in institutional serenity – because Bacon's and Witkin's images speak a language of symptoms that is profoundly tolerable to the status quo. They mystify Mapplethorpe's content, aestheticize it, personalize it, and ultimately further marginalize it as 'artistic behaviour', with signifiers that denote angst, guilt and despair. It is not portrayal that destabilizes, it is *praise*. Nor is it criticism of centrality that changes the world. Critique of the mainstream ennobles the therapeutic institution's ostensible role as shadow government and disguises its unacknowledged mandate to neutralize dissent by first ghettoizing it, and then mystifying it. Confronted by images like Mapplethorpe's that, by virtue of their direct appeal to the beholder, disdain its umbrella of 'care', the therapeutic institution is immediately disclosed for what it is: the moral junkyard of a pluralistic civilization.

Yet the vernacular of beauty, in its democratic appeal, remains a potent instrument for change in this civilization. Mapplethorpe uses it, as does Warhol, as does Ruscha, to engage individuals within and without the cultural ghetto in arguments about what is good and what is beautiful. And they do so without benefit of clergy, out in the street, out on the margin, where we might, if we are lucky, confront that information man with his reminder that we have not used the word *praise* for eighteen days, three hours, and nineteen minutes.

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