NICK MOUNT

The Return of Beauty

You find one on Madison Street, near Pike, beyond the shadow of the Manhattan Bridge. It hovers on the wall of a makeshift parking lot, over exhaust, rust, old tags. It shouldn't be here, but there it is – a hummingbird. Life-size and lifelike, put in flight by the old painter's tricks of shadow and light. You could have thought it real but for its colours, which come from art, not nature – from the graffiti behind it, its backdrop and its ancestor. Its creator says he wants the bird to give pause, and that's just what it does. Give pause. Because here, in an ugly corner of an ugly city, within choking distance of the wreckage of an ugly act, you have found the opposite of ugly. Here, beauty is back.

In 1917, Marcel Duchamp bought a urinal from a New York iron works, signed it "R. Mutt," and entered it in the exhibition of New York's Society of Independent Artists. And so, the story goes, a toilet conquered the world. In 2004, a poll of 500 artists, curators, critics, and art dealers named Duchamp's *Fountain* the most influential art object of the twentieth century.

Avant-garde artists like Duchamp refused to produce art for the pleasure of a society they held responsible for, among other things, World War I. They walked away from a definition of art that had ruled the West for over 2,000 years: no more beautiful imitations. Art should be a concept, not a copy. It should disturb, not please. Most important, it should not be beautiful. The American painter Barnett Newman said it clearest: "The impulse of modern art was to destroy beauty."

Opposite: Dan Witz, Madison near Pitt, New York City, 2000.

That's why Duchamp's urinal was the right choice for the most influential art object of our time. There are exceptions, but all it should take is a walk through any major art gallery to convince you that for twentieth-century art, beauty really isn't the point. That's not to say that it's not art, or that it's not good art. In fact, according to the philosopher Arthur C. Danto, author of the best of several recent versions of this story, that was the main insight of modern art: art does not have to be beautiful to be art.

If a trip to the gallery doesn't convince you – if you still say Duchamp's urinal is beautiful, or Picasso's women, or Pollock's splatters, or Hirst's rotting animals – blame your obviously expensive education. In its attempt to explain the value of avant-garde art, art criticism fell back on art's traditional value. Again and again, curators and critics said this new art was beautiful, if we could only open our eyes. Even when their own eyes

told them otherwise. Clement Greenberg, America's most influential modernist art critic, said it more baldly than most: "Pollock's bad taste is in reality simply his willingness to be ugly in terms of contemporary taste. In the course of time this ugliness will become a new standard of beauty."

Greenberg was right – more right than he would have liked, especially as a New Yorker. After September 11, the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard wrote that "By the grace of terrorism, the World Trade Center has become the world's most beautiful building – the eighth wonder of the world!" The *New York Times* called Baudrillard cold-blooded, but Baudrillard wasn't especially cold-blooded, just especially educated. He could call the wreckage beautiful because he had ingested, more thoroughly than most, the modernist lesson that the ugly is beautiful, in its own way.

Beauty had other enemies in the last century besides the avant-garde and Ray Stevens. Feminism attacked the "beauty myth," the reduction of female appearance to a single, male ideal. Poststructuralism and multiculturalism chipped away at universals in general, European universals in particular. Art elevated concepts over aesthetics to its logical end: the explicit exclusion of apolitical art from the international exhibition *documenta X* in 1997. In the galleries, ugly was the new beauty. In the classrooms, everyone was beautiful. For good and noble reasons, both. But in becoming anything, beauty became nothing, a word that could describe anything and that, consequently, no one could describe.

Beauty never left, of course. Exiled from high culture, it found a home throughout the century in mass culture, in its movies, magazines, music, advertising. On one side, cubist prostitutes; on the other, Barbies and Britneys. Advertising especially welcomed beauty: its seduction, its youth, its promise of better sex and a better life. Today, Plato's *Symposium* is a marketing manual.

While high art and high theory have never been so sceptical of beauty, daily experience has never been so certain. Countless psychological studies show us agreeing on the most attractive human face, agreement that cuts across gender, class, age, even race. The jury is still out on whether this consensus comes from nature or nurture, survival of the prettiest or *America's Next Top Model*. But at the very least, global mass culture has refined our everyday taste while high culture has failed utterly to change it. With the best of intentions, the twentieth century surrendered beauty to commerce. For beautiful art, we got beautiful shoes. For beautiful cities, beautiful billboards.

In 1993, the maverick American art critic Dave Hickey surprised the art world and himself by declaring at a conference that "The issue of the nineties will be *beauty*." The following year, the *New Yorker*'s future head art critic, Peter Schjeldahl, wrote a defence of beauty for *Art Issues* that the *New York Times Magazine* later reprinted as a cover story. "There is something crazy," Schjeldahl wrote, "about a culture in which the value of beauty becomes controversial."

So began, or so we noticed, what looks like beauty's return to its old haunts. In 1999, the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum marked its twenty-fifth anniversary with an exhibit called *Regarding Beauty: A View of the Late Twentieth Century*. The years since have seen shows of nineteenth- and twentieth-century art that hasn't been exhibited for decades, or never was: bourgeois Salon painters at Austria's Kunsthalle Krems, the Pre-Raphaelites at Tate Britain, the Nabi painter Maurice Denis at the Musée d'Orsay, Alberto Vargas's pinup girls at the University of Kansas, pages from *Vogue Italia* at the Royal Academy, Norman Rockwell at the Guggenheim.

In the literary arts, similar signs. Literature never rejected beauty as loudly or thoroughly as the visual arts, probably because the dominant literary form of the twentieth century – the novel – felt the tug of mass culture much more than visual art. But it fell into line, for art's reasons and its own. After WWI, being authentic mattered more to writers than being beautiful. Beauty was for the Victorians; we were tougher, smarter, cooler. In its version of art's conceptual turn, literary criticism diminished what beauty remained by preferring ideas to books and picking its books accordingly. Twentieth-century literature didn't fulfil the Dadaist poet Tristan Tzara's desire to assassinate beauty, but only because it didn't care enough to pull the trigger.

Opposite: *The Birth of Venus* (detail) by William-Adolphe Bouguereau, 1879.

Left: Yann Leroux, *Suzane II*, 2008, oil on paper, courtesy of the Ingram Gallery, Toronto.

But around the mid-1990s, book reviewers suddenly started using the B-word again. So did a few books, like the Canadian poet Anne Carson's *The Beauty of the Husband*, a verse essay that revisits Keats' equation of truth and beauty. Or the American novelist Richard Powers' *Plowing the Dark*, in which an artist who abandoned art because art abandoned beauty gets a second chance. In her book *Venus in Exile*, the critic Wendy Steiner wrote about seeing a revived hunger for beauty in all five of the short-listed novels for the 1997 National Book Critics Circle Award. As proof of beauty's return, her discussion isn't terribly persuasive. But as proof of Steiner's own longing as a reader and a critic for these books to contain beauty, to be beautiful, it's completely convincing.

For the moment, that's beauty's most conspicuous return to the high arts: not in art, but in talk about art, exactly where the twentieth-century's injunction against beauty was most dogmatic. In criticism and philosophy, beauty and its attendants – craft, feeling, sincerity, ethics, truth – have become permissible subjects again.

… a life without beauty is, as Plato said, not worth living.

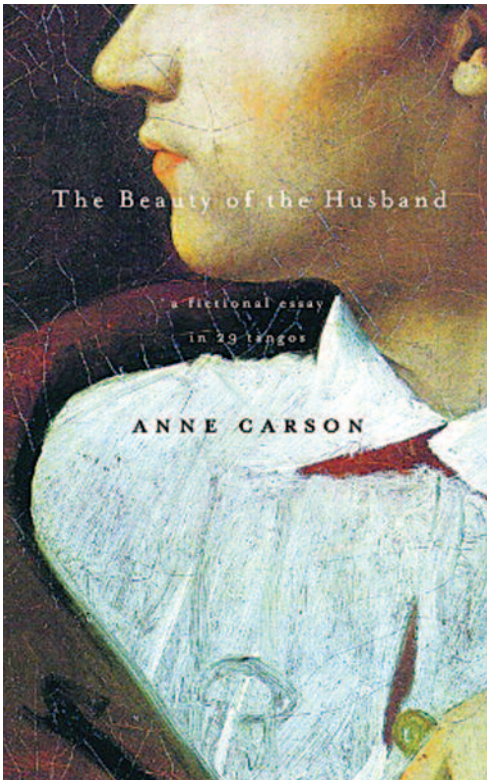
In the universities, the last decade has seen an outburst of conferences, graduate seminars, articles, and books on beauty. Because of the academy's confusion of its responsibility with page counts, it's dangerous to take quantity as a real measure of its interest in anything. But the best of the new work on beauty – like Dave Hickey's *The Invisible Dragon*, Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty*, and Alexander Nehamas' *Only a Promise of Happiness* – seems driven in thought and style by personal and so sincere motives. Like Wendy Steiner's attempt to find beauty in the novels she reads, it's born of desire, of the recovered memory that a life without beauty is, as Plato said, not worth living.

Beauty hasn't returned to these scattered fields ironically. It's back sincerely, for its own merits. Beauty is susceptible to irony, a point twentieth-century art proved repeatedly. But beauty is not itself ironic. If you see irony in the beautiful, you brought it there. The incompatibility of beauty with the late twentieth century's affection for irony is one reason it stayed away from the high arts as long as it has. As psychologist James Hillman has said, to bring beauty back, we'll need "the courage to abandon irony."

That momentous swing may have begun. In 1993, the American writer David Foster Wallace argued that the pervasive irony of postmodern culture makes it immune to critique or change by irony. Wallace suggested, audaciously, that the next generation of literary rebels might be *anti*-rebels, writers who "dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles." Eight years later, the young British curator Mark Sladen described American artists of his generation as "post-ironic."

And then, September 11. Suddenly, irony was out and sincerity in, from poignant street shrines to stern presidential promises. Suddenly, we were post-postmoderns with a vengeance, entering what *Vanity Fair* editor Graydon Carter called "the end of the age of irony." Maybe, as many said and more blogged, Carter was premature. But maybe not. Baudrillard's description of the destroyed towers as beautiful marked the culmination of a century of abusing beauty, its insanely sane conclusion. Endings are also beginnings.

Despite 9/11 and all that, actual beauty remains rare in actual art. With a handful of exceptions, beautiful imitations still take a back seat to clever concepts, or to other aesthetics like the sublime and the abject. When beauty does surface, it's still as grist for the concept, the target of a well-educated irony.



Take *Regarding Beauty*, the Hirshhorn's anniversary exhibit. Inspired by Hickey's prediction that beauty would be the "issue" of the 1990s, the organizers placed the weight of their punning title squarely on thinking about, rather than looking at, beauty. In her catalogue essay, co-curator Olga M. Viso claimed that artists no longer shun beauty, that beauty now exists "to be embraced as well as challenged." But in the exhibit itself, challenges far outnumbered embraces. Almost all the pieces continued the attack on beauty, from Andy Warhol's intentionally repetitive *Marilyn Monroe's Lips* in 1962 to Rosemarie Trockel's *Beauty* in 1995, a series of outdoor posters whose computer-generated "perfect" female faces parody Benetton ads.

Of the three dozen artists selected for *Regarding Beauty*, only the work of a few – three, by my count – is sincerely beautiful. There is room for disagreement about this, but not near as much we've been taught by a century of seeing beauty anywhere. Almost by definition, beauty is what you know, instantly, to be beautiful. Beauty *stands out*, both from other aesthetics and from lesser versions of itself. Prolonged exposure can deepen or wither your perception of beauty, in a poem or a person, but not the beauty itself, the beauty you saw then. We're not always ready for it, but beauty is immediate.

In the spring of 2007, I taught one of those new graduate seminars on beauty at the University of Toronto. For our final class I asked the students – myself and twenty MA and PhD candidates from the English, Philosophy, and Fine Art departments – to find beautiful art by a contemporary artist. Looking back, we didn't come up with much. Andy Goldsworthy, the well-known British sculptor who makes ephemeral outdoor pieces from natural materials like rocks, leaves, and snow. A young Canadian sculptor, Cal Lane, who cuts delicate, lace-like patterns into everyday metal objects like shovels, oil cans, a wheelbarrow. Recent semi-abstracts by two British painters, Howard Hodgkin and Cecily Brown. In architecture, Studio FAM's

glass memorial for the Madrid train bombing, and Foster and Partners' glass-covered court at the British Museum.

We saw others, but these are the few that immediately convinced us of their beauty, that stood out. It's possible that we found so few because we were too ignorant or too educated: that we knew too little about contemporary art, or too much about the pitfalls of beauty. But even granting those problems, I think we found little beautiful art in the real and virtual galleries of the West because there is still little to be found. The month our seminar began, the designer Bruce Mau wrote in the *Walrus* that "Today the talent to make beautiful paintings is a bus pass to the suburbs of art discourse." Add beautiful sculpture and beautiful buildings, and that's pretty much what it took us three months to find out.

In a sense, Mau was wrong. Beauty is closer today to the centre of art *discourse* than it has been for decades. But in another and more important sense, he's right, more right than I think he realized. Beauty has returned to art, not just to talk about art. It's just that its most vital return hasn't been to the centre of the art world, it's been to its edges – to, quite precisely, the suburbs of art. Today, beauty is using that bus pass.

Dan Witz is one of several artists who have been called the godfather of street art. Witz grew up in Highland Park, a suburb on Chicago's affluent North Shore. He studied at the Rhode Island School of Design in the mid-1970s and in 1980 received his BFA from the prestigious Cooper Union in New York's East Village. As Witz tells the story, he began doing street art while at Cooper, because of Cooper. Rebelling against the school's elitism – "the postmodern architecture, the chilly art snob students" – he got drunk one night and painted fires up and down its back stairway.

Ironically, students at highbrow Cooper taught Witz the lowbrow skill for which he's become known, his ability to paint hyper-realistic images that "trick the eye," *trompe l'œils*. Witz began fooling New York's eye in 1979 with his first large-scale street project, *The Birds of Manhattan*. Working with tiny brushes and acrylic paint, he painted over forty hummingbirds on walls and doors in Lower Manhattan. Besides the *trompe l'œil* illusion of three-dimensional realism, Witz used a technique called scumbling – thin layers of one colour over another – to capture the iridescent shimmer of a hummingbird's colours. The birds are not actual species: Witz let each adapt to its environment, taking its colour cues from the surface on which it flew.

Street art grew from graffiti, but it uses a wider range of techniques and styles. It's more educated: graffiti with a BFA, as its detractors say more

Dan Witz, Freeman Alley, New York City, 2000.

often than its defenders. It's less about asserting the self than addressing the world, sometimes through political content, more often through inclusive aesthetics. The most striking difference, the shift Witz anticipated by over a decade, is street art's new permissiveness towards the cute and the beautiful, aesthetics as off limits in graffiti as in the galleries.

In retrospect, *The Birds of Manhattan* was street art *avant la lettre*, two years before Blek le Rat pioneered stencil graffiti in Paris, a decade before Shepard Fairey launched his *Obey Giant* campaign out of a Rhode Island skateboard shop. But at the time, Witz's birds were less street art than art taking to the streets, like Jenny Holzer's *Truisms* of two years before and Keith Haring's subway drawings two years later. Witz assumed his outdoor art would be for him what it became for Haring, Lee Quiñones, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and other artists working the New York streets at the same time: a step on the way to the galleries. Throughout the 1980s he worked both sides of the fence, studio painting in the winter and occasional, mostly light-hearted street pieces in the summer.

In the early 1990s, a motorcycle accident together with Witz's persistent misgivings with the dollar-driven gallery scene forced him to reassess his place in art. In 1994, he recommitted himself to street art with his first major project since *The Birds of Manhattan*, a series of grim, hooded figures postered on walls overlooking heroin spots in his Lower East Side neighbourhood.

Since then, Witz has returned to the streets every summer with a new project. His dominant style remains *trompe l'œil* realism, though to reduce his exposure to increasingly anti-graffiti New York police he stopped hand-painting on site in the early '90s, working instead in the studio with a photograph printed on vinyl sticker paper and painted to add dimension. On site, Witz airbrushes shadows around the sticker, a process that gets him off the street in under five minutes.

Witz employs several aesthetics. *Hoodies* is as dark as its content, heroin and HIV in the Lower East Side of the early '90s. Street art's affection for the cute surfaces in his humour, street pranks like a house he turned into a face by adding a red weather balloon for a nose. But his driving aesthetic is beauty. In 2000, when Witz left his Ludlow loft for Brooklyn, he revived his birds as a farewell to his old neighbourhood. Once again hummingbirds flew in Lower Manhattan, on Madison, on Henry, in Freeman Alley. Back in 1979, Witz looked for clean canvases for his birds, untagged walls and doors. In 2000, he let them fly over old graffiti, announcing the relation and the difference between the two aesthetics, tradition and departure.

The summer after September 11, Witz stuck candlelit shrines on the bases of light poles radiating out along sightlines from Ground Zero into midtown, Jersey, and Brooklyn. The pieces began as photographs of the votive offerings left in Union Square Park after the attacks, painted in Witz's way to light the night again. New beauty, for an old end: consolation.

The *WTC Shrines* is Witz's favourite work to date, his best marriage of form and function. Mine is *Floating*, a series from 2005 of tiny rowboats set afloat on the sides of dumpsters, trains, tractor-trailers – anything that moved. The boats all have the same name: *Lonesome*. In context, and nowhere else, they are a near perfect image of urban pathos, transient Prufrocks for the twenty-first century. They hear the mermaids sing, but not for them.

For Witz, public art should be publicly accessible. "My small goal is to give pause, to say art is around, that it is a possibility. I want ordinary people to know that places like this street aren't always what they seem." His aesthetic follows from that goal: beauty is naturally accessible to "ordinary people," which is one reason high art spurned it and the main reason commerce embraced it. Witz's medium might be new, in other words, but his methods are old, pre-urinal. *Trompe l'œil* dates to the

Dan Witz, 23rd and 6th, New York City, 2002.

Greeks, to the dawn of beautiful imitations. Scumbling is an Old Masters' technique last used extensively in Impressionism, beauty's last gasp.

Conservative methods do not necessarily make conservative art. Accessibility matters to Witz as a starting point, a way in for all, but he uses beauty not to please but to provoke. Last fall, he wrote me that he chose beauty as "a calculated punk reaction, a form of rebellion, an artist's line-in-the-sand manifesto rejecting boring, elitist, intentionally exclusivist art practices. Beauty as sedition." Outside the art world, Witz's street art is equally radical for the simple, courageous reason that it's free: a public beauty that costs nothing to see, and has nothing to sell.

Witz is not alone. The young New York street artist known as Swoon wheatpastes fragile paper cutouts of her family, friends, and city characters – beauty caught and left to rot. In Montreal, Roadsworth spray-paints ivy

Dan Witz, *Lonesome Boat*, dumpster, New York City, 2005.

along the painted lines on streets, or did until he plea-bargained mischief charges in 2006. Sometimes the beauty of street art is in the content more than the form, as in the hundred-plus "I Love You" tags someone sprayed across Toronto in 2001. Sometimes it's not even in the street: the Wooster Collective, street art's online conscience, claims Andy Goldsworthy as one of their own.

At the moment the amount of beautiful art is about the same on the streets as in the galleries: very little. But the crucial difference is that while beauty is still largely excluded from or treated as an "issue" by the art world, it's being welcomed on the streets, by Witz's ordinary people. Witz, Swoon, and Roadsworth are not typical street artists, not yet. They're exceptional – and exceptionally admired. And though it's no guarantee, history gets made by exceptions. In 1917, urinals weren't typical art either.

Street art isn't the only artistic suburb to welcome beauty back in recent years. Beauty's back with heels and humour in the neo-burlesque, the revival of American burlesque that began in the mid-1990s. It's back with a tear in its eye in indie music, in the explosion of sensitive singer-songwriters we

would have beat with a bat in the crotch-rock '80s. It's back as a child in so-called Outsider Art, both the unskilled folk art brought inside and the skilled folk art left outside, like the painter Thomas Kinkade calls "America's most collected living artist," i.e. Thomas Kinkade. It's back as craft in border-crossing extensions of punk's DIY aesthetic to the rebirth of vinyl, the Lowbrow movement, Martha Stewart, sculpture's turn to homemade materials, poetry's return to meter and rhyme, art's return to paint.

Some or all of these will disappear, passing with fashion or swallowed whole by art dealers and advertisers. The internal backlash against street art has already begun, with accusations flying in paint and words of artists selling out to galleries and corporations as well as charges of white artists stealing a black art, the tired and tiring Elvis story. The New York street art news last summer was dominated by the Splasher, an anonymous artist who's vandalizing the vandals, Pollocking house paint on street pieces by crossover successes like Swoon and Fairey. The Splasher's manifesto quotes Dada scripture, demanding the destruction of all bourgeois art. Old toilets die hard.

Beauty will survive the passing of street art, of any art. If it could endure all we threw at it in the twentieth century, it can handle a little house paint in the twenty-first. In art, beauty is just one aesthetic choice among many. But as Danto has said and Plato before him, it's the only aesthetic that is essential to life as we would prefer to live it. In the last century, we got our public beauty fixes from nature and commerce, not art. Nature is too far away now, and commerce has another agenda. Beauty's return reveals an enduring hunger for nearby beauty that's not for sale. Kant was wrong: billboards can be beautiful. But they're not enough.

For Danto, beauty has returned to the post-9/11 world because beauty eases pain. It's the appropriate aesthetic for our elegiac mood: candles in the parks, soft ballads by pop gods, Witz's street shrines, the Madrid memorial. We convinced ourselves that beauty was subjective, in the eye of the beholder. But when we needed to come together in the communal rites of mourning and elegy, we chose beauty all the same.

Beauty's use as consolation after September 11 wasn't a movement so much as a moment, one we'd shared many times before in the long litany of twentieth-century pain. We may have snubbed beauty, but we made sure to keep some around for experiences too intense for avant-garde theory to relieve. There are no Damien Hirst reproductions in hospital gift shops.

Beauty isn't back just to help us deal with the past. It's back to help change the present and create a different future. In a poster by Britain's best-known street artist, Banksy, a masked graffiti artist in black and white

cocks his arm to throw a bouquet of flowers in full colour. In one of Witz's street illusions, a hand punctures a metal utility box to clutch a single rose. These are not beauty as consolation – they're beauty as provocation, as deliberately seditious as Duchamp's urinal was in 1917. Strange, how far we've come: that flowers could be rebellious.

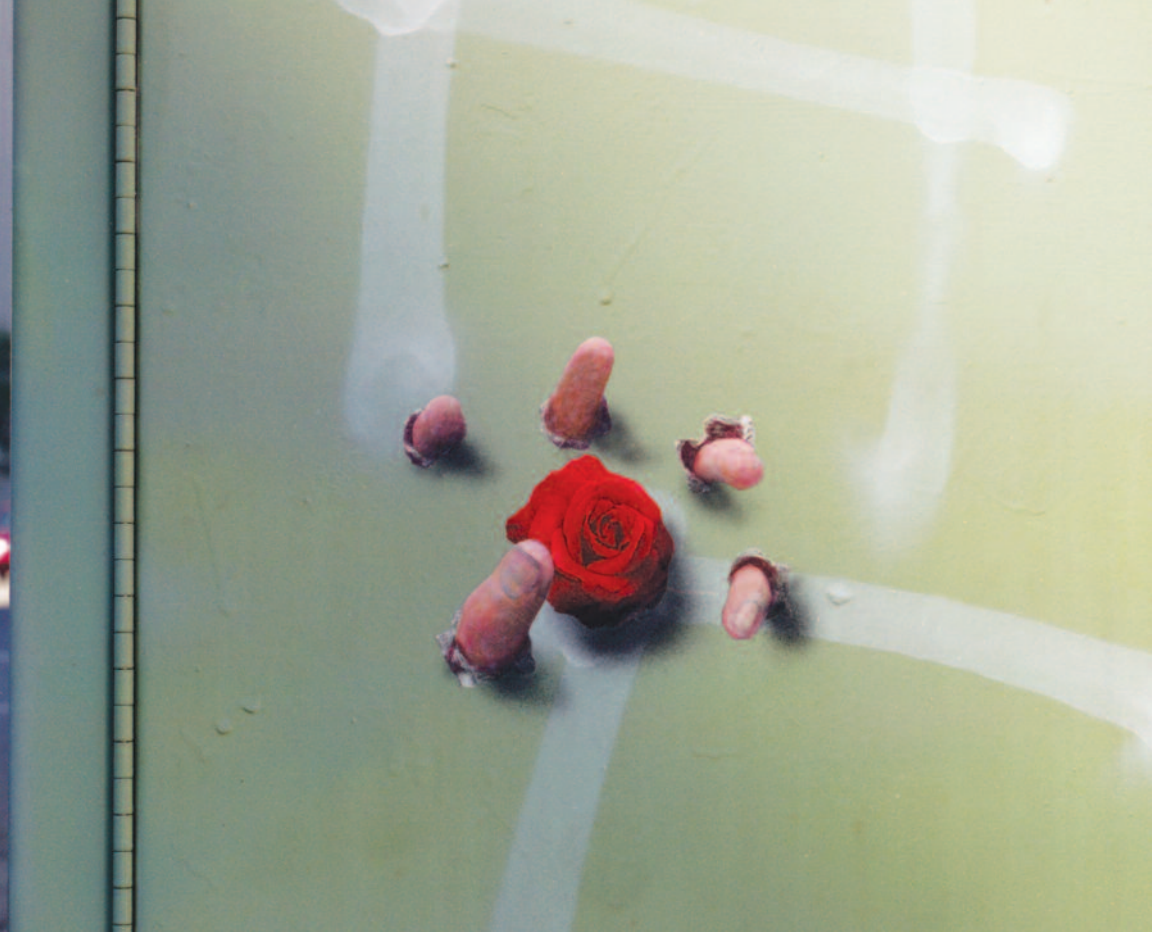
Beauty has much to offer, starting with the pleasure of seeing it. I enjoy the intellectual delights of conceptual art as much as the next PhD, but after a while (say a hundred years) they can become predictable. Challenging the viewer's definition of art, check. Deconstructing the white cube, check. Exposing the politics of representation, check. Art cannot be blamed for having few new ideas: the number of ideas entering the world at any given time is exceedingly small. But it's not unreasonable to ask it to recognize this limitation, and to aim once in a while at pleasure instead. It's not as easy as it looks, or as simple.

Many of the people who are talking about beauty again are doing so because they believe that besides giving pleasure, pleasurable art can change the world. For the art critic Wendy Steiner and the philosopher Elaine Scarry, for instance, beauty engenders crucial political virtues. For Steiner, beauty invites communication between the beholder and the beheld, the self and the other – the beginnings of empathy and equality. For Scarry, beauty's fragility fosters the desire to protect it, and so might teach us to extend our care from the extraordinary artwork to the ordinary person.

Scarry goes further, standing on Plato's and Kant's shoulders to argue that beauty points the way toward justice itself. It's more than a coincidence, she says, that we describe both beautiful objects and just outcomes as "fair." Beauty's main attribute is justice's main goal: symmetry. But unlike justice, which is necessarily general and abstract, beauty is present to the senses, particular and concrete. In answer to the question "What does a just society look like?" Scarry says we might answer, "like the sky."

I'm not sure beauty can achieve what we could not, or that we should expect it to. In his recent book *Only a Promise of Happiness*, Alexander Nehamas is also doubtful, arguing that beauty offers no moral or social value beyond itself – only the uncertain promise that my life will be better for the time I spend with it. But even Nehamas ends up saying that in an uncertain world, "the promise of happiness is happiness itself." His beauty gives the individual what Scarry's gives the world, a better life for you and me that presumably adds up to a better life for all.

If beauty offers anything beyond pleasure, it's to be found in its much-contested universality. Perhaps we need a safer word: Nehamas



Dan Witz, vinyl stickers with acrylic shadow, Los Angeles, 1997.

suggests *communal*. But hopefully universal or cautiously common, long experience and recent science show widespread agreement on beauty and its appeal. If it isn't universal, it's the most universal aesthetic we've got. Maybe it's time to admit again what Friedrich Schiller said more clearly than Kant, that "Beauty alone makes the whole world happy, and each and every being forgets its limitations while under its spell."

Beauty's magic can of course be used for unhappy ends. Mass culture's embrace of beauty doesn't necessarily make its products good for us. Beauty works as well to foster the warrior spirit as it does to lament its leftovers, from Rupert Brooke's beautiful poems in WWI to Silvia Pecota's beautiful pinups for the Canadian troops in Afghanistan. But in a time scarred by the differences among us, anything that can remind us of our similarity without erasing our differences has tremendous political potential for good. Beauty doesn't get to decide for whom it works. But we do.

In his defence of beauty back in 1994, Peter Schjeldahl suggested that maybe we banished beauty because we couldn't forgive it for not saving

the world. But we never gave it a chance: we hid its survivors in museums and mansions and sold its public space to the advertisers. We don't actually know what an ethical beauty could do if we let it loose in the world, because we haven't tried. As Dan Witz says of his form of public art, "Not for sale is the most radical thing to happen in art since abstraction."

Some believe ethics must come before beauty, the no-poetry-after-Auschwitz school. Duchamp, for starters: no more beautiful art for an ugly world. The Splasher, for another: "OUR STRUGGLE CANNOT BE HUNG ON WALLS. DESTROY THE MUSEUMS, IN THE STREETS AND EVERYWHERE." Less typographically excited but just as certain, Arthur Danto says beauty cannot return to art until politics ends injustice, while Peter Schjeldahl calls beauty "a necessity that waits upon the satisfaction of other necessities."

They're probably right. Art isn't water, it's wine. But I like wine. The problem with putting politics before beauty is that it makes beauty contingent upon utopia, and I can't wait that long. Until the Marxists make the world perfect, perhaps the rest of us can make it a little better, a little fairer, and a little happier – with the help of Dan Witz and Swoon, and, yes, Martha Stewart and Thomas Kinkade.

Beauty is not all there is or should be. I don't want to live inside one of Kinkade's bucolic paintings, and not just because I'd burn in his utopia. The human range of emotions deserves a range of aesthetics: it would be a mistake to abandon everything art learned in the twentieth century, just as it was a mistake to abandon everything it learned about beauty in the centuries before, the skills we replaced with theories. Nor is the beauty of the beautiful the end of the story: to call an artwork beautiful does not say all there is to say about it, any more than it says all there is about a person. And nor, finally, are beautiful shoes without their pleasure or virtue. Soweto's new malls are better than its old shanties – not perfect, just better.

But while we're waiting on utopia, beauty could do this imperfect world some good. Especially in public spaces, beauty could bring us together, remind us of what we share – in times of joy as well as grief. It could win our attention back from commercial beauty, showing us other pleasures besides shopping, other ways to see and think about our bodies, our values, our cities. Maybe, just maybe, it could point the way toward a fairer politics as well as a fairer home. And even if beauty can't do those things – even if it can't make the world we want – it can certainly make it easier to live with the world we have.

We don't just like beauty, we need it. Life is pain eased by the comforts we scratch on the walls. In beauty's service, Keats lied. Truth is a moving target, but beauty we can see, touch, and hold. It can't return because it never left us: we left it. The twentieth century made beauty that's not selling us something hard to share and rare to see, but it's still here, ready whenever we are.

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Banksy, *Flowerchucker*