

Dave Hickey

Buying the world

1

Nothing is so conditional, let us say *circumscribed*, as our feeling for the beautiful. Anyone who tried to divorce it from man's pleasure in himself would find the ground give way beneath him.

– Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 1889

I want to talk about the way contemporary Americans talk about the things they find beautiful, because they talk about them all the time, and when they do, they use the word 'beautiful' with consistency and precision in a very tradi-

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tional 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 our anxious pleasure at something that transcends the merely appropriate and asserts the relative value of that thing over other things of its kind. In everyday talk, the word usually occurs as an exclamation occasioned by the speaker's involuntary positive response to an object or event in the external world, and, more often than not, these vocalizations are followed by conversation, by analysis and negotiation, agreement or dissent, coalition or faction. Herein lies the mystery.

The visceral, involuntary pleasures that occasion such exclamations are by definition personal, private, and self-fulfilling, so why make them public? Why utter the word 'beautiful' at all? And why respond when someone else does? For three reasons, I think. First, we speak the word and respond to it because we are good democrats who value transparency and consensus and occasionally long for them. Second, we speak the word and respond to it because we are citizens of a self-consciously historical society that values eccentric personal responses on the grounds that these responses, made transparent, may not be eccentric at all, may in fact presage a

new consensus. Third, we speak and respond because we can, because we live in a society in which the Pursuit of Happiness is an officially sanctioned endeavor.

Thus, for Americans, the experience of beauty is necessarily inextricable from its optimal social consequence: membership in a happy coalition. So talk follows naturally from our experience, and in this we are the direct descendants of those Renaissance artists, mercantile princes, and connoisseur churchmen who spoke of beauty the way we do. These sixteenth-century Italians, in their idolatrous avarice and retrospective reverence for Pliny and Cicero, reinstated an antique artistic discourse maniacally obsessed with the *paragone* – with the argumentative comparison, competition, and ranking of things like-to-like. Aiming at the establishment of objective standards, these devotees of the ‘new learning’ considered and reconsidered, in taxonomic hierarchy, the relationship between one design and another, one painting and another, one artist and another, one genre and another, and one art and another.

The consequence of these speculations, however, was not the establishment of objective standards but a permanent and profoundly democratic revolution in the way we look at things. Official authority was subverted and its rhetoric disabled by the logic of the *paragone*. Under the auspices of this method, authorized instrumentalities of sacred devotion and political power were transformed into objects of delectation – freely elected to serve this function by private citizens through the exercise of comparison and connoisseurship. Works once presumed to express the authority of their origins were taken to represent the content of their admirers’ taste, and for the first time in history, the power to invest works of contemporary art with

meaning and value began to shift from the supply side to the consumer side.

From this point forward, the ongoing, unrequited argument about relative beauty became more and more inextricable from the habits and conventions of the mercantile republics in which it had flourished since the days of Rome – equally indebted to the conventions of representative democracy and to the dynamics of commerce. The whole business of ascertaining the relative value of comparable objects, after all, derives in its every aspect from the practical paganism of commercial life. There is no other precedent, and the site where such value is adjudicated is by definition a marketplace. In practice, this site is more of a meta-marketplace in which buying and selling are largely symbolic, something closer to a civil forum in which objects are elected by free-floating constituencies to represent shared pleasures and desires.

In this way, rather casually, the practical paganism of commercial life is reconfigured into a practice of engaged connoisseurship designed less to ascertain the value of objects than to externalize and socialize the values of their adjudicators in a multivalent world where face value, more often than not, is the only value there is. As Nietzsche would have it, these adjudications function as a public modality through which we socialize our pleasure in ourselves; and this, I would suggest, is why contemporary Americans talk about the things they find beautiful and talk about them all the time. We are citizens of a secular commercial democracy, relentlessly borne forth on the flux of historical change, routinely flung laterally by the exigencies of dreams and commerce, and bereft of those internalized commonalities of race, culture, region, and religion that purportedly define ‘peoples.’

As such, we are a social people charged with inventing and perpetually reinventing the conditions of our own sociability out of the fragile resource of our own private pleasures and secret desires. Lacking even the most basic prerequisites for relating to one another, we choose to *correlate*, to define our commonality with reference to an ever-changing panoply of external objects and occasions. We gather around these objects and occasions as about a hearth, as lines of force around a strange attractor; we organize ourselves in non-exclusive communities of desire, then stay or go according to the whims of sublimated romance and the weather of the times. As a modality of social organization this dynamic system may be construed as beguiling or appalling according to one's taste, but there is no denying its efficacy and appropriateness – or the complexity of its provenance, which is the subject of this essay.

2

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 to 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 on such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

– *The Declaration of Independence*,
July 4, 1776

Since we are talking about beauty here, I must insist at the outset that, even

though the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence is not a particularly beautiful sentence, the idea of American beauty could not exist without the cool impudence of its first seven words. In a single phrase, these words exempt the sentence's subsequent assertions of human equality and unalienable rights from the claims of traditional conduct, metaphysical certainty, and scientific proof. They do what the thirteen colonies were themselves doing. They declare their independence and divest themselves of external authority. They say, "WE hold these Truths to be self-evident," not "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 this authority, they shall have the status of law. Period.

The sentence's assertion of equality and unalienable rights derives absolutely from the authority of the 'WE' that begins it. This WE (the Second Continental Congress) derives *its* authority from the consent of the Governed, whose authority derives from the fiat of the opening clause, as well. Thus the circularity: The Second Continental Congress legally empowers the people to empower the Congress to empower the people. Upon this self-contained legal fiction, this *donnée*, the United States was founded on forms and principles designed to guarantee, with qualifications, its polity's equal right to Life, Liberty, and Happiness. Equality is posited without qualification, whether it exists or not. Life and Liberty are negatively conflated under the rubric of Safety. The right to Happiness (whether *it* exists or not) is restricted to

the pursuit of it.

To me, this final permission to pursue happiness has always been the most alluring. By distinguishing safety from happiness, it introduces an element of dynamic instability into public governance and invests the now neglected discipline of eudaemonics with legal consequence, subsuming the entire realm of commercial and institutional interest beneath it. In most writing about the republic's primal texts, this phrase is given rather short shrift. 'The pursuit of happiness' is simply presumed to be a Lockean euphemism that guarantees the pursuit of commerce and industry under the purview of contract law. It certainly is that, but the phrase is not dead language. It derives from a rhetoric in which commerce and industry are said to produce and disseminate 'goods,' (which is to say virtues incarnate), and Happiness, in the locution of the Second Continental Congress, is the Good toward which all these goods aspire.

Moreover, the panoply of goods produced and disseminated under this legally protected right to pursue happiness extends well beyond objects of use and consumption to intellectual and artistic properties, as well. And since we are all free to pursue our own happiness, the relative value of all these goods is necessarily determined outside the realm of governmental authority, scientific proof, and metaphysical certainty in the externalized, propositional discourses of the forum, the court, the piazza, and the marketplace. Herein lie the pagan roots of the republic, and, with these in mind, it is not particularly surprising that a society whose citizens propose and elect a hierarchy of incarnate creatures to represent them in the realm of governance would propose and elect a hierarchy of similarly 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 nature of their quest for it – inconceivable that icons of happiness would *not* proliferate.

Every morning, when I was in 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 counter-text, a paean to beauty in its presence, "*Oh beautiful for gracious thighs, for amber babes of Spain . . .*" It was a puerile encomium, to be sure, but I have not forgotten the inordinate pride we kids took in our collective poesis as we sang out, "*Veronica, Veronica, God shed his grapes on thee . . .*" We were less original than we thought, however. Since that time, I have yet to discover a contemporary of mine whose class bards did not invent their own dissenting lyric to be sung to this tune. Somehow (probably thanks to the Second Continental Congress), we all felt empowered to propose our own aesthetic, and we did. We all sang the song, but with our own lyrics, because we all expected our own brand of beauty as a privilege of citizenship, as an icon of happiness, and 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 all. At recess, milling around in the asphalt schoolyard, we continued to sing the same song with different lyrics. We beach dudes would extol the sublimity of mountainous, smoking surf; we would deplore the grungy indignity of city buses. Fledgling Bukowskis

among us would take exception to this anti-urban cant, as would the barrio kids for whom nothing not cars or music or Veronica qualified for serious contemplation. So the argument would bubble along – the song holding us together and the lyrics setting us apart. In this haphazard manner, the vernacular discourse of beauty flourished at Santa Monica Elementary, and not one of us would have quarreled with Baudelaire’s dictum in the *Salon of 1846* that “there are as many kinds of beauty as there are habitual ways of seeking happiness.”

Nor would any American today quarrel with Baudelaire. We all seek happiness as a matter of course and call it beauty. We brave crowds to gaze at paintings on the walls of museums. We gather on scenic overlooks just off the interstate. We sit in the stands as the jump shot swishes through the net or the skater smoothly lands. We sit in the audience as the solo or the aria concludes, and, occasionally, in our delight, we mutter this involuntary vocalization: “Beautiful!” – Or, sometimes, we just say, “Great!” – Or, if we reside in the borough of Queens, “Gorgeous!” Then we look around for confirmation or argument. Either will do to begin the conversation, which is always a discourse of value for which the only qualification is a shared experience of some correlative object or event.

Because of mass production, mass communication, and sheer mobility, a vast repertoire of such objects and events is available to us. We all see a lot in this country and see a lot of the same things, and, having these things in common, and little else, we talk about them obsessively. We may acquire knowledge and self-knowledge from such a conversation, but neither is required to begin it. We can talk about beauty with anyone and we do. We can talk about it anyplace

and anytime after the encounter, because we know it when we see it and we remember it well enough that its perceived absence 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 like to think of encounters with beauty in just this sense, as pleasant surprises. These are far from daily occurrences in any society, but they do happen. We encounter the embodiment of what we like and what we want in the external world and we are delighted. Something connecting our bodies to our minds vibrates like a tuning fork, and the sudden, unexpected harmony of body, mind, and world becomes the occasion for both consolation and anxiety.

In that moment, we are, for once, at home with ourselves in the incarnate world, yet no longer in tune with the mass of people who do not respond as we do. We now belong to 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 co-conspirators. Thus, beautiful objects or events are defined by their ability to reorganize society by creating constituencies around them, and to represent for these constituencies both who they are and what they want – and in a free society the question of what a group of citizens wants is always political.

The resulting din of aesthetic contention is so ubiquitous that it’s easy to take for granted. It is equally easy to deplore the daily fret of living in a nation of exquisite connoisseurs where yuppies

standing before the pastry case at Starbucks spend more time deliberating on their choice of muffin than you do buying a car. Even so, it's hard to imagine a commercial democracy conducting its business without this ongoing murmur of choice, advocacy, discrimination, and dissent about everything from chainsaws to eyeliner, from Puccini to Jan van Eyck. This chatter is usually dismissed as a defect of consumerism, but it is always less about acquiring things or paying money for them than the ongoing mystery of pleasant surprises – of physical resonance with a world where our own responses matter and our own vote counts.

The experience of pleasant surprises, however, is not local to the social experience of commercial democracies. It is ubiquitous and infinitely variegated because we are all very different and the world is very wide. The discourse arising from these surprises, however, flourishes to best effect in highly mobile, loosely organized, and casually administrated commercial societies whose members feel privileged to respond and *must* respond, in fact, to conduct their daily business. Better-organized and more rigorously administrated societies, those less practically pagan and restlessly cosmopolitan, cope with pleasant surprises quite differently, simply because the reflexive experience of American beauty is always, potentially, an occasion for changing one's friends, one's fashions, one's furnishings, and one's livelihood – even for changing one's home in the hope of discovering a place of residence that 'feels like home.'

In societies where precipitous changes of this sort are not standard procedure – in tribes, villages, academies, and churches, in laboratories and governmental bureaucracies – the pleasant surprise takes on a darker aspect. In such

societies, one's eccentric taste is always more likely to be construed as a threat to the community – as a signifier of disloyalty – than as an icon of aspiration. (As any tribal elder will tell you, the Trojan War was the disastrous consequence of one young man's pleasant surprise, of his cosmopolitan connoisseurship, and don't you forget it.) Accepting the experience of beauty as a straightforward, culturally informed, politically validated, physical response to the external world directs discussions of beauty toward its social consequences rather than its absent causes, and in tribal environments the consequence of espousing a dissenting aesthetic (as each of us do) is always anxiety.

Beauty reigns, if it reigns at all, with the consent of the governed. Those who do not feel free to consent feel anxiety, especially in an obsessively permissive society like this one, in which most of our cloistered citizens are charged with the task of denying us one sort of permission or another. These clerics, bureaucrats, or academics are assigned the difficult task of adjudicating the 'real' value, uncovering the 'true' meaning, and enforcing the 'correct' interpretation of everything from tax returns to literary texts, from scripture to works of art. Out in the street, everyone from the cop on the corner to the drifter he's hassling is a brazen, chattering aesthete sporting impudent opinions in lieu of green carnation, and the minions of correct interpretation must be forgiven their annoyance at this tumult.

They are, after all, disinterested professionals, and the vernacular discourse of beauty is in no sense a professional or disinterested endeavor. It is a discourse of engaged beholders – quite literally a colloquy of amateurs – and need be nothing more. It pertains to our Safety and Happiness, to the dissonance be-

tween the two, and our wistful expectation of feeling simultaneously at home in our bodies, in the world, and in society. It is also a civil institution that is only imaginable in a society whose primal texts assert the priority of eudaemonics – a society where we are led to expect first-rate representation in the world from senators, congressmen, lawyers, paintings, landscapes, and pop tunes.

3

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 Bounarroti 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 Laocoon, 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 fifteen and sixteenth centuries in Italy, a loose confederation of artisans, church decorators, and visual educators created a body of pictures whose authority and immediacy completely eclipsed the agendas they were designed to promote. In recognition of this achievement, the canon of precedence that ranked visual objects in the period was redesigned. The special category of cultural and commercial value previous-

ly restricted to works of classical antiquity was tacitly extended to include the work of these contemporary masters. In 1605, this expanded category was confirmed in writing by the city of Florence, which passed an edict expressly forbidding the sale and export of any work on any subject by eighteen artists from all over Italy. The list included Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, del Sarto, Correggio, Parmigianino, and most of the rest of the Italian canon – most of whom have remained canonical.

All of the artists whose work was singled out in the Florentine edict had executed permanent public works for churches and civic buildings throughout Italy. The objects at issue in the edict, however, were those viscerally persuasive, visually dazzling, readily portable paintings on canvas and panel whose most amazing attribute in their own time was the scale of their public vogue – their celebrity in a fame-crazy culture, their burgeoning marketability in a nascent commercial society. It is equally true, of course, that the work was idealistically inspired by the rational, corporeal authority of classical sculpture – that it was rather casually informed by the pagan cosmopolitanism of Roman learning, and justified, as often as not, by the casuistry of fashionable Neoplatonism. It is also undeniable that, regardless of their secular accouterments, 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 owed to contemporary fashion, primitive Catholicism, and classical paganism is most succinctly demonstrated by the agendas and controversies that swirled around their greatest technological innovation: the invention of oil glazing. This practice of applying transparent

layers of pigment suspended in oil one over the other created the ravishing surfaces whose luminosity became the trademark of this painting. Since it mimics the layering of skin, the invention itself probably derived from observation. The practical virtue of this layering, and doubtless part of its *raison d'être*, was first its stunning rhetorical acuity, and second its ability to approximate in painting the seductive corporeality and translucency of antique objects carved in marble.

The theological occasion for this invention was purportedly to make the doctrine of the Incarnate Word visible and palpable in portrayals of Christ (and particularly the Christ-child). This doctrine was the primary tenet of Western Catholicism, and since the glazed surfaces of this new painting allowed ambient illumination to pass through levels of transparent color and bounce back so the paint appeared to hold the light and glow, this seductive simultaneity of light and gross material was taken as a metaphor for Christ's simultaneous mortality and sanctity as the eternal word of God made living flesh. In everyday practice, however, oil glazing was never actually restricted to painting the body of Christ. The physical, theological metaphor of luminosity was immediately extended and transformed into a metaphor for the presence of grace – for the visible investment of a body with some aspect of sanctity. This justified the use of oil glazing to portray kings, patrons, princes, saints, and bystanders.

In very short order, entire paintings were bathed in atmospheric sourceless radiance – directionless and therefore timeless. (The seventeenth century would bring to painting the ruthless diagonal light that insists upon the unstable contingency of historical time.) The luminous ambience in sixteenth-century

paintings, however, was not properly a metaphor for timeless grace. It was more accurately an incarnation of it, since the visibility of grace in Renaissance theology was not a metaphor, but a fact. The theological presumption was that grace was perceptible, that it could in fact be seen. (This is why church deliberations about the attribution and assignment of sainthood remain obsessed with eyewitness accounts, with witnessed miracles, witnessed good works, witnessed aura, etc.)

So, if grace is signified by its visibility and confirmed by being *seen*, what is the status of objects whose physical luminosity *represents* the state of grace? A person invested with grace is a visible saint. An object invested with grace is a sacred icon. What, then, is a painting that incarnates with breathtaking authority the mimetic image of creatures who embody the luminosity of eternal grace? A mimetic picture, after all, is not a Byzantine ideogram that stands in for a word – or The Word. It is a persuasive representation that stands in for the *absence* of its physical subject. Thanks to oil glazing, however, such paintings seemed something *more* than mimetic pictures; they were in fact *incarnations* of mimetic pictures.

Let's say we have a painting of Christ. Is this a picture, an icon, or something else? If it is only a representation of the historical Jesus, then this picture stands in for the *absent* Christ and signifies his absence. Yet Christ, conceived in grace, is *never* absent. To presume that the picture might embody Christ's eternal presence, however, allows the inference that a man-made representation of Christ might incarnate his *presence*, and now we are playing rather fast and loose with the Second Commandment. The solution to this theological double entendre favored by the Roman church was to construe

these works as 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. This idea that works of art might exist in a condition of simultaneous absence and presence, as representations and incarnations, has persisted throughout the history of Western art, secular and sacred, and reached its modern apotheosis in impressionism.

The critical issue in Catholic Italy, the *source* of this once and future visible enhancement, is not explained by this explanation. Beyond Christ, who was conceived in a state of grace, everyone and everything else in a state of grace must be invested from without. Tangible relics invest icons with grace according to the Catholic Church, and the Church itself invests human beings. Protestants and dissenting Catholics believed human beings could be invested with grace directly by God himself, without clerical mediation, and held all objects or images purportedly invested with sanctity to be nothing more than false idols, pagan simulacra of Christianity.

In retrospect, one can't help but suspect that these issues of incarnation and idolatry, of grace and its investiture, would have remained moot without the challenge of Renaissance painting, which confounded representation and incarnation and mimicked the luminosity of grace. These issues did arise, however, and the continuing impact of these theological niceties on secular painting is inescapable. Even today, the phrases 'craven idolatry' and 'commodity fetishism' may be substituted for one another with no loss of sense. The idea of grace as sanctity-visibly-confirmed translates so easily into the idea of beauty-that-need-only-be-seen-to-be-believed that it's hard to imagine the latter without the former. The intellectual construc-

tions of an object in a state of grace and that of a work of art in an autonomous state of quality, goodness, or beauty are virtually identical: both the artwork and the icon are presumed to embody, in the present moment, a condition of ahistorical, visible 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 self-evident authority derive from the institution that sponsored its creation? From the artist who created it? From God who inspired the artist who created it? From the scriptural criticism and scholarship that interprets it? From the instructive value of the stories it portrays? Or could this painting possibly derive its authority from a constituency of beholders who have actually experienced its power, agreed upon its loveliness, and, in word and deed, publicly confirmed its value?

In the history of commentary on art, all of these sources of authority have been passionately defended except for the last one. Even though enthusiastic secular constituencies undeniably created the public vogue of Renaissance painting, and this public vogue created the beaux-arts tradition, most commentators hesitate to acknowledge this circumstance. Presumably the colloquy of enthusiasts talking around and about a work of art evokes the noisy chaos of a souk and calls up the image of feckless Israelites dancing with abandon around the golden calf. If it does, it should, since *neither* of these evocations is inaccurate or non-descriptive. Both exempla are implicit in the scene described by Francesco da Sangallo of the chattering crowd gathered around the pit from which the Laocoon has just been exhumed.

Everyone present at the excavation of

this wonderful object is drawing, talking, comparing, and appraising. The Laocoon, mythically risen from the earth, is at once a golden calf, an object of commerce, and the incarnation of an ancestral text. Giuliano da Sangallo, who recognizes the statue from a passage in Pliny, is an architect by profession. Michelangelo Bounarroti 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 Laocoon is hardly an offence against culture, while ignoring the impact of commerce and consumption on the history of art does in fact qualify, since it simplifies the picture without improving it and leads us down the garden path toward the noxious habit of explaining the flowering of Renaissance painting in terms of 'insight,' 'inspiration,' and 'creativity.'

I am much more comfortable tracing the origins of this flowering to the late Middle Ages when the Catholic Church began outsourcing its decoration piecemeal. Over the next few centuries, the sacred orders traditionally entrusted with in-house decoration were gradually reassigned, and outsourcing became the norm. By the late mid-fifteenth century, the visual rhetoric of Western Catholicism could be said to reside firmly in the hands of private providers overseen by commissioning bishops and scholarly iconographers. At this point, the Church in Rome, as an image-provider, began to function as a public-private conglomerate surrounded by a satellite ring of competing subcontractors. (One thinks of Brunelleschi and Ghiberti's competition to portray the sacrifice of Isaac in the doors of the baptistery of Florence Cathedral in 1401, the outcome of which launched Ghiberti on a career of bronze

doors and drove Brunelleschi into architecture much to his chagrin and our own joy.)

Over the years, this outsourcing arrangement had a three-fold effect on art practice. First, unlike the artisans of sacred orders, these new subcontracting artists, artisans, and ateliers, vying for competitive advantage, strove for distinction, evolving trademark styles by investing their production with idiosyncratic strategies and mannerisms (on the principle that if you get your style on the ceiling you are more likely to get the commission for the nave). Second, the practice of stealing, borrowing, refining, and inventing that the struggle for distinction entailed began to erode the integrity of regional artistic idioms. Expatriate artists and artisans, brought to Rome by provincial popes to celebrate their papacies in local styles, did not go home. They stayed in Rome, absorbed local influences, and continued to compete for work in an increasingly cosmopolitan stylistic environment.

Finally, and most importantly, the Church's public administration of private art practice created, early on, a nascent art world populated by connoisseur churchmen 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 one to the other according to its 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, and there can be little doubt that without their imposition of ideological consistency, the Renaissance orgy of formal diversification, visual refinement, and technical invention would have been considerably less

exuberant. Even with it, the steep curve of escalating sophistication had its darker consequences. Throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, under the pressure of competition and in response to the challenge of Reformation, painting assumed new grandeur. It also became more cold-bloodedly rhetorical, more calculatedly seductive, and much, much more persuasive.

This regime of escalating professional sophistication almost inevitably reconfigured the relationship between the purportedly religious artist and his audience. Looking back from the vantage point of the early seventeenth century, any knowledgeable citizen could have told you with some authority that the difference between the work of a contemporary like Caravaggio and the work of a fifteenth-century master like Fra Angelico is that Caravaggio wants to dazzle and control us, that the theatricality of his breathtaking illusions has one goal: to make us believe. Fra Angelico, on the other hand, just believes and believes that we believe. This is the source of his power, and, lacking that doubled faith, no subsequent painter has ever approximated Brother Angel's devotional eloquence. One instinctively and involuntarily believes both artists, in other words, but the conditions of that belief have changed. A fifteenth-century art-lover and connoisseur might look at a painting by Fra Angelico and become a Christian. A seventeenth-century Christian gazing at Caravaggio's *Entombment* might just as easily become an art-lover.

4

It is curious that princely galleries were so highly admired during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a period during which the hierarchal classifica-

tion 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. It is, paradoxically, not until the nineteenth century when the classification of art by subject matter was in theory becoming increasingly old fashioned that, in practice, a growing number of thinkers began to deplore the situation that had been brought about.

– Francis Haskell, *The Invisible Museum*

So far, I have tried to characterize the cultural vernacular out of which the beaux-arts tradition arose in the late Renaissance and to characterize as well the contemporary American vernacular into which it has dispersed. Anyone wondering what these boisterous vernaculars might have to do with the domain of fine art proper at the dawn of the twenty-first century should, in truth, already know: they have nothing to do with it. The contemporary street discourse derives directly from a revolutionary way of looking at things that was first validated in Renaissance Italy. This revolutionary mode of address made it possible for private citizens to appropriate and willfully misconstrue advertisements for the church and state as objective correlatives in rituals of social adjudication.

The loose coalition of artists, critics, churchmen, and Renaissance princes who led this revolution founded what we now call the beaux-arts tradition by willfully misinterpreting masterworks of sacred and philosophical art as icons of

private desire and personal enthusiasm. They created what Francis Haskell refers to as “a category of art for which only aesthetic quality need be taken into account” – which is not really a category of art at all but a categorical way of *looking* at art that privileges the quality of the object’s consequences over the authority of its causes. In practice, this revolution shifted the power to interpret and preserve works of art from their sponsoring institutions to their volunteer beholders. This enhanced the ability of images to *acquire* new meanings over time while compromising their ability to *sustain* cultural meanings and communicate official propaganda or impose official policy.

In this small way, the beaux-arts revolution sounded the death knell for the wars of iconography that ravaged Europe and the Middle East for a thousand years – from the days of the Early Church on up through the Reformation. In recent years, however, the consequences of this revolution have been virtually obliterated in the realm of official culture by a counter-revolution that has taken us back to the day before anyone found anything beautiful. This counter-revolution – called a ‘culture war’ and mounted simultaneously by the right and left wings of American culture – has pitted the authority of culture, ideology, and tradition against the pleasures of society, and both wings have won. The right wing has prevailed in the realm of public governance, the left in the realm of institutional and academic culture, and both wings have instituted a new regime of correct speech and correct interpretation.

In this moment of officious triumph, we lost the object. Our right to willfully misappropriate the elegant lies of ambitious power lost its sanction. The privilege of creating provisional icons of so-

ciability out of high-dollar, bravura dreck went into exile on main-street. For five hundred years this privilege of misinterpretation had been society’s hedge against rhetoric, its mode of subverting the blandishments of governmental, corporate, academic, and clerical authority. Now no more, except on the street, and it may seem a small thing but the privilege of standing with one’s companions before some juggernaut of ill-intentioned bombast selling the pleasures of war, penury, or tribal seclusion – of being able to stand there smiling happily in its presence and say, “Well, isn’t that *pretty!*” is no small thing. It is the essence of liberty and sophistication, the emblem of civilized sedition; and, today, the cultural sites that once preserved our right to be seditious and civilized in this way no longer do. Having won the culture war, the administrators of these once-and-future ‘museums’ now purport to give us ‘good advertising’ correctly interpreted to counteract the ‘bad’ advertising we encounter in the street.

Once again, it’s all advertising, and the explanatory texts that deface the walls of these institutions stand as cold evidence of a culture morbidly obsessed with the longevity of its own ideas and morbidly fearful of the perpetual re-allegorization that ensures works of art *their* longevity. These Nebuchadnezzar-style word-walls that one confronts like quavering Daniel may be read as ironic epitaphs for the beaux-arts amateurs who dreamed these halls of high culture, built them and filled them with works of art now in the custody of philistine colonizers, not one of whom imagines the flowering of the beaux-arts tradition to have been anything other than a viral efflorescence of elitist connoisseurship infected by self-regarding narcissism and nascent commodity fetishism. This, however, is only to say that the temperamental proclivi-

ties of administrative bureaucracies in the Christian West have survived without much alteration for five hundred years.

The considered teaching of churchmen and philosophers still holds incarnate beauty to be, at best, the unintended consequence of accident or design and, at worst, plain old craven idolatry. All this means, however, is that the beaux-arts tradition has reverted to the status it maintained for two hundred and fifty years, from the Florentine edict in 1605 until the 1850s when Édouard Manet established the first rigorously beaux-arts *practice* by speculating openly in the mercantile appetite for pleasant surprises. Until the moment of Manet's emergence, the beaux-arts tradition had no proper objects. It was a responsive, personal, evaluative way of looking. The act of looking was always followed by talking and sometimes followed by the investment of writing or capital in some visual occasion designed for other purposes, or used to other ends. During this period, the beaux-arts appetite for visceral consequences reconciled itself as a matter of course with the official presumption that the utility of art resided in its devotional, ideological, or educational content.

Even reconciled, however, enthusiasm for beautiful things was never considered sufficiently Christian or intellectual or publicly responsible to be a completely respectable social avocation. It remained a vaguely reprehensible hobby that survived under the mantle of its deniability – simply because there was no discernable evidence of its existence. The same works of art, seen differently, could represent the opposing interests of enthusiasts and educators. Connoisseurs, who were also, by happy chance, charged with imposing ideological correctness on paintings, could comfortably

commission high pornography in the guise of thoughtful classicism. These naughty bits could then survive in serene duplicity in well-appointed drawing rooms because the aristocrats funding the church and state were also the collectors buying the pictures. Public virtue and aesthetic value coexisted in the same commodities – aesthetic discernment and public authority coexisted in the same adjudicators – and all the funding came, finally, out of the same pocket.

In this sense, the beaux-arts tradition from 1605 until 1850 was an invisible empire – the very definition of what Michel Foucault calls an 'open secret.' It was a social endeavor of which everyone was aware and hardly anyone spoke. Its activities were limited to a small but far-flung circle of producers, consumers, commentators, and facilitators – the sort of people who gathered around the pit and watched the Laocoon being unearthed – and for these people the aesthetic way of looking was presumed to be a privilege of education, rank, and talent. Their adjudications were neither for public consumption nor scholastic disquisition. There were no reporters from "Entertainment Tonight" in 1542 to announce that Cardinal Farnese had just commissioned an odalisque from Titian with the caveat that it be sexier than the Duke of Urbino's. There were no follow-up stories reporting that the papal nuncio had written Farnese from Venice to reassure him that his odalisque-in-progress made the duke's "look like a frigid nun."

Today, the cardinal's odalisque is presumed on good evidence to survive in the basement recesses of the Vatican (the sexier the nude, one presumes, the deeper the recess), and the duke's odalisque now hangs in the Uffizi, in classical drag, under the pseudonym *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." This, however, does not mean that either the duke or the cardinal were unaware of what they had, or unresponsive to the quality of Titian's creations. They, and those who followed them, were demonstrably committed to the work surviving and worldly enough to understand that Western culture does not officially condone high pornography however elegant. Western culture approves of composure ("Ah, look at the composition"), and consensus ("Ah, the chromatic harmony!"), and antique learning ("Venus in her bedchamber, how exquisite!"). So if the price of preserving a painting of a naked woman by Titian was pretending to love virtue while actually finding virtue in something you love, that was considered a small enough price to pay.

This congenial state of hypocritical complicity about aesthetic matters sustained itself in happy invisibility until the early nineteenth century when the beaux-arts tradition, catastrophically, lost its 'beard.' The collapse of religious authority and the erosion of aristocratic values forced aesthetics out of the closet, and in the escalating orgy of historical self-consciousness occasioned by this collapse, the frivolous antiques that had been inexplicably preserved by beaux-arts enthusiasts were transformed into icons of the lost past and of the culture's (*Oh dear!*) lost values. This occasioned a quantum escalation of art's perceived cultural importance, and rather quickly, thanks to the inordinate amount of longing invested in it, the practice of art itself came to be perceived as the very emblem of human aspiration, self-realization, national pride, historical achievement, and cultural identity.

Even John Ruskin, who was deeply complicit in the propagation of art-as-

religion, recognized this for the idolatry it was – and the moment did not last. Instead, a whole array of purportedly scientific teleologies arose to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of traditional religion and aristocratic patrimony, and works of art (now seen as incarnate history) provided an evidentiary symptomology for all of them. Under the auspices of Herder and Hegel, Darwin, Marx, and Freud, new regimes of 'correct interpretation' were instituted, and, *plus ça change*, works of art were recruited to do for their new bosses the same job they once did for their old ones. Paintings that previously argued for the glorious primacy of church, state, and patrimony now served in circular arguments as both symptom and proof of natural selection, the historical necessity of the class struggle, and the validity of oedipal rage. In other contexts, the art of the past (now 'correctly' reinterpreted) was recruited to validate separatist myths of cultural identity and to reinvigorate regional and tribal traditions.

The putative adversary of all these manly narrative projects, its effete *bête noir*, was the colloquy of 'inauthentic' Anglo-French constituencies that constituted the surviving infrastructure of beaux-arts society. So it was probably fortunate for these cosmopolitans that, just at this moment, after centuries of collecting and connoisseurship, a rigorously beaux-arts *practice* was finally established by Manet. The invention of this 'modernist' art may be said to mark the end of the beaux-arts revolution's beginning. Unfortunately, it also marked the beginning of its end. With the invention of the bourgeois art market by Manet and the simultaneous establishment of new 'cultural' regimes of correct interpretation, the co-existence of institutional virtue and aesthetic discernment was irrevocably sundered.

From this point forward, Europeans

and Americans engaged in artistic endeavors were divided into two increasingly distinct constituencies. There was a professional class of administrators, historians, and theoreticians concerned with determining and enforcing the correct interpretation of art's original cultural intentions; and an unofficial class of collectors, dealers, critics, and artists concerned with exacerbating the social consequences of art's embodied presence. As the twentieth century progressed, the maestros of correct interpretation, whose original agenda was only to make art more culturally meaningful, became increasingly concerned with making art less aesthetically appealing and less surprising – lest it be misunderstood. At the same time, mandarin aesthetes became similarly engaged in suppressing representation and transforming art into an increasingly embodied, purely 'aesthetic' activity – lest it be misunderstood.

In the late twentieth century, this schism would finally open into an abyss. The conventions of beaux-arts practice would once again dissolve into the cultural wallpaper – this time with no residue of covert complicity in official quarters. As a consequence, the radical social function of the beaux-arts tradition survives in the vernacular discourse of value while its more romantic project of saving everything we ever loved is withering away under the administration of utopian bureaucrats whose only utopian attribute is their visceral contempt for both the relevant past and the physical present. So we should not forget this: for five hundred years, the beaux-arts tradition survived on the revolutionary premise that beautiful art, regardless of its cause or content, is much to be preferred over art that is not so *beaux* and thus should be preserved – and, further, that works of art, once found beautiful

and no longer considered to be, might easily become beautiful again and are thus equally deserving of rescue.

This beaux-arts vision of love's enduring virtue sustained itself while nations rose and fell, institutions flourished and lost their funding, fashions burst upon the scene and just as quickly faded. Under its auspices, beautiful things were not only preserved but also put to use. Objects and images that had long since outlived their cultural contexts, their practical and official utility, were snatched from oblivion, maintained, displayed, and vigorously reutilized through the agency of perpetual reinterpretation. New uses were found for old portraits of dead kings and commoners utterly forgotten. Formal virtues were attributed to brown landscapes. Nouveau story content constantly reinvigorated depictions of lost narratives. Visual arguments in aid of lost philosophies and ideologies now defunct were renovated and renewed as a matter of routine.

Today, all this is over. The past is presumed to be well lost – to be nothing more than a cautionary narrative against which the present must be inoculated. To this end, surviving works of art are summarily banished to the inaccessible dungeons of their original contexts with the inference that resituating the same work in the context of the present is somehow verboten. It isn't, unless the prohibition is against objects themselves, and this would seem to be the case, since even objective evidence of the present is quickly discarded, presumably to rescue the utopian future from the evil influence of this, its reprehensible past. The deficit of pleasure and complexity being incurred by this cultural demolition derby, however, would seem a rather high price to pay to rid us of the casual hypocrisy that preserved

the *Venus d'Urbino*. It is an absolutely outrageous price to pay to deny the undeniable fact that objects of human manufacture have consequences that proliferate far beyond their original causes and that these often beneficent consequences routinely subvert and even repudiate the intentions of their manufacturers.

5

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

– Krishnamurti

Begin the ending here: Pleasant surprises are a fact. Their social, psychological, and somatic dimensions are radically contingent and infinitely complex, but beyond the opacity of these occasions there is no mystery. The vernacular discourse of relative beauty is a rationally explicable mode of perception that requires nothing more imaginative 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,” and we begin our education in doing this with a base premise of American semiotics: that all simple signs have two primary domains of reference. First: 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. Second: since all signs that we call signs are also things in the world, they have *embodied* meanings. They reference things that are *like* themselves – as a word, or 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 pro-

posed a formal way of sorting out their tangled skeins of reference. The quarrel, especially in the realm of art, is about the relative priority of these 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 likeness? 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?

There is little doubt that the king's portrait is *intended* to celebrate the king, and no doubt at all that Picasso's table is *intended* to celebrate his virtuosity. Free citizens, however, are unbound by authorial intention. They must choose between two readings that require quite distinct ways of looking at the world. In practice, of course, there is no absolute distinction. We are always choosing a reading somewhere between these two extremes and weighted toward one or the other, but, even so: A reading weighted toward designative meaning prioritizes the absent king and the imaginary table. A reading weighted toward embodied meaning prioritizes the paintings. Either is possible. The argument is about which is preferable and to whom.

Administrative cultures, preoccupied with delivering the message, keeping the record, teaching the lesson, and assuring our compliance, necessarily prioritize designative meanings. In order to survive, these cultures need to be relatively certain that we (their auditors) accept what they (our administrators) say that words mean and colors stand for. If we accept our administrators' reading of the world, their ability to control our behavior is considerably facilitated: we stop at

the sign and stop at the light as well. The urgency of their concern with teaching us what things mean derives from the fact that the world gets in the way of their authority. Administrative authority depends on designated reference, but like-to-like embodied meanings always have cognitive priority. Most contemporary theorists, in fact, argue that *only* embodied meanings have even marginal necessity.

When Jacques Derrida asserts that there is no meaning outside the text, he is not arguing for the priority of text, but for the primacy of the embodied relationship between one word and another. He is arguing that any field of designative reference we construct behind the patterned words that compose the text (and the patterned words that express their meanings, and the patterned words that express *their* meaning, ad infinitum) is radically contingent and literally imaginary. Embodied relationships, on the other hand, are perceptible without designative reference. Their patterns signify for us the *possibility* of designative meaning, and the actual designative meanings we attach to them are always in some degree 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 supply our cue to seek out designative meanings, and however well we have been indoctrinated with these designative references, the relative beauty and authority of the embodied pattern *itself* is determined by us, if we are empowered to respond and pass judgement.

If we do feel empowered to pass judgement, to privilege beauty and dismiss the banal and the grotesque, the seriousness with which we take any designative messages is contingent upon our taste, upon our aesthetic response to the pat-

tern of embodied signs that bear their reference. In this way, the physical existence of embodied signs poses a perpetual threat to bureaucratic authority, and, if we exclude the Orwellian option of simply deracinating our languages, there are three administrative ways of dealing with the problem of taste and compliance. First, one may simply obliterate taste by disenfranchising the polity and denying them their right of preference. In commercial societies, unfortunately, this is an extremely destructive option.

Second, one may engender and promote a quasi-Protestant 'cult of content' in which the relative felicity of embodied and designative meaning is presumed to vary inversely. This is a popular option in contemporary academia, holding, as it does, that bad writing infers good meaning, that ugly painting infers beautiful content, and dissonant noise infers good music. The only legitimate defense of this cult is that, in the flow of things, bad does, on rare occasions, become good, ugly becomes beautiful, and dissonant becomes harmonious. This is not necessarily the case, however, and, in fact, it is never *necessarily* the case. In the fullness of time, ninety-nine percent of the bad, ugly, stupid, obtuse, and banal remains so, and remains so unmemorable that it sinks into oblivion. Even so, there is always enough of it around.

Finally, there remains the option of teaching taste – of training the bureaucracy in a felicitous mode of embodied expression and educating the polity to appreciate and respond to it. This creates 'appropriate' expression and 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 once rested upon this principle: that, in the moment of encounter, intricately constructed patterns of embodied reference always have the potential to completely reinvent the past, to reinvent even their own pasts and yield up the future in new, surprising, and totally unauthorized meanings.

This perpetual promise of radical destabilization creates, in any polity conversant in the discourse of relative beauty, a predisposition to oppose established authority at every turn, since the experience of beauty itself invariably overrides it. Confronted with inept administrative expression, we decry its ugliness. Confronted with appropriate administrative expression, we ignore its banality. And on those few occasions when we encounter genuinely beautiful and surprising administrative expression (while standing before a Raphael, perhaps), we feel free to ignore its designative message. We appropriate its embodied mastery to our own purposes and invest it with new social meaning. We expect such opportunities. If the world before our eyes does not adequately represent us, we claim our right to seek out new representatives.

So here, quickly, is the argument: First, I am assuming that human beings in the course of their daily lives will, on occasion, experience involuntary positive responses to configurations of embodied signs, whether these responses are socially permissible or not. Second, I have observed that, when these responses are permissible, we habitually identify the configurations of embodied signs that occasion them as beautiful in the hope of creating constituencies of agreement with our own evaluation. Third, I am arguing that the cognitive priority of such patterns of embodied signs makes beau-

ty a powerful category of value in societies where it exists. For this reason: If beauty does exist in a society as a category of value and if we are among the members of that society who can and do appraise the world before our eyes as a matter of habit, the cognitive priority of embodied signs more or less guarantees that the pleasant surprises we experience in the presence of beauty 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.

Thus, the utility of beauty as a discourse 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. Since the intentions and values that inform the origins and historical meanings of such objects bear no necessary relationship to any subsequent meanings they might acquire, these physical things provide us with a publicly available, socially accessible correlative, an interstices, 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 the present, and alert to the possibilities of the future.

The condition of existence I am describing, of course, is nothing more or less than ethical, cosmopolitan paganism. It is the gorgeous inheritance bestowed upon us by the pre-Christian societies of the Mediterranean whose idolatrous proclivities have never been effectively obliterated or even subordinated in the Christian West. Nor, I would sug-

gest, are they likely ever to be obliterated or subordinated. The pervasive vernacular of beauty is a part of that pagan inheritance. The whole rhetoric of commerce and all the modalities of practical science are a part of it as well, as are the foundational premises of this republic whose framers embraced the first tenet of Ciceronian republicanism which holds 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.

Defined in this context, the discourse of beauty is an empirical, social practice of valuing that arises out of our relationship with an external world largely bereft of transcendental norms. In practice, it sets us a difficult task. The categorical attributes through which we assign value 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, beauty, levity, solemnity, eccentricity, complicity, and utility – and their value shifts from moment to moment. Moreover, since virtually everything we see, hear, or touch can be bought and can be sold, we must somehow determine the personal and social value of things we know the prices of. And prices are no help at all. Even if we bought *everything*, bought the whole world, all we could say with certainty is that the value of what we have purchased, for us at least, exceeds the price we paid. We would have to talk it over with our friends, with other people who have bought the whole world or want to, and these people would not be difficult to find. Wanting to buy the whole world is the first condition of cosmopolitan paganism. Beauty arises out of that desire.

*Buying
the world*