

Martha Rosler. *Cargo Cult, 1965–74*, from the series *Body Beautiful* (a.k.a. *Beauty Knows No Pain*). Photomontage printed as color photograph. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Gorney Bravin + Lee, New York.

Alexander Alberro

Beauty Knows No Pain

That my title derives from a 1965–74 series of photomontages by Martha Rosler, *Body Beautiful* (a.k.a. *Beauty Knows No Pain*), underscores the periodic return of the issue at hand.

The Arthur Danto epigraph is from “What Happened to Beauty?” *The Nation* (March 30, 1992): 418. The Peter Schjeldahl quote is from “Notes on Beauty,” in *Uncontrollable Beauty: Toward a New Aesthetics*, ed. Bill Beckley and David Shapiro (New York: Allworth Press, 1998), 55.

1. See Beckley and Shapiro, *Uncontrollable Beauty*; Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* (New York: Allworth Press, 1999); Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993); Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1999); and Wendy Steiner, *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Free Press, 2001).

2. Steiner, 192.

3. Peter Schjeldahl, “Beauty Is Back: A Trampled Esthetic Blooms Again,” *New York Times* (September 29, 1996): 161, as cited in Steiner, *Venus in Exile*, 140.

Every beautiful work can be viewed as an allegory of political well-being, and disharmonic work as an allegory of social pathology.

—Arthur Danto

There is something crazy about a culture in which the value of beauty becomes controversial.

—Peter Schjeldahl

During the past decade, a number of texts by authors such as Arthur Danto, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, Dave Hickey, Elaine Scarry, Peter Schjeldahl, and Wendy Steiner have sought to return our attention to the subject of beauty and in particular to the experience of the beautiful in contemporary art.¹ The central questions raised by these authors, the questions they all in one way or another seem to need to address, are: Whatever happened to beauty? Why and how has it been disparaged? Who denigrated it? And why do so many art critics and historians no longer consider the judgment of beauty to be a valid exercise?

All of the authors named above present their work as an unapologetic attempt to revitalize the experience of the beautiful, to give credence once again to aesthetic judgments of beauty. Toward this end, they—each in their own way, though remarkably in concert with one another—suggest histories of twentieth-century aesthetics in which the idea of the beautiful has been suppressed either by the incursion of the sublime or the dimension of the political. Modernism in particular is reproached for rendering beauty outmoded, for sending the beautiful into “banishment” or “exile” so as to promote the experience of the sublime. Yet if we are to believe recent writing on the aesthetic, the long and painful denigration of the beautiful has finally come to an end in our own historical moment. As Steiner puts it, “The avant-garde blockade on beauty is being lifted. Books and articles on [beauty] are proliferating. The public refuses its masochistic role as philistine, seeking affirmation instead in an art [not of modernist deprivation but] of generosity and pleasure.”² “Beauty,” Schjeldahl boldly announced in the late 1990s with an enormous sense of relief, “Is Back.”³

Beauty was indeed problematized in the early twentieth century by the avant-garde in its various attempts to reveal the production and reception of art as based on historical conditions (and not, say, on natural or universal phenomena or experience). Its credibility was also in dispute after World War II, though then primarily from an ethical standpoint. Theodor W. Adorno’s famous pronouncement that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” by which he meant to question the very possibility of an aesthetic of idealized unity and harmony in the aftermath of unthinkable atrocities, has come to represent the most prevalent example of this point of view, though it was fairly widespread in the postwar period. Critical anti-aesthetic positions—often coded as anti-beauty—prevailed once again with the legacies of Conceptual art later in the century. But the persistence of the idea of beauty throughout the twentieth century is evidenced precisely by the very existence of the critiques against it. Although powerful arguments contested beauty’s continued validity throughout the century, its tenacity and unremitting appeal ensured the idea’s survival even through difficult times.

Prior to addressing what may have caused the recent wave of texts seeking to end beauty’s exile, let me briefly outline some of the underlying concerns that

fuel today's arguments for a revival of the experience of the beautiful. First of all, it is important to note that most of the writers take up Immanuel Kant's division of the aesthetic into two competing modes of experience: the beautiful and the sublime. In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant argues that in the presence of the formal order, proportion, and harmony of the beautiful the human subject experiences a pleasurable sense of alignment between the faculties of the mind and the mind's experience of reality, whereas before the turmoil of the sublime—which exceeds sense, measure, and order—the subject is powerfully made aware of its own limitations.⁴ Second, following Kant's own valorization of different modes of aesthetic experience, today's advocates of beauty lament the ways in which modern art has privileged the category of the sublime. Modernism, they argue, hailed the sublime, including its tendencies to buttress various aesthetics of power, in order to reduce the characteristics or features of the beautiful to a diminutive status.⁵ Third, what is striking about the contemporary discourses on beauty is that they tend not only to associate the beautiful with the feminine and the sublime with the masculine, but to read and reevaluate their historical competition through the lenses of historical feminism. Scarry, for instance, does not hesitate to argue that modernist aesthetics understood each attribute or illustration of the beautiful as “one member of an oppositional pair, and because it was almost always the diminutive member, it was also the dismissible one.”⁶ Modern art's championing of the experience of the sublime, we are consequently urged to conclude, was nothing other than a product or symptom of the patriarchal denigration of the feminine.⁷

Fourth and finally, most of the writers resuscitating the idea of beauty today advance the beautiful as a structure of feeling energized by a sense of transcendental meaning and harmony, and of the centrality of the human subject. Thus if the sublime, for authors such as Danto, Scarry, and Steiner, simply decenters, detaches, and plunges the subject into loss and pain, making him or her undergo a crisis and fading of identity and agency, the experience of beauty produces an acute sense of perfection, repletion, and wholeness. The beautiful, according to this logic, thus affirms the centrality of the human subject—one produced not through hedonistic pleasure, which has a practical interest for the individual prior to judgment and apart from a community, but through disinterested pleasure and pure affect, which can be universally shared by everyone. It is in this way that contemporary writing on the idea of beauty, as if trying directly to revive the principles of Friedrich Schiller's idea of aesthetic education, seeks to render aesthetic judgments analogous to moral judgments. For the underlying premise of this writing is that perfect symmetry in art not only produces shared aesthetic experience, but also effects a shared sense of ethical fairness, truth, and justice.

Here it is important to note that recent pleas for a renewal of beauty locate the pursuit of fairness, truth, and justice firmly within the realm of abstract ideals. For while contemporary theorists of the beautiful keenly emphasize the link between judgments of beauty and moral judgments, at the same time they posit an art of immanence and contingency that seeks to demystify the work of art as beauty's greatest enemy. In other words, insofar as the figures of disintegration and disillusion in art practices that pursue fairness, truth, and justice through an interrogation of art's own internal contradictions are made to serve an end (even if that end is dialectically yet another form of transcendence), they

4. The “Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment” is the centerpiece of the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment,” which is the first part of the *Critique of Judgment*. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987).

5. Scarry, 85.

6. *Ibid.*, 83–84: “In the newly subdivided aesthetic realm, the sublime is male and the beautiful is female. . . . The sublime resides in mountains . . . the beautiful resides in flowers and elysian meadows. The sublime is night, the beautiful day. ‘The sublime moves’ (one becomes ‘earnest . . . rigid . . . astonished’). ‘Beauty charms.’ The sublime is dusk, disdain for the world . . . eternity; the beautiful is lively gaiety and cheers. The sublime is great; the beautiful is multiple. The sublime is principled, noble, righteous; the beautiful is compassionate and good hearted.”

7. The contemporary revival and restoration of beauty is thereby advanced as a revalidation of the “feminine,” the “ornamental,” the “sensuous,” the “pleasurable,” and the “charming” within the context of high art. And while the beautiful is championed, modernism and such quintessential modernist movements as Minimalism and Conceptual art are dismissed as being impossibly masculinist, elite, and anti-aesthetic. Here, for instance, is Steiner paraphrasing Danto on this issue: “Conceptual Art made an attempt to restore the edge to avant-garde aesthetics by depriving its audience not only of ornamental and female beauty, but of all beauty beyond ideas as such. . . . Through hyperrationality and sensory deprivation, Conceptualism breathed new life into the sublime monster.” Clearly then, if beauty has been locked away, the jailer has been in the service of what Danto, in *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Chicago and Lasalle, Ill.: Open Court, 2003), calls the “intractable” avant-garde. Indeed, the current championing of beauty is cut of the same cloth as the cry of “death to the avant-garde”—or, to put it more poignantly, death to the very relevance of the historical avant-garde, seen now as a minor and misdirected epiphenomenon in the spectrum of Western aesthetics.

are condemned as having a deleterious effect on beauty, which by definition is experienced in a wholly disinterested manner, without a purpose. Instead of recognizing the historical (and dialectical) interdependence of the aesthetic and the anti-aesthetic, today's proponents of beauty remove these positions from their historical dynamic only to hypostatize the beautiful as the sole, undisputed, and universal bearer of a better society. Rather than rethink the category of the aesthetic from a historical position that could account for what produced its critique in the first place, and rather than examine whether under current conditions the anti-aesthetic itself might have been consumed or reconfigured by the historical process, these writers simply seek to suspend the messiness of history in the hope of returning us to an idyllic and abstract past that knew of no internal tensions, disputes, and contradictions. As if wanting to invite the reader to acts of unadulterated time travel, current writing on beauty revisits eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century notions of the beautiful with a desire to bring them back to our present. Yet, this writing is not concerned with refunctioning those concepts or recomposing them for our historical context, but solely with reinserting them *tout court*, as if particular social and historical circumstances were irrelevant for acts of symbolic and intellectual transfer.⁸

But I do not want to leave this discussion of the parallels discernible in the arguments put forward by the recent proponents of beauty without at least commenting on another reason advanced by these authors for the twentieth-century disavowal of beauty—namely, the fact that “beautiful art sells.”⁹ Repeatedly, our authors point to the very success of beauty on the market as one of the fundamental reasons for its critical disavowal during the twentieth century. Strangely enough, rather than being troubled by art's association with commercial interest and imperatives, rather than seeing the commercialization of beauty as threatening their own desire for disinterested pleasure, advocates of the beautiful such as Hickey argue that beauty's impressive sales record over time testifies to the universal pleasure that it offers and vindicates its continued viability.¹⁰

To put it polemically, then, recent attempts to revalidate the experience of the beautiful are, first, driven by intensely nostalgic impulses; they promote ahistorical views of the past in the hope of returning us to a state unclouded by the insights and advances made in a wide range of theoretical and discursive practices, including critical theory, sociology, cultural studies, and psychoanalysis. Second, though it might once again toy with Schillerian utopias of aesthetic education and political mediation, today's writing on beauty is deeply antipolitical. It is mostly unwilling to contemplate the legitimacy of artistic practices that take a stand and bring together the aesthetic, the cognitive, and the critical, preferring instead to value artworks that operate independently of any practical interest.¹¹ And third, this new discourse on beauty is trenchantly antimodernist, seeing modernism and its dialectical relation to transcendence as antithetic to, as Steiner puts it, “the perennial rewards of aesthetic experience, identified as pleasure, insight, and empathy.”¹² Interestingly enough, in privileging the transcendent experience of beauty over the realities of the world's disenchantment, the position of many of today's champions of beauty comes to look remarkably like the one they censure, namely, that of the detached professional aesthete produced—as they argue—by the category of the modernist sublime.

Many of course would stop here and dismiss this inherently nostalgic call

8. To be accurate, it must be said that this is not true in Danto's case. *The Abuse of Beauty* revives aesthetic response via Hegel, not Kant, allowing Danto to claim that beauty can work in the service of politics, inducing an empathic awareness of social injustice: his model is not Kantian, disinterested, but empathic, as is Scarry's. Indeed, this is also a less-than-accurate description of Hickey's notion of beauty as social transgression that, rather than disinterested à la Kant, is better described as a diluted version of Georges Bataille's aesthetics.

9. On this point see Hickey's essay “Enter the Dragon: On the Vernacular of Beauty,” in *The Invisible Dragon*, 11–24.

10. As Hickey puts it: The arguments mounted “to the detraction of beauty come down to one simple gripe. . . . Beautiful art sells. If it sells itself, it is an idolatrous commodity; if it sells anything else, it is a seductive advertisement. Art is not idolatry, they [the academic radicals] say, nor is it advertising, and I would agree—with the caveat that idolatry and advertising are, indeed, art, and that the greatest works of art are always and inevitably a bit of both.” *Ibid.*, 16–17.

11. For Scarry, both the sublime and the political or “real” have been the enemy of beauty. “Permitted to inhabit neither the realm of the ideal nor the realm of the real, to be neither aspiration nor companion, beauty comes to us like a fugitive bird unable to fly, unable to land” (*On Beauty and Being Just*, 86). Danto is even more pronounced in his indictment of engaged art: “That is always a danger in activist art, I'm afraid. I can understand how the activist should wish to avoid beauty, simply because beauty induces the wrong perspective on whatever it is the activist wants something to be done about” (“Beauty and Morality,” in *Uncontrollable Beauty*, 36).

12. Steiner, xv.

for a revalidation of the beautiful as hopelessly retrograde and unproductive. But I want to push the analysis of this phenomenon further, for I think that it is in several ways indicative of a larger cultural condition. Nostalgic turns such as the current one toward beauty are usually symptomatic of deeper structural problems; they help distract us from topical issues whose unabashed recognition would disturb one's self-assured path through present and future.¹³ Thus, we need to try to locate the deeper socially symbolic meaning, the threats and anxieties, from which current revivals of beauty—whether it is thought of as inherently self-contained or, in Beckley and Shapiro's words, as "uncontrollable"—divert us.¹⁴

At the most immediate level, the calls for a return to beauty's order and perfection are part and parcel of a rejection of the political dimension of the phenomenon that came to be referred to as postmodernism. Jean-François Lyotard famously defined postmodernism in terms of the sublime and posited it as presenting what is unrepresentable, excessive, regardless of order and perfection. The role of the sublime was advanced to search "for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable."¹⁵ From this perspective, the call for a return to beauty in art functions as an obvious attempt to restrain the politics of (post)modernism, which (for better or worse) enormously expanded the field of art in the past thirty years, not only in actual practitioners but also in the subjects, genres, and media deemed appropriate for art in the first place.

These calls are also symptomatic of the perceived loss of the sensual and transcendent dimensions of the artwork in the wake of the critical art practices of the 1960s and 1970s that negated the myth of artistic autonomy and disabused the artwork more than ever before. Rather than locating the sites of meaning and value exclusively within the intrinsic properties of discrete objects, such connotative procedures were shown by a large number of artists and art tendencies that emerged in the context of the social and political protest movements of the era to belong to an intricate network of discursive and institutional practices. And this is where the other shoe drops for critics who today posit as ruthlessly materialist a visual art that expands the conventional parameters and yet refuses to be received solely through the senses.

Another level of the problematic comes into view when we consider that we have now reached an age in which it is possible to synthetically produce flawless harmony, perfection, and wholeness. This ability has been (or is in the process of being) achieved in diverse fields: from digital sampling of images and sounds, to the recent boom in aesthetic or plastic surgery, to genetic engineering, cloning, and virtual reality. While these technological developments have largely been greeted with enthusiasm, they also evoke deep-seated and at times profoundly unconscious anxieties. In the areas of artistic and cultural practice, they have produced a new epistemology of the image. Not only have the ways in which traditional art media are produced, exhibited, and distributed been radically transformed, but the new technologies have also led to the invention of new art forms and media that eliminate from the production process the role that chance, error, and the uncontrollable formerly played. Flawless images are now fairly easy to manufacture. But digital image production today also throws into question the formerly crucial distinction between copy and original in ways not

13. The indulgence in nostalgia is explicitly noted by Steiner, who explains the decision behind the 1997 National Book Critics' Circle selection committee as "redolent with nostalgia for a lost pleasure in art: a reluctant nostalgia" (Steiner, 193).

14. See Beckley and Shapiro, *Uncontrollable Beauty*. Steiner indicates an awareness that the calls for a return to beauty are symptomatic of "a cultural readiness to move on" from dominant aesthetic conventions (Steiner, xxv): "a way of registering the end of modernism and the opening of a new period in culture" (xviii). Yet, she makes no attempt to understand this "new period in culture" or to comprehend why invoking beauty should be the legitimate response. We need to try to discern what change is taking place on the horizon and what its arrival brings to an end. Coming to terms with these phenomena may help us understand why beauty reemerged as a critical category at the end of the twentieth century.

15. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 81.



Martha Rosler. *Nature Girls*, 1966–72, from the series *Body Beautiful* (a.k.a. *Beauty Knows No Pain*). Photomontage printed as color photograph. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Gorney Bravin + Lee, New York.

even imagined by mid-twentieth-century theorists of reproducibility such as Walter Benjamin. Whereas this total collapse of the difference between copy and original requires an entirely new category of cognition and conceptualization, contemporary musing on the beautiful—though deeply troubled by how computer-based image manipulation might privilege becoming over being, physical flux over temporal stability—in the end finally wants us to return to old orders of experience and cognition, orders in which premodernist myths of reference and uniqueness alone can warrant the possibilities of truth, justice, and social harmony. As such, the new context, this emergent cultural condition, is not as much addressed as it is evaded or ignored. Insofar as it is addressed, it is placed within and displaced by a framework of the familiar, thereby at once domesticating its unique features and denying its radical difference from what was previously known.

Just as there is no longer a clear distinction between the original and the copy, the difference between art and culture has also become highly nebulous. For increasingly today art is conflated with ideas and customs prevalent in everyday life. From this perspective, the return to a way of experiencing art in a bygone era when the spheres of art and culture were clearly distinct might very well be a symptom—conscious or unconscious—of the sense of malaise produced by the blurring of these boundaries, an effort to alleviate the anxiety produced by the indeterminate condition in which that blurring necessarily

Martha Rosler. *Untitled*
(*Transparent Box*), 1967–72,
from the series *Body*
Beautiful* (a.k.a. *Beauty
***Knows No Pain*).**
Photomontage printed
as color photograph.
Dimensions variable.
Courtesy of the artist
and Gorney Bravin + Lee,
New York.

leaves the work of art itself.¹⁶ Yet, at the same time, the mobilization of a well-established theory of the beautiful also functions as part of a concerted attempt to wrest the experience of the beautiful from the vernacular where the new technologies allow it to proliferate and to link it to objects that are unambiguously high art.

But the contemporary malaise to which I have pointed here also concerns the question of agency, or at least the relationship of the human subject to history at a moment when history seems to have run out of control, catastrophically blowing us backward into the future. Indeed, in the face of the onslaught of catastrophes that have come to define our contemporary moment, it is not entirely surprising that writers who unequivocally reject the validity of critical artistic practices should call instead for a pathos-infused, humanist aesthetics. For in the eyes of many of those who have recently advocated a return to the beautiful in art, the experience of beauty helps coalesce the disparate itineraries of human subjects through unspoken feelings and intuitive responses to magnificent works of art. What is particularly—and literally—pathetic about this, since I have just referred to it as a pathos-infused, humanist aesthetics, is the fact that it no longer sees art's pursuit of transcendence in dialectical tension with the quest for knowledge, understanding, and the improvement of our contemporary condition. Rather, it is now solely in the most personal, fleeting, and insubstantial facets of experience—namely, in the aesthetic and only in the aesthetic—that humans are seen to be able to come together in keeping with one another.

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16. My discussion of the conflation of art and culture takes as its starting point Fredric Jameson's analysis of the postmodern implosion of the aesthetic and everyday life in *A Singular Modernity* (New York: Verso, 2002). For a provocative "disagreement with Jameson's picture of modernism" to which my paper is also indebted, see T. J. Clark, "Origins of the Present Crisis," *New Left Review* 2 (March/April 2000): 85–96.