

Beauty's Back in Town

or

Design gets a Hickey

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Something is happening to beauty. For almost a century reviled as the province of the petit bourgeois, beauty is now reemerging as a legitimate, even desirable, value among curators, designers, critics, city planners, even scientists and anthropologists.

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In his call for new zoning laws on April 20, 1999, Joseph B. Rose, Chairman of the Planning Commission and Director of the Planning Department of New York City, proposed that there be "...one deliberate exception to ... new height and bulk rules [for buildings]...on the basis of exceptional design," saying, "Let us instill the quest for beauty into the powerful economic drive of this city's real estate entrepreneurs."

James W. McAllister, in his book *Beauty and Revolution in Science* (1996), argues in Darwinian fashion that the survival of the fittest mathematical theories may depend on their beauty, "certain aesthetic properties--certain simplicity properties and so on..." In a similar spirit, this year Nancy Etcoff, a physician at Mass General Hospital, published *Survival of the Prettiest*, in which she argues for beauty as a biological imperative.

Anthropologist Wilfried Van Damme asks in *Beauty in Context: Towards an Anthropological Approach to Aesthetics* (1996), "How may we account for...cultural relativity in aesthetics? That

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is, if the notion of beauty is to a significant extent influenced by culture, then which elements of the cultural environment are actually involved in shaping aesthetic preference?"

In Washington, D.C., the Hirshhorn Museum is in the process of developing an exhibition called *Regarding Beauty: A View of the Late Twentieth Century*, due to open in the fall of 1999.

Curators Neil Benezra and Olga Viso write that after decades during which the critical winds "blew in favor of 'non-retinal art,' a reconciliation between beauty and content has been undertaken as artists today reevaluate their relationship to beauty and its underlying tradition."

Their work builds on the momentum of critics like Peter Schjeldahl whose writings were included in the 1998 anthology *Uncontrollable Beauty: Towards a New Aesthetics*, edited by Bill Beckley and David Shapiro. Indeed, Schjeldahl's "Notes on Beauty," contained in that volume, still ring truest to my ear. He writes that:

...an onset of beauty combines extremes of stimulation and relaxation. My mind is hyperalert. My body is at ease. Often I am aware of my shoulders coming down as unconscious muscular tension lets go. My mood soars. I have a conviction of goodness in all things. I feel everything is going to be all right. Later I am pleasantly a little tired all over, as after swimming.

The appearance of *Uncontrollable Beauty*--whose 28 essays range from discussion of the "contemporary sublime" (Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe) to the "enigma of pleasure" (Hubert Damisch) to "beauty and morality" (Arthur Danto)--came at the same time that I began to detect a resurgence

of interest in beauty among designers.

Last summer at Katherine and Michael McCoy's High Ground think-tank, "beauty" emerged as a hot button in the conversation. Bill Moggridge spoke of "beauty with a smile" and "beauty with a wink." Tucker Viemeister called for "resonant beauty to extend the life span of design." In a parallel train of thought, Jamer Hunt spoke of the sexual potency of objects and questioned the absence of a criticism that dealt with the erotic nature of things.

Unlike other conferences, High Ground has no prescribed theme or focus. Each participant is invited to discuss whatever they feel are front-burner design issues. So it was all the more compelling when beauty surfaced as a preoccupation among several of us in the group.

Uncertain as to the forces behind this, albeit, somewhat cautious return to the realm of the irrational in the wake of the functional, contextual, semiotic, and, on the whole, rational emphasis of recent years, I set myself the task of asking "Why is beauty back?" side-stepping the unanswerable "What is beauty now?"

Can we credit the new attention given to Charles and Ray Eames occasioned by the traveling retrospective organized by the Library of Congress in partnership with the Vitra Design Museum? (The exhibition opens in New York on October 12th at Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum.) The Eames were unabashed seekers of "the uncommon beauty of common things." (At High Ground, Lorraine Wild called for a reassessment of the Eames' design values, triggered by the removal of their "Mathematica" exhibition from the California Museum of

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Science and Industry in Los Angeles.)

Theirs was an egalitarian definition of beauty befitting a democracy. The more you look for beauty, the more you see it--the antithesis of a Miss America pageant where there is a winner and losers. The Eames would have agreed with scientist Jeremy Bernstein (as quoted in *Beauty and Revolution in Science*) that "the obviously beautiful in both science and the arts is more often than not an extension of the familiar." It is the generosity and inclusivity of their understanding of beauty that holds up in today's relentlessly fractured, pluralistic climate.

Perhaps we can thank the Eames for serving as our conscience, reminding us not to shy away from beauty, but for the past decade, the real St. John the Baptist paving the way for beauty at the *fin de siècle* has been the writer Dave Hickey, who teaches art criticism and theory at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, when he's not on the road proselytizing. It began with the 1993 publication of *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty*. As he relays in that collection, Hickey's own inadvertent epiphany grew out of an impromptu response to a student audience asking his opinion on issues that would dominate the art of the 90s. His response-- beauty--was met with dumbstruck silence. Hickey's elaboration offered then, is no less compelling now:

If images don't *do* anything in this culture, if they haven't done anything, then why are we sitting here in the twilight of the 20th century talking about them?...if our criticism aspires to anything beyond soft science, the efficacy of images must be the cause of criticism and not its consequences...And this is why I direct your attention to the language

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of visual effect--to the rhetoric of how things look--to the iconography of desire--in a word, "beauty."

From this exchange, a whole new dimension of Hickey's already formidable career developed. He is now, a decade later, on the lecture circuit for his muse. I was reasonably conversant with the discussion of beauty vis a vis art, having lived a past life as a painter, but I was interested to see Hickey turning up on the dais of design schools. I caught his act--remember Hickey is from Las Vegas, and proud of it--at Columbia University's School of Architecture, but as a mere spectator. But when he showed up at the Maryland Institute of Art as a featured centennial speaker on none other than "beauty," I had the opportunity for an up-close-and-personal. Part of his duties entailed serving as guest critic for Ellen Lupton's graphic design studio, where we had agreed to catch up. It was there that the discussion of beauty became more nuanced, and to a degree troublesome.

Hickey is no stranger to design. He also runs an architecture program out in the desert. But his populist faith in the power of images turned out to have a decidedly conservative cast. Ever the provocateur, he railed against the students' reliance on the computer and its evidence in the sameness of their work. Going further, he balked at the notion of the designer as auteur. He, being a man of letters, has issues with typographic licence he perceives to be at the expense of text.

The formalist experimentation of modernism (which many of us would justify, at the least, in the name of beauty), came under repeated attack as a northeastern, Germanic, Protestant conspiracy

of over-control, suffering from an extreme case of nature-worship. In contrast, this libertine son of Vegas, champions a design ethic--a standard of beauty--if you will, that reflects what he perceives as our authentic American mobile, mercantile culture, to which nature is hostile. He advocates the bazaar, indeed the casino, as the ideal building archetype because it serves an open, free-wheeling *civilization* of exchange, eschewing what he reads as the closed *culture* of avant-garde architecture. Emblematic of that culture is the contemporary museum, which he castigates as the "therapeutic institution," the neutralizing, neutering white box that divorces art from society.

These biases duly noted, Hickey's polemics deserve to be viewed in light of his larger (and more sympathetic) preoccupation with the messy delights of democracy. The eloquence and sheer rightness of his arguments for genuine engagement (vs. spectatorship) in the arts, (brilliantly articulated in his newest book *Air Guitar*), have convinced me that this is no ordinary philistine. So I am willing to overlook his prejudices of taste to see if more useful lessons can be extracted for design.

I would speculate that Hickey is a fundamental Eamesian at heart. His taste may run to the decorative, the embellished, and the faceted, because the reductivist alternative is too thin for his rapacious aesthetic appetites. It is against his populist politics to embrace modernism's inversion of beauty, which he, no doubt, sees as bulimic. (Over lunch, he held up Galveston's historic, 19th-century buildings as another paradigm for architecture today.) He has no patience for a beauty that is only apparent to an educated elite. A la Groucho, he sees it as a club that would have him that he could never join.

However, this unreformed sensualist and cultural epicure did give Lupton's students an analogy that offered a way out of the parochialism of his bias. In his own student days, he recalled there were two types of Beatles fans: those for whom "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" was really an encoded celebration of LSD, and those (like him) who got off on the purely "beautiful, euphonious phrasing" of the song. Lyrics were not meant to be divorced from sound. Analysis strangled pleasure and denied the opportunity for visceral pleasure. For Hickey, it was the difference between Beatles and Stones fans. For me, it was a workable definition of beauty as felt experience--something we have moved away from as a culture.

The irony is that so much of what Hickey finds puritanical in the modernist tradition of design was, in fact, built on Bauhaus formal building blocks that privileged the sensual, the visceral, over the encoded ornament (LSD) of the past. That the optical pleasures of the avant-garde became a hair shirt for the masses was understood by mid-century American modernists like the Eames who married the aesthetics of the academy with the aesthetics of the street to enormous advantage.

Hickey's injunction to Lupton's under grads that they look at old *National Geographic* and *Saturday Evening Posts* for inspiration, rather than *ID* magazine or *Metropolis*, I take less to be a stylistic preference for excess than a useful reminder that designers work at risk of marginalization by not, at least selectively, taking into account conventional beauty.

And this is why beauty is back: fear of irrelevance, combined with a starved appetite for the pleasure principal and the pure selfishness it implies. Hickey is, no doubt, less affronted by the

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austerity of modernism than its popularly assigned religious overtones. His is a paganism of multiple gods and therein lies his contribution to the discourse of beauty in design.

I would like to believe that he isn't Prince Charles in chain-smoking Vegas drag, that his and our interest in beauty isn't an infantile nostalgia. My instincts tell me that he is, in fact, a closet modernist in his quest for authenticity--that blissful moment of recognition we experience as beautiful.

In the end, however, the fact that we can even talk of beauty without blushing probably has less to do with Hickey's missionary zeal than it does with the fact that we have come out of a century whose biggest achievements in software (psychology) and hardware (electronics) have conditioned us to accept as reality forces that are invisible and the formless. And factor into the equation that this is also the same century that witnessed the shipwreck of Cartesian rationality on the jagged shoals of deconstructivist philosophy.

There is no percentage in denial. We understand ourselves as, and design our products for, entities driven by emotions and personal appetites. An economist might say that the beauty discussion is nothing more than a reflection of our own gilded age of prosperity. And there is, I suppose, a danger that designers, who often serve the most prosperous, could assume the role of courtiers, pushing a vacuous formalism that a flush market no doubt encourages.

But the best designers I know are educators, interested in shaping the conversations they engage in through their work, in contributing to knowledge of the world, not just its inventory. I have to

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believe that if beauty is (re)emergent among designers, it is because they understand it as an experience--as well as a gift and a tool through which they can impart their specialized knowledge of the world with the greatest economy, while at the same time, sustaining their spirits and keeping their souls. Beauty may be "more volatile than truth, and harder to define than sin," as Stephen Doyle phrased it for me recently, but our desire for its transport is incontestably as hardwired as the sex drive in the species. For beauty, to give Mr. Hickey the last word, is simply, "the arrangement of the physical world to which we *involuntarily* respond."

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